

**Tuesday
20 December 2022**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 20 December 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Core Northern Powerhouse Rail: Public Funding

1. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the level of public funding that will be required to build core Northern Powerhouse Rail. [902877]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): May I begin, Mr Speaker, by wishing you and all of your brilliant House of Commons staff a very merry Christmas?

The integrated rail plan, published last November, set out an estimate of £17.2 billion at 2019 prices for the core Northern Powerhouse Rail network, with a further £5.4 billion for the TransPennine route upgrade. That includes building 40 miles of new, high-speed line between Warrington, Manchester and Yorkshire, as well as upgrading and electrifying the rest of the route between Liverpool and York, and the existing line between Leeds and Bradford.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. The Chancellor has rightly spoken about the importance of capital investment to the long-term growth of the economy but, at the same time, he has downgraded the £40 billion vision of Northern Powerhouse Rail, which was agreed on a cross-party basis with northern leaders, to the much-reduced £17 billion core scheme. Decisions on Northern Powerhouse Rail will shape the future of the railways in the north of England for generations to come and unlock massive economic benefits. Will the Minister look at refocusing Treasury appraisal of NPR on its long-term transformative benefits and whole-life value, rather than on short-term factors? Otherwise, a massive opportunity, not just for the north, but for the whole of the country, will be missed.

James Cartlidge: I commend the hon. Gentleman, who speaks with great passion on these issues. He is right that the Chancellor is absolutely committed to the long-term benefit to the economy of capital investment and infrastructure schemes like these. Just to be clear, the IRP set out the Government's view that the core NPR network is the most effective way to deliver rail connectivity benefiting the north. Our plans would deliver substantial journey-time saving and capacity benefits all the way from Liverpool to York. It will do so far more quickly and cost-effectively than alternatives.

Energy Producer Profit Trends

2. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the level of energy producer profits in the last 12 months. [902878]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): The structure of the electricity market means that the price of electricity is tied to the wholesale gas price. Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented increase in gas prices, driving energy prices to eight times their historic levels. As a result, many energy generators' profits are well above pre-crisis levels. As announced at the autumn statement, the Government are introducing a temporary 45% tax on extraordinary returns made by some UK electricity generators from 1 January.

Mr Speaker: I call Wendy Chamberlain, whose birthday it is today. Happy birthday.

Wendy Chamberlain: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Shell announced worldwide profits of £8.2 billion and £9 billion for the three-month period between July and September and the three months to June. BP announced more than double its profits for the same period. They have increased their dividend payments and spent billions buying back their own shares from the market. Shell says that it does not expect to pay any windfall tax at all this year and BP said that it would pay £678 million. Does the Minister agree that, if the Government had implemented a proper windfall tax that captured these things, we could be supporting offshore customers such as my own in North East Fife?

James Cartlidge: Obviously, the hon. Lady knows that we do not comment on the commercial decisions of individual companies. What I can confirm is that the specific levy to which she refers—the energy profits levy—will contribute £40 billion to the Exchequer. We must remember that that £40 billion will play a key part in enabling us to afford the support that we are giving to constituents throughout the United Kingdom this winter and next year, which will total, for businesses and households, more than £100 billion, and the Office for Budget Responsibility has already found that that will help to reduce inflation overall.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): May I begin, Mr Speaker, by wishing you, the Minister and the whole House a jolly Christmas?

If the Government had implemented Labour's windfall tax, they would have raised an additional £16.8 billion. Why have the Government chosen to leave this windfall of war on the table and not put it to use to support families and businesses in the tough winter ahead?

James Cartlidge: I do not entirely accept that. I would be interested to know the detail behind that figure. What we can confirm is that we have two specific levies: one on oil and gas, and one on certain electricity generators. We think that these are being applied in a very fair way. The levy to which the hon. Member refers does include an allowance for investment but this is the

point. That level of support cannot continue for ever. The long-term answer is energy security—investment in new energy sources and, indeed, investment in the North sea, supporting UK jobs and the transition to net zero.

Financial Conduct Authority: Loyalty Penalties in Insurance Market.

3. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Financial Conduct Authority in protecting customers from loyalty penalties in the insurance market. [902879]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government welcome the Financial Conduct Authority's pricing rules, introduced in January this year, which require insurers to offer a renewal price no greater than the price the firm would offer to a new customer for the same policy. The Financial Conduct Authority has confirmed there is no evidence of widespread non-compliance with those rules.

John Penrose: The FCA's cheap and, we hope, effective measures to stop insurance company customers being ripped off is in stark contrast to the energy price cap, which was introduced for exactly the same reason, but has not held down the price of energy and has larded hundreds of pounds of extra hedging costs on to every household's energy bills to boot. Since the Treasury is spending vast amounts of taxpayers' cash on energy subsidies at the moment, will my right hon. Friend speak to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about replacing the failed energy cap with a version of the FCA's much cheaper and more effective approach as soon as energy prices return to normal?

John Glen: I am very happy to look at that question further. The Government previously considered, but rejected, asking Ofgem to implement a relative rather than an absolute price cap in energy markets, which would have similarly prevented energy suppliers from charging those large differentials, because it was judged that it was more likely to distort competition in the fixed-term tariff market. As ever, I am happy to continue the conversation with my hon. Friend and I know he will take the matter up further with the regulator.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Subsequent to the changes to the insurance market to protect people from the loyalty payment, the Chancellor announced his Edinburgh reforms to wider financial services regulation and a great many consultations. At a quick glance, many of them closed very quickly—on 5 February, 17 February, 3 March, 5 March and 17 March. Given that the Treasury Select Committee warned over a decade ago that the Government

"needs to take the time required to get its reform of financial regulation right",

how can we be convinced that the rather painful lessons of the financial crash have not been forgotten?

John Glen: For four and a half years, I was the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, and many of those reforms were baked up over a lot of consultation with

industry over many months. The Edinburgh reforms represent an incremental advance on those reforms and have high prudential regulatory standards very much at their core.

Stewart Hosie: I will come to that, because the Minister is absolutely right. I did quote from a 2010 report. But in June this year, the Treasury Committee, in its report on the future of financial services regulation, warned:

"Weakening standards could reduce the financial resilience of the UK's financial system and undermine international confidence in that system and the firms within it."

Given the intention to review capital requirements, and the new remit letters and secondary objectives for the Prudential Regulation Authority and the FCA, how will the Chancellor and the Minister ensure the regulatory focus on stability is maintained?

John Glen: I gave evidence to that inquiry and I heartily agree with its conclusions. Stability is at the core of the regulators' objectives, but so is the need to look at the competitive landscape across the globe and ensure that the UK, with the city of London as a global hub for financial services, evolves and remains competitive, taking account of the risks but also developing frameworks in line with expectations, so that we can remain that world-leading global hub.

Poverty Levels in Scotland

5. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of his policies on levels of poverty in Scotland. [902881]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): The Chancellor published the "Impact on households" document alongside the autumn statement 2022, containing analysis of how policy announcements affect household incomes. The results show that the autumn statement decisions on tax, welfare and changes to the energy price guarantee in 2023-24 benefit low-income households across the UK, including Scottish households, the most. The autumn statement announced further support targeted at 8 million of the most vulnerable households across the UK, who will benefit from additional cost of living payments in 2023-24.

Peter Grant: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that, by October this year, one in five households in Scotland had already had to go without food or without heat because they could not afford both—and that was before the recent severe cold snap. The JRF also described the Scottish child payment, introduced by an SNP Government, as

"a watershed moment in tackling poverty".

Does the Minister have any plans to speak to the Scottish Government to find out how the Scottish child payment works so it can be introduced here? Who knows—they might give him some tips on how to avoid a nurse's strike at the same time.

James Cartlidge: I am, as ever, grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his advice. Of course, we engage closely with the Scottish Government. The latest official statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions, based on data up to 2019-20, show that, compared with 2009-10, there were 55,000 fewer people in absolute poverty after

housing costs in Scotland. But I think the key point is that we are supporting everyone in every single part of the UK with their energy bills this winter. It is a challenging time, but our extraordinary help is making a real difference.

Levelling Up Communities: Fiscal Steps

6. **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to level up communities. [902882]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Treasury is making significant investments to level up communities across the UK—101 towns, including Dewsbury, will benefit from more than £3.2 billion from the towns fund, supporting long-term economic and social regeneration. Of course, communities will also benefit from the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, the £2.6 billion shared prosperity fund and the £250 million community ownership fund.

Mark Eastwood: The decision on the £47 million Penistone line levelling-up fund bid is due to be announced shortly. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that this important round 2 category 1 bid will be subject to the same financial considerations and eligibility as bids submitted in round 1?

John Glen: I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend that all round 2 bids are undergoing a robust and thorough assessment through that decision-making process. That is consistent with the approach taken in round 1. Of course, the individual decisions will be made in due course in the very near future.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): One way the Government could level up low-income families with young children is through healthy start vouchers. This year, I have tabled four written questions asking what the take-up rate of that scheme has been since digitisation in April, but the Government have been unable to give me an answer, despite the fact that we are eight months on and in the middle of a cost of living crisis. How do the Government know what the take-up rate of the scheme is and whether it is working in balancing out inequalities?

John Glen: I obviously cannot answer that specifically, but I can say that the Government have, over recent weeks, shown the commitment to helping the most vulnerable across the United Kingdom. But I take the hon. Lady's question seriously, and I am very happy to look into that and to work with colleagues across Government to find an answer.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Minister will know, fiscal steps in investment zones can help to boost and level up communities—I am thinking in particular of Paignton in South Devon, where South Devon College and the photonics industry exist side by side. Will he meet me to discuss how that initiative could help to support growth in Paignton?

John Glen: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who is, as ever, fighting strongly for his constituents. As he knows, the investment zones are designed to be a

meaningful mechanism to catalyse growth, sometimes, although not exclusively, through university, looking at where we can find clusters across the United Kingdom to drive the economy forward.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Clearly, we need to level up on housing. In my constituency, many people just cannot afford a private rented home or to own their own home, and we need more social housing, but that is not possible without Government subsidy. What is the Treasury considering to make sure that people who desperately need a permanent roof over their head can get it?

John Glen: We are working very closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at specific interventions. We have just released an extra amount of capital money to work alongside the Ukraine support scheme. But I totally recognise that this is a critical issue, and we will make further announcements about it in due course at the next fiscal event.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) in his levelling-up bid for the Penistone line, as it goes through my constituency, with stations in Brockholes and Honley. I also have my own levelling-up bid to regenerate a disused mill in Marsden for commercial space. These bids are good not only for connectivity and regeneration, but for the economy, because they create jobs and growth. Does the Minister agree that this allocation of funding therefore makes sense?

John Glen: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—perhaps unsurprisingly. The Government have developed a bespoke and objective index of priority places. We are very keen for this investment to work effectively, wherever it is. I very much respect the representations he has made this morning for the bid in his own constituency.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): An important part of levelling-up communities is to invest in the community transport network. Last week, I visited Shettleston-based Community Transport Glasgow alongside Councillor Laura Doherty. They were telling me that they were having real difficulty attracting volunteers because of HMRC rules around mileage rates. Is that something that the Government are willing to look at? Will the Minister be willing to meet me and Community Transport Glasgow to discuss that issue?

John Glen: We keep these matters under review, but I am sure my colleague the Financial Secretary, who takes a close interest in these matters, will follow up in the appropriate way.

Public Spending: Value for Money

7. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure value for money in public spending. [902884]

10. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure value for money in public spending. [902887]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Value for money is a central priority for the Government and at the heart of every decision we take. The Government take our responsibility for managing the public purse seriously. The Government recently launched the efficiency and savings review, and that will help to keep spending focused on the Government's priorities and manage pressures from higher inflation. It will include renewing our efforts to drive efficiency, tackle waste and re-prioritise spending away from lower value and lower priority programmes.

Mrs Hodgson: I hear what the Minister has just said, but he will be as aware as I am that, in the 2020-21 annual report from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Government wrote off a total of £8.7 billion-worth of the personal protective equipment they had acquired in the first year of the pandemic. When families are facing a choice between heating and eating this Christmas, does the Minister understand the real public anger that people are facing these difficulties at this time, when the Government are having such rampant waste of public money?

John Glen: I acknowledge that figure in that report, but it refers to the write-down that was necessary following a situation where we acquired a lot of PPE at a time of acute demand and shortage of supply. It was an adjustment for that. Of course, 97% of all PPE was suitable for use in healthcare and non-healthcare settings. While I take the general point that the hon. Lady is making about concern for the most vulnerable in communities, which has been addressed by the £37 billion of support we have put in this year, those are the facts around the figure that she raises.

Mary Glendon: Figures suggest that at least £3 billion has been spent on agency staff in the civil service over the past three years, plugging the gaps in our public sector at a huge premium to employment agencies. With Public and Commercial Services Union members in the civil service now out on strike for fair pay and terms and conditions, and thousands of contingency staff already drafted in to break the strikes, can the Minister say how much this dispute is costing the taxpayer? Does he agree that it is a false economy not to give these dedicated public servants a decent cost of living pay rise?

John Glen: Strikes are obviously very regrettable, and we as Ministers work closely with civil servants day in, day out, and we very much value the contribution they make to government. I will be looking carefully with Secretaries of State in the coming weeks at efficiencies across government and how we can get the economy, the country and public finances in the best possible place as we move forward through the pay review round next year.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Are the Government not just paying lip service to the need to get improved productivity in public services? For example, the NHS produced an internal report in April on its efficiency, or lack of productivity. I requested that that report be made available in the Library more than one month ago, and I have not even had a reply to the question. Why are the Government not more open with Members about the need for productivity improvements?

John Glen: I can be very open with my hon. Friend today. We are absolutely committed to driving forward productivity across the economy and in the public sector. I will look into the specific question he has not had answered. That will involve conversations with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, as well as across the Cabinet.

Mr Speaker: I just remind everybody that Members' letters must be answered when they put requests in, please. We now come to the shadow Minister.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I echo the good wishes to you, Mr Speaker, to the Minister and to the whole House for a very happy Christmas.

Last year, the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor, who is now the Prime Minister, announced a star chamber to crack down on waste and fraud in public expenditure. How often has the star chamber met, and how much of the £6.7 billion estimated to have been lost to covid fraud and error has been recovered?

John Glen: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have instituted a range of interventions, investing in His Majesty's Revenue and Customs fraud prevention measures to embed those in business as usual. I have been in post for the past eight weeks, and I will be having a series of meetings in January.

Mr McFadden: The Minister could not tell us whether the star chamber has met at all.

On top of all the examples that have been cited today, the rescue of the energy company Bulb is estimated by the Office for Budget Responsibility to be costing another £6.5 billion, partly as a result of our hedge fund Prime Minister's failure to hedge against rising energy prices. Why do the Government not show more respect for public money and chase down every penny of these losses before putting up taxes for 30 million people at a time when the public already face the biggest cost of living crisis for generations?

John Glen: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the imperative of chasing down all waste. The Government are providing continued funding for the Bulb Energy special administration regime while the sale of Bulb's customers to Octopus is pursued by the energy administrator as an exit route from the SAR, but I will look at what the right hon. Gentleman said and reflect carefully on what we can do further.

Inflation: Student Maintenance Loan Increases

8. **Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab):** Whether he has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Education on the potential merits of increasing student maintenance loans in line with actual rather than forecast levels of inflation. [902885]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Treasury Ministers meet regularly with Ministers at the Department for Education to discuss matters of shared interest, including student finance. The Government are considering options for changes to loans and grants for 2023-24, and an announcement will follow in due course.

Steve McCabe: The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the real value of maintenance loans is the lowest for seven years. Rents, which account for 45% of bills, are rising; food costs are rising; one in 10 students are using a food bank; and 80% say they cannot make ends meet. Why does the Minister not make his Christmas present a proper increase in the level of maintenance loans? Because it is a loan, he would not even have to pay for it.

John Glen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have a lot of respect for him and I recognise the issue that he refers to. Of course, many higher education providers have hardship funds that students can apply to, and there is £261 million—a quarter of a billion pounds—of student premium funding available this year to support disadvantaged students. On the specific issue of the uprating, of course there needs to be a delay to operationalise those additional sums. That is at the core of the issue. However, as I said, the Department for Education will report on the matter in due course.

Tax System: Fairness

9. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure fairness in the application of the tax system. [902886]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, to all the House staff, to the Members in the Chamber, and to our parliamentary staff, who do such a good job for us all year round—[*Interruption.*] And to the Doorkeepers—thank you very much.

It is right that everyone contributes to sustainable public finances in a fair way. The autumn statement tax reforms mean that those with the broadest shoulders contribute the most. We are also implementing the OECD pillar two reforms so that multinational corporations pay their fair share of tax, and we are introducing measures to address tax avoidance and evasion to ensure that people pay the right amount at the right time.

Mr Sharma: Does the Minister think it is fair that landlords and those on high incomes earned through trading stocks and shares pay less tax than those paid a salary?

Victoria Atkins: I do hope that the hon. Gentleman noted the announcements by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the autumn statement in relation to dividends and corporation tax allowances. We want to ensure, where we can, that unearned income is roughly comparable to earned income. That is precisely why the principle running through the autumn statement was that those with the broadest shoulders should bear the greatest burden.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Edinburgh reforms, which help to make our financial services sector more competitive. I urge my hon. Friend to adopt the same approach to R&D tax reliefs and capital allowances, so that our world-class entrepreneurs, start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises can benefit from the same advantages.

Victoria Atkins: We all have campaigns to which we devote a great deal of time and for which we build a reputation. My hon. Friend has had a reputation for campaigning on and highlighting the fourth industrial revolution since he was elected in 2015, so I am not surprised that he asked that question. I am delighted to say that we very much support innovation and the critical work of our entrepreneurs, start-ups and SMEs, which is why we are setting the annual investment allowance permanently at £1 million from 1 April, and reviewing the research and development tax reliefs to ensure that, while we are rebalancing the rates of relief out of fairness to the taxpayer, we are also targeting that relief at the knowledge-intensive and innovation-intensive businesses that we all care so much about.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): For a bit of Christmas cheer, I agree with the Minister for once as she says that she wants those with the broadest shoulders to pay the most in the tax system. Why, then, did the Chancellor pick the pockets of hard-working people in the autumn statement through stealth taxes, such as freezing tax allowances, rather than tackling non-doms, which could have brought in £3.2 billion to the Exchequer?

Victoria Atkins: I feel a little slighted, because the hon. Gentleman and I agree on an awful lot behind the scenes—I wish him a very merry Christmas. On non-doms, we know that they paid £7.9 billion in UK taxes last year, which is a significant sum of money. The Chancellor has been clear that when we look at those rules, we have to bear in mind that they pay a significant sum of money in their UK taxes that obviously contributes towards the public services that we all care so much about.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The success of our fantastic town deal in Redditch, which is thanks to record-breaking investment from the Government, relies on our amazing SMEs, who tell me that they need to compete against the online giants. What more can the Minister do to ensure that our businesses play a full part in our vision for the future, so that we can continue to unlock Redditch?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has done so much for her constituency through her campaigns, including by securing the investment that her local hospital needs. In relation to her high streets and small businesses, she is right that we are the Government of small business. That is why, although we had to make some difficult decisions in the autumn statement, we were determined to protect our precious high streets and small businesses, particularly in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, through the business rates support package, which totalled £13.6 billion.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the consensus about the importance of a merry Christmas. In the last month, I have asked Treasury Ministers three simple questions: whether the Chancellor has considered abolishing non-dom status; whether the Prime Minister was consulted about doing so; and whether, when the current Prime Minister was Chancellor, he recused himself

from discussions on the matter. I have asked those questions four separate times, but four times Treasury Ministers have refused to answer or even acknowledge them. Once might be an oversight and twice might be careless, but three times seems deliberate and four times feels like stonewalling. Will the Minister finally show that they have nothing to hide by answering my questions today?

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is entering into the spirit of pantomime season with his questions. We have been clear that non-doms paid £7.9 billion in UK taxes last year—a number that he does not seem able to accept—which is a significant sum of money. Although we keep the scheme under review, as I have said many times—perhaps he is choosing not to hear it—we must recognise their contribution in UK taxes, because that £7.9 billion helps to pay for the services that we all care so much about.

James Murray: Well, that was the fifth time; I wonder what people will make of that.

We believe that to be trusted and effective, the tax system must be fair, yet while millions of working people and businesses across Britain are paying the highest tax burden in decades, those who use tax havens are playing by different rules. Those who benefit from tax havens are undercutting responsible businesses, undermining our public services and breaking the basic principle that we must all play by the same rules. Will the Minister agree that creating a fair tax system must involve challenging tax havens and those who avoid paying their fair share?

Victoria Atkins: I ought to declare an interest at this point: I used to prosecute tax fraudsters for HMRC before I came to this place. I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman and put my money where my mouth is when it comes to tackling those fraudsters.

On the income tax take, the top 10% by way of income paid 36% of all tax in 2020-21. We are proud of the fact that our distributional analysis for the autumn statement shows that decisions made at that fiscal event are progressive: the lowest income households will receive the largest benefit in cash terms and as a percentage of income, and will on average be net beneficiaries of decisions made on tax, welfare and amendments to the energy price guarantee.

Energy Costs: Fiscal Support

11. Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Whether his Department plans to take further fiscal steps to support (a) households, (b) local authorities, (c) charities and (d) businesses with energy costs.

[902889]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Merry Christmas to you and your staff, Mr Speaker; as your fourth Chancellor of the year, I sincerely hope that I am here this time next year to wish you merry Christmas as well.

The Government are very conscious that these are tough times for businesses as well as families. That is why in the autumn statement I announced, among many other measures, a package of business rates support worth £13.6 billion over the next five years, including a 75% relief for retail, hospitality and leisure properties. That will help thousands of businesses in Scotland.

Neale Hanvey: A very merry Christmas to you and yours, Mr Speaker, and a happy new year to boot.

My constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath plays host to energy giants Shell and ExxonMobil; Seagreen and Berwick Bank wind farms, which supply 2.8 million homes in England with energy, are just off our coastline. In such a land of energy plenty, it is perverse that so many people live in poverty and that businesses struggle to survive. Kirkcaldy ice arena is the oldest rink in the United Kingdom and home to the Fife Flyers ice hockey team. It survived world war two, fire, the financial crash and covid, but in energy-rich Scotland it is struggling to pay its unavoidable energy costs. What targeted support is the Chancellor going to make available for energy-dependent companies such as the rink? Will he meet me to discuss how best to tackle the problem?

Jeremy Hunt: We have announced a package of support for businesses this winter worth nearly £20 billion; it will help businesses throughout the United Kingdom, including in Scotland. It includes special measures for energy-intensive industries. We will shortly announce plans that will take effect from next April.

Cost of Living: Fiscal Steps

12. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to help tackle increases in the cost of living.

[902890]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Because of these unprecedented and difficult times, the Government have chosen to make more than £100 billion of additional support available to families this winter and next winter, on top of increasing the national living wage by a record 9.7% and uprating benefits by inflation.

Jessica Morden: Businesses do not know what Government help, if any, will be available for energy bill support from April next year. They include nursing homes, supported housing schemes and older people's schemes, which have been able to pass on lower costs to vulnerable residents. Without help, costs will significantly increase for those vulnerable people and affect the long-term viability of care and support services. What are the Government doing to address the issue?

Jeremy Hunt: I am very grateful that the hon. Lady asked that question. She is absolutely right; a number of businesses, charities and organisations such as care homes are extremely vulnerable because of the big increase in energy prices. All I would say is that she should look at what the Government have done this winter. With around £18 billion of support, we have demonstrated that we are aware of those concerns. Early in the new year, we will bring forward an appropriate package on what will happen from next April.

Energy Costs: Fiscal Support

13. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support people with their energy costs.

[902891]

14. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support people with their energy costs. [902892]

17. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What recent fiscal steps his Department has taken to support families with the cost of energy bills. [902895]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): We have reaffirmed our commitment to help hard-pressed families this winter with support for energy bills. We have introduced a range of measures to help those families, including capping energy bills at £3,000 this year and £2,500 next year.

Gerald Jones: The End Fuel Poverty Coalition has called for an immediate ban on the installation of prepayment meters made under court warrants, because of fears that energy suppliers are using them to disconnect the poorest and most indebted customers by the back door, and it claims that transferring households to prepayment meters often prompts people in debt to self-disconnect. Citizens Advice said that an extra 450,000 people could be switched to prepayment meters by the end of the year because of debt, and a record number of people could not afford to top-up their prepayment meters—the eighth time that record has been broken in the past nine months. This is a crisis made in Downing Street, and it is having a grave impact on a growing number of the most vulnerable households in my constituency and across the country. What will the Chancellor do to support people in that grave situation?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. There are 4.1 million people across the country on prepayment meters, and the Ofgem energy price cap covers all prepayment meter customers and ensures that they pay a fair price for their energy. Licence conditions require energy suppliers to provide extra support for those customers because, as the hon. Gentleman said, we recognise how vulnerable they are. We will continue to monitor the situation over the months ahead, because we are aware of the extreme vulnerabilities of that group.

Cat Smith: A great number of my constituents who live in park home sites such as Willowgrove park in Knott End-on-Sea or Smithy Park in Winmarleigh, as well as boat dwellers on the Galgate marina, are concerned about their energy bills but seem to have been forgotten about by the Government. When is the £400 payment of support likely to be made to people in park homes and on boats, and what support will be available from April onwards?

Jeremy Hunt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for asking that question because I have a number of park home residents in my constituency. The answer is that they can apply online for that support from January.

Andy Carter: I have heard from many voluntary groups in Warrington South, including organisations, such as the Scouts and Guides, that provide important extra-curricular activities for young people's development, especially after the impact of the pandemic on their education and wellbeing. What steps are the Government taking to support charity and voluntary organisations, many of which have seen their energy costs increase by five times over the past year?

Jeremy Hunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for standing up for businesses and charities in Warrington, as he always does so ably. As he knows, this winter the energy business relief scheme is providing £18 billion of support for businesses and charities, and early in the new year we will announce how that support will continue after April. I reassure my hon. Friend that we are particularly concerned about the impact on charities, which see their costs go up but without a corresponding ability to increase their income.

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

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I wish you, Mr Speaker, your team and the Treasury team a merry Christmas. Has the Chancellor had a chance to read the Treasury Committee's report, published last week, about the welcome that we give to the cost of living support that he has announced for next winter? Did he also note our points about the potential cliff edges in that £900 support, and the recommendations we made to spread those payments more evenly over the course of next winter?

Jeremy Hunt: I wish my hon. Friend and all members of the Treasury Committee a merry Christmas. I have read a summary of their report, but I have saved the entire document for my Christmas reading, and I am immensely looking forward to that. The most important thing is that we are offering extra support for people who are vulnerable—support that amounts to £13 billion next year—and that comes before the support with people's energy bills and a lot of other measures. My hon. Friend makes a very important point about cliff edges, which we will reflect on carefully.

Education Sector Funding

15. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase funding for the education sector. [902893]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): At spending review 2021, the Department for Education was allocated a total of £87 billion, providing a cash increase to our education system of about £18 billion by 2024-25. Young people and adults benefited from the biggest long-term settlement for post-16 education in England since 2015. Of course, at the recent autumn statement, an additional cash increase of £2 billion was provided for both 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Tom Hunt: There have been significant improvements in special educational needs and disabilities provision in Ipswich in the last few years. Just last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), was at the Sir Bobby Robson School, which has 66 new places. Suffolk has had 1,000 new SEND places since 2019, and all of that is because of the investment that my right hon. Friend just mentioned. However, it is ever so slightly frustrating that Suffolk is still unfairly funded compared with other areas, including not just London but Norfolk, where a SEND pupil will get £99 more per head than those in Suffolk. I want young people with SEND in Norfolk to have every chance, but there is no reason why young and vulnerable people in Suffolk and

Ipswich should get any less funding and investment. Will he commit to reviewing the bizarre quirk that means that Suffolk SEND kids get less than kids elsewhere?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is somewhat of an expert in the subject. I agree that it is critical that we get it right. Decisions on the distribution of high-needs funding are a matter for the Department for Education, but I reassure him that, as a result of the additional funding announced at the autumn statement, Suffolk's high-needs funding is increasing by 11% per pupil in 2023-24 compared with this year. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), who has responsibility for children, families and wellbeing, will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to describe and discuss the different mechanisms of allocation and, indeed, how the high-needs formula works across different local authorities.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): A merry Christmas to everybody when it comes. What steps is the Minister taking to review further education funding for people with disabilities? It is very important that people have equal opportunities across the United Kingdom and that our education system has inclusion at its core.

John Glen: I completely agree with the hon. Lady, and I am working with colleagues in different Departments looking at the challenges to help people back into the workplace. It is particularly difficult when people need support for such a range of needs and conditions. We must treat everyone as an individual and be ever more creative in the solutions that we bring forward. I look forward to working with her and colleagues in Government to try to assist in improving the situation.

Topical Questions

T1. [902904] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): My Christmas wish for the economy is that 2023 is the year when we bring down inflation, and that means staying the course outlined in the autumn statement and giving people as much help as we can with the cost of living crisis. I am pleased that, yesterday, my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury was able to announce that we are freezing alcohol duty for a further six months.

Neale Hanvey: This morning, I met nurses on the picket lines outside St Thomas's Hospital. They do not want to be there, the unions do not want them to be there and the public do not want them to be there, but we understand why they are: it is because of the Government's inflexibility over pay. The Government have deep pockets for bankers and their bonuses, dodgy personal protective equipment and fly-by-night Prime Ministers who blow up the economy. I took the Chancellor at his word when I was with him on the Health and Social Care Committee. Now that he holds the purse strings, will he enter into discussion with the unions and unlock this untenable situation?

Jeremy Hunt: I enjoyed working with the hon. Gentleman on the Select Committee. One thing that we both said needed to happen was to have an independently reviewed workforce plan for the NHS, so he will be pleased that I was able to announce that in the autumn statement.

T3. [902908] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I welcome the steps that the Treasury has taken to support Carshalton and Wallington residents with the cost of living. What steps is the Department taking to signpost people to the help and support that is available?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): The Government have announced cost of living support worth £26 billion in 2023-24. More than 8 million of the most vulnerable households across the UK will continue to be supported through to next winter via additional cost of living payments. In my hon. Friend's constituency, that equates to 11,600 households who will be eligible for £650 of extra support this year through the means-tested benefits cost of living payment. I urge all colleagues across the House to look at the help for households website—helpforhouseholds.campaign.gov.uk—which can signpost people to the various funds and ways in which they can get support.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister, Pat McFadden.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The end of the year is a moment for reflection, so let us look at the Government's report card: a Tory mini-Budget that crashed the economy, waiting lists and times at record highs, trains delayed and cancelled all over the place, billions wasted on dodgy contracts, and a reshuffle policy that means everyone in the Conservative party gets to be famous for 15 minutes. Why is it that when nothing is working under the Tories, even at this time of seasonal gift giving, they still insist on making everyone else pay the price for their Government's failures?

Jeremy Hunt: First of all, may I wish the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), a merry Christmas in her absence and a speedy recovery from the lurgy that I gather she has? I look back on the last 12 years of this Conservative Government with a great deal of pride. What the right hon. Gentleman never likes to mention in his comparisons is that Labour had a golden economic inheritance from the Conservatives in 1997 and left us with an economy that had run out of money. What have we done? We are the third highest-growing economy in the G7.

T4. [902909] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): Before I came into this House I was a chartered accountant. The VAT threshold rate has remained at £85,000 for the last six years, including at the moment when inflation is at nearly 10%. Many of my constituency businesses are smaller trader entities in the leisure, tourism and hospitality sectors, and they are really struggling. What assessment has the Chancellor made of increasing the VAT threshold, and, if he will not look at that, of lowering VAT rates on the sectors I mentioned?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome my hon. Friend's strong support for his local economy and the small businesses that play such a vital part in his constituency. The VAT

registration threshold, at £85,000, is more than twice as high as the EU and OECD averages, which keeps 3.2 million small businesses out of VAT—the majority of businesses in this country. I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that since the start of the pandemic more than £35 billion has been provided to the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors in grants, loans and tax breaks. As a Government, we recognise their incredible value and how important they are to the wellbeing of our constituencies.

T2. [902906] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Further to my previous question on best value in the public sector, can the Minister confirm how much money the civil service strike is costing the taxpayer and whether any cost-benefit analysis has been carried out on the merits of giving civil servants a decent pay rise?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The cost of strikes is always regrettable. It is regrettable to those who rely on the services that those individuals deliver.

T6. [902911] **Dame Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is waiting for Treasury allocations to be made that would allow the start of a public consultation on our new hospital in Basingstoke, funded by the Government's flagship hospital infrastructure plan. Can my right hon. Friend confirm when Basingstoke might be getting news on those allocations—perhaps even an early Christmas present?

John Glen: I am sorry that I cannot give an early Christmas present. Allocations from that funding are the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I encourage my right hon. Friend to speak to the Health Secretary, who is working hard with the Treasury and other parts of Government to look at capital projects across the whole of health. Announcements will be made in due course, early in the new year, I hope.

T5. [902910] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Changes to the eligibility criteria for the warm home discount mean that those in receipt of disability living allowance, personal independence payment and attendance allowance can no longer claim it. I am sure the Minister will tell me that disabled people are being compensated via the two disability cost of living payments, but new research by YouGov has found that millions of disabled people are spending this winter living in cold and damp homes. What is he doing to ensure that no disabled person has to choose between eating and heating?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important point. Yes, I would draw attention to the cost of living support for those on disability benefits, which is extremely important, together with the energy price guarantee. On the specific point about the warm home discount, I am happy to look into that and write to the hon. Lady, but I remind her that in the autumn statement the Chancellor made a very significant commitment to energy efficiency which will apply to the whole country: the 15% target and £6 billion more funding for energy efficiency.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Inflation is high in the UK, but I understand that it is lower than the EU average. Why do we not do what they do in France? All the funding that goes into supporting people with the cost of energy is given to the utility companies so the bills are lower, thus reducing inflation.

James Cartlidge: Few colleagues put a question about inflation more eloquently than my hon. Friend. He makes an interesting suggestion. The support we have put in place has come through a variety of mechanisms, such as direct support for our constituents to help with cost of living and the energy price guarantee. He asks about how we ensure that that reduces inflation; the key point is that the OBR has confirmed that because of the energy price guarantee, the peak of inflation will be 2.5% lower than it would have been. That shows that our support is not only making a difference to our constituents this winter but is reducing the underlying cause of inflation, and that is in the best interest of the whole of the United Kingdom.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Ind): I am sure that like me, Mr Speaker, you long for the days of cool Britannia under a Labour Government. Touring musicians and performers are now hamstrung with restrictions and red tape because of the Government's botched Brexit deal. We need a Christmas miracle, don't we? When will the Government accept that this is a problem, and what are they doing about it?

Victoria Atkins: I hope that, in the spirit of Christmas cheer, the hon. Lady will accept that the trade and co-operation agreement is the world's biggest zero-tariff, zero-quota trade deal. It provides a strong base for UK businesses to trade with the EU. We continue to support businesses trading with the EU, as well as helping them seize new opportunities with fast-growing economies around the world through our free trade agreements.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Chancellor was absolutely right in Edinburgh to include environmental, social and governance ratings agencies within the regulatory perimeter. But will he ensure that in the guidance, ESG objectives are consistent with the long-term actuarial goals of pension funds, to ensure that money is available in 20 or 30 years' time, when people wish to retire?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is an expert in this area. He is absolutely right to point to that concern. We must ensure joined-up regulatory innovation to make sure there are no unforeseen circumstances. He puts his finger on a very important point.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Chancellor knows that a workforce plan cannot work if the Government cannot retain staff in the NHS. We cannot retain staff in the NHS if we do not pay them—that is why they are out on strike today. Will the Chancellor, instead of hiding behind the pay review body, admit that the Government set the remit for the pay review body? The only way to end this dispute is for Government to sit down with the trade unions and negotiate.

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady is right about the importance of retention. That is why we are pleased to have 32,000 more nursing staff than at the start of the Parliament, which takes us some way towards our 50,000 additional nursing staff target. When there is a cost of living crisis, as we have at the moment, the best way to resolve this is an independent process. It is an independent process; when I was Health Secretary, it often made rulings that were not comfortable. The best way to resolve the situation is to respect that process.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Pensioners are increasingly worried about the fact that, although they have paid high—and now higher—taxes all their life, the service they get from the NHS seems to get worse. Will my right hon. Friend consider an idea put forward and implemented by his great predecessor, Ken Clarke, to give tax relief on private health insurance for pensioners? If we were to have a meeting, could he invite his hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary, who campaigned for this idea before higher office silenced him?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend always asks important and challenging questions. I do not agree with the way forward that he has outlined, but Ken Clarke revolutionised our education system by introducing Ofsted, which has led to a massive increase in standards in our schools. That was the reason I introduced the Ofsted system in our hospitals through the Care Quality Commission, which is also seeing a big improvement in standards.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): God's richest blessings to you in this Christmas season, Mr Speaker.

My constituent, who owns a small business, paid VAT on goods that they had ordered and brought back to Northern Ireland, only to receive a second VAT bill from the Republic of Ireland because of the Northern Ireland protocol. That makes doing business totally unaffordable. A previous Prime Minister said that businesses could tear these documents up. Can my constituent tear these documents up?

Victoria Atkins: For the majority of businesses trading in Northern Ireland, VAT continues to be accounted for in much the same way as when they trade in the rest of the UK. We are confident that the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol for VAT mitigates the risk of double taxation in Northern Ireland. We know of one example and HM Revenue and Customs is working with that business to see what more can be done, but I am happy to take up the hon. Gentleman's question outside the Chamber.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Rural poverty is devastating, but it is often hidden by the relative affluence of surrounding rural areas. To ensure that councils have the funding that they need to support those who are living in rural poverty, will the Chancellor and his officials meet me to discuss putting social mobility into funding formulas alongside deprivation, to get councils what they need and to end rural poverty?

John Glen: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. Representing a rural constituency myself, I totally understand the tension in fully reflecting the needs of a sometimes diverse set of communities. I am happy to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): A happy Christmas to everybody.

The latest estimate that I have seen is that the Government's failure to clamp down on tax havens in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies has cost us £65 billion—almost half what we spend on the NHS, or a third of our education budget. Does the Chancellor agree that our public finances would be in a far better shape, our taxes would be far lower and our tax system would be far fairer if we had cracked down on our tax havens?

John Glen: We always need to be vigilant about tax evasion and work closely with the overseas territories and Crown dependencies on those matters. A lot of progress on registers has been made in recent years, and more is due to be made. I will continue to reflect carefully and work with the Economic Secretary on further improvements to get things to where they need to be.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that investor confidence in the United Kingdom will be increased only if we bring forward the overdue reforms to the law of corporate criminal liability? If so, will he and the Treasury support further amendments to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, including those that would implement the Law Commission's recommendations to create further "failure to prevent" offences?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. and learned Friend is one of the people who knows most about corporate criminal liability. I would be happy to take his question away and discuss it with him, because it is critical that the justice system addresses not just individuals who have criminal liability, but companies; indeed, I have prosecuted many companies across a range of offences. We understand that they can commit crimes too, so I am very happy to take his question away.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will Treasury Ministers work with Transport Ministers to give Avanti West Coast's customers an early Christmas present by removing the contract from it, putting it into public ownership and saving the taxpayer an absolute fortune?

John Glen: I recognise the significant concerns about the delivery of that service. I am in ongoing conversations with the Secretary of State for Transport to look at what more can be done.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): The people of Doncaster will be eternally grateful for the help that they received through the pandemic and for what they are receiving through the cost of living crisis, but Doncaster still needs a new hospital. Although money is tight, will the Chancellor meet me with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to see how we can achieve that goal in the new year?

John Glen: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend again to discuss the matter in detail. As I mentioned in my reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), the situation with the capital programmes is under urgent review across

the country. I hope that further announcements will be made in the new year, but I will certainly meet my hon. Friend anyway.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A few months ago, the Chancellor promised at the Dispatch Box that he would make a further announcement about the energy bill relief scheme before Christmas. Nothing has yet been forthcoming. Small businesses, charities and schools in my constituency either face going under or face huge deficits in the coming year. Will he confirm when he will make a further announcement about support for businesses, the public sector and charities, and whether this House will have the opportunity to scrutinise it?

Jeremy Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that the House will not have to wait very long for that announcement—and yes, it will have a chance to scrutinise the announcement in detail.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): As well as reassuring financial markets and bringing down mortgage rates, the autumn statement did a great deal to help consumers and businesses through winter energy prices. When my right hon. Friend comes to announce what further help might be available for businesses after March, will those in the Treasury also highlight the opportunities for business from the increased business rate discounts for the hospitality and leisure sectors that will come in the spring?

Jeremy Hunt: We will certainly do that. I know that the 75% discount we announced for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses will make an enormous difference to businesses in Gloucester, as will the £2.5 billion annual discount in business rates overall as we make the transition to the new system.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): A very Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

With oil and gas companies making grotesque profits from high global prices, it is beyond belief that the Chancellor does not scrap the so-called investment allowance announced in the autumn statement, which means that companies are still able to claim £91.40 in tax relief for every £100 invested in oil and gas infrastructure. Will he now come clean about the cost to the taxpayer of this perverse and utterly unjustified subsidy?

James Cartlidge: I am happy to confirm that that levy will raise £40 billion. As I said earlier—and this is very important—the support that the hon. Lady's constituents, and indeed all our constituents, will receive this winter has to be paid for somehow. A key purpose of the levy is to help fund support for businesses and for our constituents, with higher cost of living payments for the most vulnerable

and those on benefits. It is extremely generous, and, as I have said, it is bringing down inflation for the whole country.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Over the weekend, an anonymous Conservative MP admitted to a newspaper:

“We've got no ideas and people feel abandoned.”

This was an

“economy that's in recession with 10 per cent inflation”

and

“possibly one of the least successful governments in modern Europe.”

My constituents are going into Christmas poorer as a consequence of 12 years of Conservative government. Is the Chancellor proud of that?

Jeremy Hunt: I am very proud of the fact that, having inherited an economy that was bankrupted by the hon. Lady's party, we have given it one of the strongest growth rates in the developed world.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I know that the Chancellor has invested in public health personally, but may I urge him to invest, in a fiscal sense, in beer and alcohol duty, and to create a differential between off-sales and on-sales? On-sales are where jobs and tax and employment are generated, and off-sales are where all the harmful drinking comes from.

James Cartlidge: In my statement yesterday I not only confirmed a six-month extension of the alcohol duty freeze, but announced that next August we will introduce an ambitious reform package which will include—this is happening for the first time ever, and is only possible because of our departure from the European Union—a duty rate differential between what is on tap, namely draught beer, cider and so on, and what is in the supermarkets. That will create a level playing field which I think is in the best interests of our pubs.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Asylum seekers, who are at the very sharpest end of the cost of living crisis, have seen only a 13p increase in asylum support payments. Will the Chancellor uprate that? It should not fall to brilliant charities like Refuweggee to ensure that asylum seekers get a Christmas this year.

John Glen: I think that communities up and down the country are doing amazing work to support, in particular, the Ukrainian visitors who came here this year at very short notice. We have just agreed a new package of support with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which gives guarantees going forward into next year.

Annual Fisheries Negotiations with EU and North Atlantic States

12.38 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on the outcome of the annual fisheries negotiations with the European Union and other North Atlantic states. Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

As an independent coastal state, we have taken back control of our waters and have the freedom to negotiate on our own terms and push for deals that will deliver for the UK fishing industry, for the marine environment, and for all parts of the United Kingdom. I am delighted to say that this autumn the UK has secured vital deals for 2023 with our coastal state neighbours, including the European Union and Norway. Taken together, these deals have secured more than £750 million-worth of fishing opportunities for the UK fleet in 2023, £34 million more than last year.

The UK has put sustainability at the heart of these negotiations, and an initial estimate suggests that nine more catch levels align with the scientific advice than did so last year. This is an important step forward and will allow our most important stocks to be fished sustainably. That is essential for a thriving fishing industry for the future. The UK will continue to champion sustainability throughout all negotiation forums and push for other coastal states to do so too.

Through the trade and co-operation agreement we will also have the specialised committee on fisheries with our EU counterparts. We use this forum to consider a range of issues, including how to increase the sustainability of certain stocks, which we hope will improve the outcomes of the negotiation in the longer term.

The UK's fishing opportunities are negotiated in three main forums. First, the UK-EU bilateral. Today the UK reached an agreement with the EU on total allowable catches in 2023 for 69 stocks, as well as arrangements for non-quota stocks. This deal provides fishing opportunities for more than 140,000 tonnes for the UK fleet and is worth around £282 million based on historical landing prices. As part of this deal, we have agreed access arrangements on albacore tuna and spurdog in the North sea for the first time through the UK-EU written record. For non-quota stocks, we have agreed a roll-over of access arrangements for 2023 to ensure continued access to fish non-quota stocks in EU waters, worth around £25 million a year to the UK fleet. The House will also want to note that, as a result of the quota share uplifts agreed in the trade and co-operation agreement, the UK has around 30,000 tonnes more quota from these negotiations than it would have received with its previous shares as a member of the EU.

The second main forum where we negotiate our fishing quotas is the trilateral arrangement that focuses on stocks that we share with the EU and Norway in the North sea. In that negotiation, there were significant increases for North sea whitefish quotas, all set at levels either in line with or below those recommended by

scientists. This deal is worth over £202 million to the UK fishing industry in the North sea and a further £11 million in waters around the UK based on historical landing prices. The UK also reached a deal with Norway that ensures stability for the UK whitefish fishing industry through continued access to each other's waters for 2023. Our arrangements with Norway also mean that our crucially important long-distance fleet has access to fishing opportunities worth over £12 million in the Arctic region at a time when the main quota in that area fell by 20%.

Many Members will know that the UK has a significant interest in pelagic stocks, and these form the third main negotiation each year. This autumn we have agreed quotas with the other coastal states in the north-east Atlantic for mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring. These quotas were all set at the level advised by scientists and will be worth over £250 million to the UK fleet in 2023.

These deals are crucial to the long-term health of our vital fishing industry, but it is not just about securing financial value for the year ahead, important though that is. These negotiations are a crucial route for the UK to protect our fish stocks, to safeguard the marine environment and, in turn, to ensure that the fishing industry can profit and thrive for future generations. As we head into 2023, I am excited to carry on working with the industry to maximise fishing opportunities and put sustainability at the forefront, and, in short, to continue to support a fantastic sector to profit, modernise and succeed.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I should point out that I chair a community interest company, REAF—Renaissance of the East Anglian Fisheries—which has the objective of regenerating the East Anglian fishing industry. Much of our fleet is inshore in nature, pursuing non-quota species, and thus the outcome of these negotiations is only of some relevance with regard to stocks such as sole. That said, the matter is of vital importance to the whole industry, as it provides the foundation stone on which it can be rebuilt all around the four nations of the UK.

It used to be an annual tradition that the Minister would come to this Chamber to make a statement at the conclusion of the negotiations, and thus it is to be regretted that it has been necessary to submit this urgent question, particularly taking into account the enormous interest in fishing generated by Brexit and the role that the industry can play in levelling up coastal communities such as Lowestoft, which I represent.

My right hon. Friend highlighted the fact that the total UK fishing opportunity secured across the three main negotiating forums totals £750 million, an increase of £34 million on the previous year. This 4.7% increase is considerably below the level of inflation, which is currently hitting fishing businesses particularly hard.

I would be most grateful if my right hon. Friend could add to his statement by answering the following questions. Will he advise the House as to the preparatory work that is carried out to ensure that the UK achieves better outcomes from negotiations now that we participate as an independent coastal state and are not part of the EU? What monitoring work is carried out after each annual negotiation?

The negotiations were due to complete by 10 December; I would be most grateful if my right hon. Friend could advise the House as to the reason why they did not. Have the issues that caused the delay been concluded satisfactorily from the UK's perspective?

To revive the fishing industry post Brexit, it is necessary to enhance trust and for the Government to work in partnership with the devolved nations, industry and conservation organisations. This is best achieved by increased transparency, so will my right hon. Friend publish the positions that the UK took in respect of the total allowable catch levels for each stock? Progress towards sustainable fishing requires accountability, and the Government would contribute to that by making that information available.

Finally, as mentioned, East Anglian fishermen will accrue limited immediate benefit from the outcome of the negotiations, but from that outcome should flow the improved management of fisheries and increased access to fishing opportunities for local fishermen. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend provide a progress report on the Government's plans in that regard?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend not only for tabling the urgent question but for the work he does to represent his constituency. It is a little disingenuous of him to say that he dragged me to the Chamber for the urgent question; the ink went on the agreement when it was signed this morning, just after 10.30 am—around quarter to 11—which was after the statement deadline, meaning that it was not possible for me to bring a statement to the House.

Nevertheless, I am delighted to be here to celebrate what is a great deal. As my hon. Friend has identified, we are 30,000 tonnes better off now that we are outside the EU than we would have been had we remained a member state.

My hon. Friend made reference to the 10 December deadline, which I think was a false deadline. We were of course always ambitious to try to conclude the negotiations, but as the Minister I was always clear that it is more important to get the right deal than to get a quick deal and that setting false deadlines does not always bring us to the right deal.

My hon. Friend mentioned our negotiating position and asked whether we would lay it out in public. I am afraid to say to him directly that no is the answer. I am not prepared to share our negotiating position. I do not think that is how we get a good deal for the UK, which is what we have secured. If we set out in public where our red lines are before we enter the room, we tend to move quickly towards those red lines and fall back from that position.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the urgent question. I share the hon. Gentleman's frustration that it took an urgent question to hear about the negotiations. I hear what the Minister said about the timeframes, but there was a convention under which each year the House had a proper discussion about the outcome of the negotiations. I hope the Minister will promise today to return to that convention so that we can have proper and full discussions.

I pay tribute to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and other charities, as well as the fishers, who last week intervened so effectively to save human life in the channel. I remind the Minister of the continuing anguish that is being caused to many in the inland fleet at the hands of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency; the Minister really needs to work with colleagues to get a grip on that.

On the recent negotiations, it is clear that many industry players have welcomed the outcomes of the various sets of talks, and that is positive, but may I ask the Minister about the status of the Faroe talks? What efforts were made to ensure that the deals made with the EU and other coastal states included a commitment to keep Russia's fleet out of their waters? Although we welcome the promise to stop the fishing of sand eels in our waters, will the Minister tell us when that will take effect and whether we have secured commitments from others during the negotiations?

In general, we will, of course, want to see the detail of the outcome and understand the potential environmental impact, but not everyone in the industry is quite as happy as the Minister says. Therein lies a fundamental problem that we have identified in the new architecture, including in the latest version of the joint fisheries statement, something also recently published and not discussed in this House. Although the Minister speaks for the UK Government, the devolved Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also play an important role in fisheries management, so we ask again: who speaks for England?

Labour has consistently pointed out that no one fights the corner for English fishing in these negotiations. The statement has been welcomed by the Scottish Government and fishing sector, but can the Minister explain how much of the increase in catch will be available to the hard-hit English fishing sector? What will be the overall impact on jobs and economic opportunities in our English North sea fishing ports and surrounding communities?

The Minister mentioned the distant fleet. Jane Sandell, the chief executive officer of UK Fisheries Ltd, which is based in Humberside and operates in distant Arctic waters, did not react with any positivity about this outcome. She called it

"yet another body blow for fishers in the North East of England. While the government is gloating over its 'success' in the Norway talks, we are having to make skilled people redundant in the Humber region. It's an absolute travesty of fairness and common sense."

She also said:

"The few extra tonnes of whitefish in the Norwegian zone won't come close to offsetting the loss in Svalbard due to the reduced TAC. Defra knows this, and yet it simply doesn't seem to care about the English fleet."

That was borne out at the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a couple of weeks ago, when the Secretary of State appeared to be unaware of the problems facing the English distant fleet. So perhaps the Minister can explain today why the English distant fleet has fared so badly, and what he plans to do about it.

Mark Spencer: We have of course tabled a written statement; we did that as soon as we were able, give that we signed the deal this morning. Once again, it is a little

[Mark Spencer]

disingenuous to say that we were not prepared to make a statement, as the deal was not signed until after the statement deadline.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Faroe Islands has just concluded its general election and is in the process of forming a Government, so it is difficult to negotiate with its Fisheries Minister when that Minister has not been appointed. As soon as that Minister is appointed, we will be back around the table talking to them to try to sort out the challenges we face, particularly on the Russian fleet, which the Faroes has allowed access to its waters.

I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the details on sand eels. He talked about the devolved Administrations, the north-east fleet and who represents England. We tried very hard on this. We work with our devolved Administration colleagues constantly and we worked very hard to get a fair deal for all parts of the UK. We get the best deal for the UK and we try to divvy that deal up as best as we can among the devolved Administrations and around the coastline. I think we have struck the right balance. It is entirely possible to increase quota for any part of the UK that we want to, but we have to take that off somebody else. If he wants to write to me to tell me from whom he wants to remove quota, we will give due consideration to that representation and consider his thoughts.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am surprised to hear the Minister say that he could not make a statement on this before today, because there was a statement on the Government website on 9 December.

I welcome the fact that we have got an agreement for the North sea that relies heavily on scientific advice. However, although an increase in catch quotas is welcome, certainly for the Scottish fishing industry, we also need seamless access to export markets. So will the Minister listen to calls from the industry for an improved deal for market access to the EU for Scotland's fishing industry? The all-party group on fisheries recently reported that the fishing industry now takes a "principally negative" view of Brexit. In Scotland, that industry was almost the only voice for Brexit before the referendum. Does the Minister agree with the Scottish White Fish Producers Association Ltd that

"Brexit failed to deliver any benefits of being a coastal state"?

Given that Brexit red tape and paperwork alone cost the UK fishing industry £60 million in just the first 12 months, not including the cost of lost trade, when will the Government recognise the damage that Brexit has done to our fishing communities? When will they compensate them adequately for that loss?

Finally, I note that one big increase in quota is for blue whiting, which has increased by 80%, against the strong wishes of the UK and Scottish Governments, who wanted a more cautious approach on that species. How much of the increased value of this deal for the UK fishing industry relies on that increased quota for blue whiting, which the UK Government fought against?

Mark Spencer: Clearly, this deal is better than what we would have negotiated had we been within the EU. I hear the hon. Gentleman's comments about market

access, and we continue to work with our colleagues in Europe to secure better access to those markets. That is all part of a long-term strategy to negotiate with our friends on the other side of the channel. Clearly, the 30,000 tonnes we were able to negotiate is a significant amount of fish, and better than we would have done as an EU member state.

I also say gently to the hon. Gentleman that this time we have seen increases in cod; in whiting and in saithe in the North sea; in megrims and in anglerfish in the Irish sea; in nephrops in the Irish sea and the Celtic sea; in nephrops in the west of Scotland; and in hake and in spurdog in the western area. I could keep going down the list, but we secured a good deal for the UK. Scotland gets its fair share of that deal, and I would have hoped that he would be more positive, on behalf of his Scottish fishermen, than he has been.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of how much of this increased quota will be landed in English ports, in order to bring jobs and economic opportunities to coastal communities such as Fleetwood?

Mark Spencer: That is a good question. We need to do all we can to support the processing industry in the UK, because it is vital that we can process UK fish caught in UK waters in UK ports, to create UK jobs. We continue to work with our friends in the Home Office to make sure that the industry has access to good staff and to plentiful employment. We will do all we can to support ports such as Fleetwood, and others up and down the country.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): May I place on record my thanks to the crew of the *Arcturus*, a Plymouth-based fishing vessel that was first on the scene to rescue the capsized people in the channel last week? Their brave actions saved lives.

The majority of the employment in fishing lies in small boats, but they have only a fraction of the overall quota. Super-trawlers, especially foreign-owned ones, are hoovering up huge amounts of our fish from our marine protected areas. Is it not now time to ban foreign-owned super-trawlers from fishing in marine protected areas and to make sure that where they do fish in UK waters they land all their catch in UK ports?

Mark Spencer: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's constituents who were first on the scene; it emphasises what a dangerous occupation fishing can be at times.

Interestingly, the hon. Gentleman sort of contradicted his Front Bencher to a certain extent, in that the huge north-east shipping fleet that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) was talking about could be a victim to the sort of policy that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting on hoovering up large amounts of white fish in the Arctic. However, I recognise the importance of small boats, particularly on the south coast. We continue to support that sector of the fishing industry, and I look forward to visiting it soon to hear from it directly.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the urgent question. We know that following the trilateral deal, what was critical in the UK-EU deal was mitigating the 30% decrease in monkfish stocks. Part of that has come about because of precautionary advice on monkfish stocks, but we know that the data on monkfish is not as robust as it could be. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we have the right data so that we can take the right actions?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Of course, I have had discussions with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and the Marine Management Organisation to make sure that we have the best data available on monkfish. There were a few issues in obtaining the right sort of data during the covid period. We are satisfied that the data we have is accurate, but she is right to identify that during negotiations with the Norwegians we were able to secure more anglerfish and monkfish quota to try to help out and mitigate the impact of the drop in the total allowable catch overall.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to all the House.

Many of my constituents in Newcastle enjoy fresh fish landed locally from the North sea—they know that it is fresh because it is landed locally. There have been a number of questions on this, but I am still not sure whether I have an answer. Can the Minister say that, as a consequence of this deal, more fish will be landed in English ports? Moreover, can he confirm that, in the North sea ports, we will have more local fish landed locally as a consequence?

Mark Spencer: Many of those are individual decisions for skippers of boats. They choose where to land their fish, and I do not want to start dictating to skippers

where they can and cannot land. In securing more quota, a greater share and more tonnage, it is very much hoped that those boats will land within our ports. We will do all we can to support the processing industry and those markets to ensure that that happens.

Mr Speaker: I now move on to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Panic was setting in there, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions. He understands the issues for fisheries and, in particular, for fisheries in my constituency of Strangford and also in Portavogie. I spoke to the Anglo North Irish Fish Producers Organisation this morning. Will the Minister provide an assurance that the necessary parliamentary time will be provided to ensure the urgent passage of the statutory instrument to remove spurdog from the list of prohibited species? That will allow British fishermen to take advantage of the fact that there could be a fishery for this species in 2023, which is good news. My understanding is that the EU could fish for spurdog right now, but it has deferred the decision for two months. Time is therefore urgent. I know that the Minister will not want the British fishing sector to be disadvantaged in any way, so the two months must be used for the necessary SI to be introduced in this House.

Mark Spencer: As ever, the hon. Gentleman is very well-informed. There is a requirement for a statutory instrument to allow the spurdog quota to be accessed. This is a new quota. He is right in saying that we will have to process that SI as rapidly as possible. However, I cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and make commitments on behalf of the Leader of the House or business managers, but he can rest assured that the Department is working very hard to make sure that that SI is in a place to be deployed, and we will be pressing business managers to get it through the House as rapidly as possible.

Service Family Accommodation

1.2 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) *Urgent Question:* To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the maintenance and repair of service family accommodation.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Alex Chalk): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgent question.

The provision of safe, good quality and well-maintained accommodation is an irreducible minimum when it comes to supporting our armed forces. It is essential to operational output, recruitment, retention, and morale, which is why providing such accommodation is a core priority of the Ministry of Defence.

More than 96% of the MOD service family accommodation of 46,000 properties meets or exceeds the Government's Decent Homes Standard. Only those properties that meet this standard are allocated to service families. However, it is unacceptable that some of our personnel and their families are not receiving the level of accommodation services—in the form of maintenance standards—from our suppliers that they deserve and, in particular, are suffering from a lack of heating and hot water. I have spoken to a number of our personnel, from a range of ranks and circumstances, and I share their indignation. It is not acceptable.

MOD contractors are under a legal, but also a moral, duty to resolve heating and hot water problems. What are those duties? Emergency calls should be responded to, and the issue made safe within two hours. An emergency is an incident that threatens imminent risk of injury to persons, or that presents a high risk of extensive damage to property or the environment. Urgent calls should be responded to as soon as possible and within 48 hours. Those are the terms of the contract that were agreed, but our suppliers in too many cases are failing to meet those requirements. We expect and demand that our suppliers do better, and we will do everything we legally and properly can to force them to do so. Let me be clear: no home should be left without heating or hot water for more than 24 hours. Should it not be possible to resolve the issue quickly, alternative forms of heating and sources of hot water, or alternative accommodation, must be provided.

Rectification plans were triggered by the Ministry of Defence earlier this year following concerns about contractor performance. Since then, access to temporary heaters for families without heating has been improved. A total of 1,500 additional heaters have been purchased, and they are being dispersed at various locations based on several factors, including where there is a high density of homes.

Secondly, there is an increased use of temporary accommodation to support families with vulnerable people, or where some form of heating cannot be restored in a reasonable time. Thirdly, more staff are being recruited by Pinnacle, VIVO and Amey and, following a call to the National Service Centre about a heating or hot water issue, families will be contacted by a qualified engineer to support the diagnosis of faults, enable remote fixes if possible, and arrange an appointment if a remote fix cannot be achieved. All families will also be provided with temporary heaters, or offered alternative accommodation, should a fix not be possible.

Fourthly, I can confirm that compensation will be paid to families to cover any increased energy costs caused by the use of temporary heaters. VIVO, Amey and Pinnacle are, I know, in no doubt about Ministers' profound dissatisfaction at their performance. I have met them already and I am meeting them again later today. This is not any old contract. This is a contract to support the accommodation of British service personnel and their families—the people who answer the call of the nation to step up and defend us when required. These contractors must improve. They will improve, or they will face the consequences.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Minister for his response. There will be complete agreement, I am sure, on the importance of looking out for those amazing men and women who serve in our armed forces and, critically, their families as well. The Minister will be well aware—he alluded to this in his statement—of the volume of concerns about the state of service family accommodation and single living accommodation. It is particularly concerning given the recent freezing weather and proximity to Christmas, but it is also at a time when our armed forces continue to be busy, not least, potentially, with commitments to Military Aid to the Civil Authorities.

Some shocking recent accommodation cases include: recurring black mould causing viral infections in children; crumbling roofs leaving houses exposed to the elements; burst pipes flooding homes; and broken boilers in sub-zero temperatures. What is worse is that, currently, there is no reasonable way to report and resolve those problems, as there are waits of two hours on Pinnacle's helpline, if callers can get through at all. Even when a report is lodged, there is no guarantee that a repair will happen urgently.

Such are the concerns that have been expressed about the inaction of various contractors, there is evidence of soldiers signing out sleeping bags. No single contractor is responsible for repairs and maintenance, meaning that there is no central responsibility. However, there is central accountability, and, ultimately, that lies with the MOD.

Those who step forward to serve deserve and expect better. I look to the Minister to act urgently, by which I mean today, to move heaven and earth to ensure that measures are being taken to alleviate this problem. Can I ask him to provide an update on whether the Secretary of State's meetings with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, Amey, Pinnacle and VIVO have taken place? If not, why not? Can he outline a plan for MOD intervention to ensure that the backlog of repairs is dealt with as a priority? Can he say more on how the Department will support service personnel and their families affected by these issues over the Christmas holidays?

The current standards of service accommodation are just not good enough. We are a very long way away from homes fit for heroes. The Government must do better.

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those remarks, many of which I completely agree with. He asks whether we will act today. I can say that the Secretary of State has met the DIO, Pinnacle, Amey and VIVO and that some of these issues were becoming apparent quite some time ago. In fact, a rectification

plan was imposed in the middle of September. There were 480 or so elements of that plan, of which 200 have been complied with. That does not mean that the situation has been sorted—far from it—because when the cold snap came, we saw that it revealed more difficulties.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the backlog. I can say that the backlog of complaints peaked at a stunning 4,200 or so. That has come down to around 3,100, but I completely accept that that is far too many.

The real issue, it seems to me, is there must be prevention in the first place. In other words, the quality of accommodation must be good enough at the point that service personnel go into the properties in the first place. There are some indications of improvement in that regard. First, in addition to the standard £176 million for accommodation, the MOD has allocated £350 million over and above that annual sum to get on top of the maintenance issues. In July of this year, when 1,276 service personnel went into properties, 4% turned out on the day to have non-habitable failures; by December that figure had gone down to 0.6%. This is about ensuring that the properties are fit for purpose at the outset.

On the issue of mould, which the hon. Gentleman is right to raise, it is unconscionable to think that people should be moving into properties with any mould, and I am pleased to have had a clear assurance from DIO that that will not happen again. Now, if there is a report of mould, a fully qualified inspector should come in to do a proper report and alternative accommodation should be provided, if appropriate. I will end where he did: these are people who come to serve our country, and the least we can do is ensure that they have proper accommodation. I will do everything in my power to ensure that we honour that requirement.

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

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Minister's tone in wanting to grip this issue. I put in an urgent question for this yesterday, as Mr Speaker knows, and I am really pleased it is being discussed today. It is shocking state of affairs. We talk about having the most professional armed forces in the world, we give them excellent equipment and we train them well, but accommodation has constantly played second fiddle—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think it is rather naughty of you to say that. The fact is that if I were to see everybody who put in for urgent questions, I would spend all day doing that. Accept that you have the urgent question; we do not need to go over what you did or did not do, because you put in a lot of urgent questions and you get a lot.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that clarification, Mr Speaker; it was not in any way a complaint, but a confirmation. I am delighted that we are able to address this matter today. As I was saying, we have the most professional armed forces in the world, but I am afraid that accommodation plays second fiddle to the equipment and the training that we provide them. I ask the Minister what is going to happen in the integrated review, which is due for an update shortly. Will it identify funding to be put in place to make sure we can improve the accommodation? This problem did not happen in the

last few days. Reports of heating and boilers not working, let alone the mould that he speaks about, need to be addressed, or the soldiers, sailors and air personnel will vote with their feet and depart the already overstretched armed forces.

Alex Chalk: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this is an issue about ensuring retention in the armed forces. He asks about money going in: one positive thing, as I indicated, is the £350 million going in over two years, over and above the budget. However, I do not want to let the contractors off the hook. He is right that there is a backlog of work that needs to take place, and I have talked about the £350 million for that, but one of the most shocking things about this to me, as a new Minister coming in, is that it appears to have come as a surprise to Pinnacle, Amey and VIVO that their IT systems were not properly married up. Service personnel would pick up the phone to report a complaint to Pinnacle, but by the time it got VIVO or Amey, it was not necessarily the right contractor who turned up. That is an IT failure. They are grown-ups entering into a contract—caveat emptor and all that—and they should have known what the situation was and have made arrangements accordingly. As I said before, this is not any old contract. It is a contract to provide accommodation. People need to be sure of their ground before they take on one of these deals, and clearly they were not.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Broken boilers, water pouring into homes, mould, vermin and painful waits for basic repairs—all while Ministers cancel troops' Christmas leave. Our forces deserve so much better. It is a national scandal that the Government are leaving service personnel, their families and their children without heating and water during the coldest winter for more than a decade. Can the Minister say exactly how many forces homes are currently without heating or hot water, and what he is going to do about it? Can he guarantee here and now that no one in uniform or their family will be without heating or hot water this winter?

Although shocking, these reports are unfortunately not surprising. There are deep-seated problems with the Government's handling of Defence housing, going back years. One third of our armed forces personnel are dissatisfied with the overall standard of their family accommodation and almost one in three service family homes are awaiting repair. Between June and October this year, more than 5,000 maintenance appointments were missed. Is the Minister confident that his contractors are meeting their mandated key performance indicators? It certainly does not look as though they are. The MOD paid £144 million to contractors to supposedly maintain service family accommodation this year. Is he satisfied that that represents value for taxpayers' money?

These reports of dodgy accommodation not only are a breach of the contract the nation makes with those who serve, but pose a risk to recruitment and retention. More than one quarter of armed forces personnel said that poor accommodation increases their intention to leave the services. Decent accommodation is a fundamental part of our moral obligation to those who serve and their families. This Government are failing our armed forces when it comes to service accommodation and we

[Luke Pollard]

need to see better from Ministers. In setting out what he has done, will the Minister now apologise to forces and their families, many of whom will be spending yet another Christmas in shoddy military accommodation?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman asks, quite fairly, whether I think that the contractors are meeting their requirements. We are absolutely clear that they are not meeting their requirements. Indeed, that is why a rectification plan was imposed as long ago as September; it was clear that there were some fundamental issues going wrong. I have spoken about the IT issues, but also, candidly, there were not enough people in the call centre. I think Pinnacle had 14 people, although that has now been increased to 60.

I get that there has been some snow and ice, but not biblical levels of snow and ice; these are things the contractors should have accounted for and prepared for. The hon. Gentleman asks whether the contract is value for money, and no, at the moment I do not think it is. If the contractors performed, it would be a perfectly sensible contract, but I reiterate: over and above the annual amount, we must ensure there is the £350 million of support to get ahead of this problem, so that we can have a well-maintained service family accommodation estate that does not run into problems in the first place. I am pleased to note that there is £76 million targeted towards improving thermal efficiency—to you and me, Mr Speaker, that means boilers, insulation and so on—which again will resolve some of these issues.

There are lessons to be learned, candidly, and I am clear about that. One thing that must be investigated is how this contract was entered into. Was it the case that some people were—how can I put it?—a little economical with the actualité when indicating what they could provide by way of support and IT? What did they say and when? We need—[*Interruption.*] Of course we should also look at the due diligence; that is a fair point as well.

The hon. Gentleman made a political point at the beginning, and I hope he will forgive me for saying this: it is true that a lot is being asked of our troops at Christmas, including to fill in for jobs that others are not doing. I urge him to join the Government in saying that those going on strike should call those strikes off so that our troops can get the Christmas they deserve.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): In February 2020, I co-authored a report called “Stick or Twist?” for the Prime Minister, copied to the Defence Secretary, after a year-long study into why armed forces personnel leave. Poor standards of accommodation was one of the major factors why they decide to stop serving the Crown. In that report, we pleaded with Ministers not to go ahead with the Future Defence Infrastructure Services contract, but to look at better alternatives, such as a bespoke forces housing association instead. Nevertheless, they ploughed on. FDIS will never work. It is structurally dysfunctional. I say to the MOD: “Please, on behalf of service personnel and their families, rip off the plaster, admit you were wrong, create a workstream on accommodation as part of the integrated review, and do something better that actually works.”

Alex Chalk: As my right hon. Friend indicates, he has been assiduous in raising the issue of service family accommodation, and I commend him for doing so. There will have to be a long, hard look at FDIS, and I suspect—in fact, I know—that the MOD will look carefully at the points he made in his “Stick or Twist?” report. We will have to see what the lessons are from entering into contracts such as this, and it may be that he is absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Once again, we are debating with a Minister forced to atone for the appalling housing conditions inflicted upon our armed forces. This is, of course, a decades-long problem, which the MOD continues to show no strategy to resolve. Pinnacle was recently, in March, awarded a £144 million contract to manage these homes. This money has barely scratched the surface. It has been reported that families are still being issued with sleeping bags and are sleeping in their coats in mould-ridden houses, and some go weeks without heating. Some houses are so badly insulated that families cannot afford to turn the heating on. How can the Minister defend that enduring shame?

Senior officers and junior ranks alike are frustrated by an unresponsive private sector facilities management contractor. That is further compounded by the now demonstrably failing Defence Infrastructure Organisation. Is that failure in political leadership caused by a lack of funding, the DIO’s incompetence, a failure of the contractors, or all three? Can the Minister say specifically that he has full confidence in the executive officer team of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation?

Alex Chalk: On the plan, as I have been at pains to underscore, the MOD is specifically putting money into that area over and above the normal maintenance contract. That is absolutely critical. It is what the hon. Gentleman would do in his own house if he wanted to get on top on maintenance issues: if he were able to, he would invest in it to ensure that things do not go wrong in future. That is precisely what the MOD is doing by way of a plan. To put that into context, £350 million is around double what is paid annually to keep on top of the problem, so there is a plan.

On funding, lest we forget, in the spending review of 2020, a full £24 billion was released by the then Chancellor and now Prime Minister to show that this Government will always get behind funding our armed forces and ensuring that they have the resources they need to be lethal, agile, expeditionary and so on.

On confidence, at the moment, frankly we do not have confidence in Pinnacle, VIVO and Amey. I am very disappointed by the performance that has been discharged so far. The hon. Gentleman asks about DIO. I do not think I am betraying any confidence in saying that some exacting questions need to be asked about precisely how this contract was entered into. Those questions have started to be asked, and I can assure him that they will go in the direction of the evidence—I make that clear. I want to get to the bottom of who knew what and when, and how this was allowed to happen.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In my hon. and learned Friend the Minister’s welcome and forthright response to this urgent question, he said that consequences

would follow if satisfaction was not forthcoming. Can he explain to the House what those consequences might be, and what options the Government have to discontinue the contract and, if necessary, find alternative and better providers of service accommodation?

Alex Chalk: In the first instance, there are clauses in the contract that allow for the MOD to recoup—or, indeed, to refuse to pay out—certain sums that would otherwise accrue under the contract. In fact, from 23 January, we will be in a position to do that. We could not do it for the first six months because there is a contractual bedding-in process, but that point has now been passed, so there is, potentially, a financial remedy. As with any contract, however, if the breach has become so severe as to become a fundamental breach, other remedies may follow. My right hon. Friend will understand precisely what I mean by that. If he will forgive me, I will not go down the road of spelling out what all those remedies might be, but I can say that all options are being considered in the normal way, as he would expect.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): HMS Raleigh; the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, Lympstone; HMS Sultan; HMS Collingwood; RAF Cranwell; RAF Halton; Catterick garrison; RAF Cosford and Stonehouse barracks are just nine armed forces sites that have contacted me about problems with hot water and heating. Many of those sites deal with initial basic training. What message does it send to young people and potential recruits if we cannot provide the basics of heating and hot water?

Alex Chalk: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: that is not good enough. When we get into the details on the specific numbers of properties that have been left without heating and hot water, if there is the thinnest of silver linings, it is that the majority—indeed, the large majority—have experienced that for less than 24 hours. In other words, the overwhelming majority are fixed during that period. But it should not happen at all. It is a fact of life that sometimes boilers break, and we accept that. It is no doubt the case that elsewhere—in civvy street, so to speak—some suppliers are having difficulties fixing them within a reasonable period because demand has spiked. But the central point is that there was a contract, which had specific requirements, and grown-up, experienced contractors entered into it knowing fine well whether they had the resources to meet them. They should have taken account of the fact that, just perhaps, it might get a bit snowy in winter. It seems that that did not happen. That is why we are particularly indignant and frustrated about it, and we will take every proper and legal step to hold them to account.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Like many on both sides of this Chamber, I have had the privilege of spending time with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, where we meet service personnel and, on many occasions, their families. I am always interested to hear about families' experience and the expectation of being the partner of one of our service personnel. For retention and for so many other reasons, it is absolutely crucial that we sort this out. I know that the Minister knows that, so how long will he give Pinnacle to pull its socks up or make significant change?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has experienced, through her own mailbag, the impact on the families of service personnel. I have experienced that myself in Cheltenham. The answer is that we are absolutely clear that that needs to improve. She asks about timelines. From 23 January, if things have not improved, potential financial consequences can follow. Act 1, scene 1 is for Pinnacle to make progress now. I am talking about right now—indeed, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) was talking about today. I am receiving daily dashboards about what the situation is and what proportion has been left without heating for more than 24 hours and so on, and I have made it clear that I want to see improvements every single day.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): When service personnel in service families accommodation are away, their spouse has to take charge of property maintenance. I recall my wife spending hours on the phone to the then contractor, Modern Housing Solutions, waiting in the queue on the phone in the hope that, eventually, the circuitous jingle would come to an end and she would be met with a human voice. Last year, 16,250 armed forces personnel left the armed forces—the largest number since 2016. What account did the Government take of retention of service personnel when they awarded the contract to Pinnacle Group in April?

Alex Chalk: Issues of recruitment and retention are, of course, broad-based and multifactorial. All sorts of issues go into determining levels of recruitment and retention, but the hon. Gentleman raises a fair point. I would hope and expect that, at the time of entering into the contract, it was made crystal clear that Pinnacle had to deliver on it, because otherwise the implications for service families—not just the individual serviceman or woman, but their families—would be deeply profound. It has not measured up to that, and I think we need to establish in very short order what it said, when it said it and whether it was being entirely up front about what it could deliver.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee has issued two reports on this—one in 2016 and one in 2021—and there is also, of course, the excellent report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), which highlighted the same issues. Yet another contract was let earlier this year with the same problems. There is a rottenness at the core of the MOD's ability to contract to deliver on this service, and worryingly, it also delivers on major warships, armoured vehicles and so on. What is the Minister going to do to make sure that there is a real difference? Financial penalties do not deliver better heating systems. Will he undertake a root-and-branch review of how the Ministry of Defence contracts for these services, and will he listen to some of the recommendations made in recent reports?

Alex Chalk: There are two issues here. First, there is the issue of the overall quality of the stock. I have spoken about the fact that that does need to improve. In fact, the £350 million to which I referred is principally directed at the 20% of accommodation that requires the most support. As I have indicated, 96% of all service

[Alex Chalk]

family accommodation meets the decent homes standard, but we need to make sure that that £350 million goes where it is needed and has the maximum impact.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asks a fair question about ensuring that these contracts are properly entered into in the first place, and it is one that I am keen to get to the bottom of. DIO needs to ensure that it does everything possible to do its due diligence on contracts and make sure that, ultimately, we all end up with something that will deliver. That is absolutely what I am focused on.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Halifax is home to many armed forces families and has a long association with the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in particular, but service families have made more than 9,000 complaints about the state of their service accommodation since the start of last year, largely relating to maintenance concerns. The Minister has been candid about the failings he has found, so what are the consequences for those contractors where he finds such failure in meeting those service standards?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the situation in her constituency. Built within the contract is an understanding that should contractors fail to meet what is known as ALP—acceptable levels of performance—consequences can follow. Under normal English law, if there is a repudiatory breach, that can lead to consequences in the normal way, but built within the contract is also potentially a financial penalty. Respectfully, I disagree with those who say that cannot be significant; it can be extremely significant and damaging for the company. As I said before, this is not any old contract; this is a contract to provide accommodation for some of the best people in our country who answer the call. The contractors should have done better; they will do better, or they will face the consequences.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his strong response to the question. Understandably, many families are deeply concerned by the lack of action to tackle black mould in these homes and the serious effect it could have on their children's health. What assurances can the Minister offer military families with children that they will not have to live in these dangerous conditions?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The position is that if mould is found in a property before a service family is due to enter it, they will not or should not enter it. One of the things that, as I indicated, I am moderately encouraged by is that whereas in July, for the more than 1,000 families due to enter, some 4% of properties were discovered to have a non-habitable failure—which could be mould—by the time we got to the early part of December, that had gone down to 0.6%. That is the first thing: if mould is found, service families should not enter. If mould is found when they are already there, there is now a dedicated helpline they can call, which should lead to a surveyor coming to conduct a survey. If the work can be done, great. If not, and they need to move into alternative accommodation, that will be provided.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): After the death of Awaab Ishak, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said that it should never have happened and that it was a basic responsibility of the local authority or housing association to make sure that people are living in decent homes. There have been thousands of complaints since 2021 over problems of mould and leaking ceilings in the homes of service personnel. The Minister is a decent man, but we are hearing a lot of excuses about contractors today. Should the Secretary of State for Defence not accept the same basic responsibility that the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) seeks to impose on local authorities and housing associations?

Alex Chalk: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that more needs to be done in respect of mould. One encouraging thing is that there is now a dedicated hotline for people to report it, which did not exist before. They are reporting not just into an empty room, but to people who will ensure that a professional survey and remedial action are undertaken. He makes a wider point about more general responsibility. I am pleased to say that DIO has set up an improvement team of 30 people—made up of operations specialists, IT specialists and more—to ensure that the MOD will do everything it can to ensure that Amey, VIVO and Pinnacle have nowhere to hide by blaming other people. Ultimately, we will have the inquest in due course, but right now we need to ensure that these problems are being solved, and we will do everything in our power to solve them and to support people.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): This is an extremely important issue, and I place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this urgent question. I was lucky enough last year to complete the Royal Air Force segment of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and I visited several bases in the UK and abroad and saw the standard of accommodation that some service families have to live in, and it is simply not acceptable. I take this opportunity to thank Wing Commander Smith for facilitating that. Will the Minister give the House a precise figure for service family properties that have cases of mould and damp?

Alex Chalk: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with a precise number, but the central point is this: any member of the armed forces, be they in the RAF—I am delighted he went on the armed forces parliamentary scheme—the Navy or the Army, should, if they discover mould in their service family accommodation, call the national hotline, and that should trigger the remedial action that I have indicated, with a surveyor going in. If the issue cannot be sorted within a reasonable period of time, they should then be re-accommodated. He raises a fundamental point. We ask an awful lot of our armed services personnel, particularly over Christmas, for the reasons we discussed earlier. This issue has to be sorted out, whether it is mould or anything else. We are absolutely determined, every single day, to do everything we can to fix it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his firm and helpful response to the urgent question. I have an Army base just a couple of miles from my constituency, and I believe it can be of use to help

people, whether that is temporary accommodation or a complete refit for affordable housing. To see these sites lying vacant seems so wrong when there is so much need. Will the Minister outline what discussions have taken place referencing accommodation in Northern Ireland so that vacant properties are not left to fall into even deeper disrepair?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It is not just Northern Ireland; other people have got in touch to say, “There seems to be this vacant accommodation.” There is a lot of movement around the country, as he will appreciate, and the MOD needs to keep significant headroom in available accommodation. The central point is that that should not be a mechanism by which properties can fall into disrepair. He makes precisely that point, and that is why the £350 million over and above the annual maintenance cost is so important. If that can be, as I am assured it will be, directed at that 20% of accommodation in the greatest need, that will ensure that when that accommodation is required, it will be fit for purpose for service personnel, who deserve high standards.

Ukraine

1.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Ukraine. I am grateful for the leeway that Mr Speaker has given me for a slightly longer statement than normal; I thought it important to give as much information as possible to the House at the close of this year.

Today marks the 300th day of what was supposed to be a three-day operation by Russia. As this calendar year draws to a close, I want to update the House on the illegal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the brave defence of the Ukrainian people. Since it began its offensive on 24 February, Russia has failed to achieve its strategic objectives. Not one single senior operational commander in place on 24 February is in charge now. Russia has lost significant numbers of generals and commanding officers. Rumours of General Gerasimov’s dismissal persist, as Putin deflects responsibility for continued military failure in Ukraine, high fatality rates and increasing public dissatisfaction with mobilisation.

More than 100,000 Russians are dead, injured or have deserted. Russian capability has been severely hampered by the destruction of more than 4,500 armoured and protected vehicles, as well as more than 140 helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, and hundreds of other artillery pieces.

The Russian battalion tactical group concept—for a decade the pride of its military doctrine—has not stood up to Ukrainian resistance. Russia’s deployed land forces’ combat effectiveness has dropped by more than 50%. The Russian air force is conducting tens of missions a day, as opposed to 300 a day back in March. Russia’s much-vaunted Black sea fleet is little more than a coastal defence flotilla. Kremlin-paid mercenaries are faring no better. Hundreds were recently killed by a strike on a headquarters used by the paramilitary Wagner Group in the Luhansk region.

Behind the scenes, international sanctions, including independently applied UK sanctions, have handicapped the Kremlin’s defence industry. Russia is running out of stockpiles and has expended a large proportion of its SS-26 Iskander short-range ballistic missiles. It is now resorting to stripping jetliners for spare parts. Its inability to operate independently is underscored by its reliance on Iran’s Shahed drones.

President Putin’s failure to marshal recruits and machinery is translating to battlefield defeats. At the maximum point of its advance, in March, Russia occupied around 27% of Ukrainian territory. Ukraine has since liberated around 54% of the territory taken since February. Russia now controls only around 18% of internationally recognised areas of Ukraine. Last Monday, the Kremlin cancelled its annual press conference for the first time in a decade.

Almost a year on, the conflict now resembles the attritional battles of world war one. The Russian army is largely fixed in place, not just by Ukrainian firepower but by its own creaking logistics system and barely trained troops. Soldiers occupy networks of waterlogged trenches and a vast frontline stretches for 1,200 km—the distance from London to Vienna. Despite intense fighting in the Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions,

[Mr Ben Wallace]

Russia can barely generate a fighting force capable of retaking lost areas, let alone make significant operational advances.

Russian public opinion is starting to turn. Data reportedly collected by Russia's Federal Protective Service indicated that 55% of Russians now favour peace talks with Ukraine, with only 25% claiming to support the war's continuation. In April, the latter figure was around 80%.

Alongside Russia's litany of failure is an expanding rap sheet of reported war crimes. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, since 24 February some 6,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed and nearly 10,000 injured. Every day more allegations emerge of rape, arbitrary detentions, torture, ill treatment, deaths in custody and summary executions. Unrecorded group burial sites have been discovered in former occupied areas such as Mariupol, Bucha and Izyum. Industrial facilities such as the Azovstal steelworks and the Azot chemical plant have been targeted, risking the release of toxic industrial chemicals, and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant—the largest in Europe—has been indiscriminately shelled. At the start of the invasion, Russia planned “kill lists” of civic leaders, show trials and sham referendums. Unfortunately for it, the international community has not been fooled by such tricks.

Russian soldiers recently exhumed the bones of Prince Potemkin, the legendary confidant of Catherine the Great. They have also looted priceless artefacts from museums and, according to UNESCO, either partially or completely destroyed more than 200 Ukrainian cultural sites. More sinister still is the splitting up of families through forced relocation or “filtration” into temporarily occupied territories or Russia itself. Numerous open-source reports show that this morally bankrupt activity is not the work of rogue units or corrupt individuals; it is systemic.

Today, Russia is weaponising winter, with ongoing and widespread missile strikes targeted at Ukraine's energy and water infrastructure. More than 40% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been struck. However, Ukraine's resilience has meant that a significant proportion is back up and running. Such behaviour is a flagrant breach of international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict. We are doing everything we can to support the Ukrainian authorities and the International Criminal Court as they investigate.

At the beginning of this year, my aim was to help Ukraine resist and to give its citizens hope that the Europe they aspire to be part of would support them in their hour of need. The international community has not disappointed. As Russia has changed its tactics throughout the conflict, so we in the United Kingdom have changed the type and level of our support. For example, Britain's expertise and advice is helping Ukraine better co-ordinate and synchronise its air defence. Our advice helps Ukraine target incoming Russian or Iranian kamikaze drones. We always make sure that our support is calibrated to avoid escalation. The House should be under no illusion that it is Russia that is escalating its attacks on Ukraine, and I have made that point clear to my counterpart Minister Shoigu in Moscow.

I wish I could tell the House that, after 300 days of almost daily defeats, Russia has recognised its folly. Sadly, it has not. There is no let-up for the Ukrainians

and, as can be seen by the weaponisation of energy, there is no let-up from Putin's war for us here in the United Kingdom or across Europe. Therefore, Ukraine will require our continued support in 2023, building on our lethal aid, training, humanitarian support and international co-ordination.

That is why, as the temperature drops further in Ukraine, the UK is doing what it can to help Ukrainians endure the harsh winter. The UK has donated 900 generators to Ukraine, and it has sent approximately 15,000 extreme cold weather kits to the Ukrainian armed forces, including cold weather clothing, heavy duty sleeping bags and insulated tents. We anticipate that a further 10,000 cold weather kits will be delivered by Christmas. Across the international community, around 1.23 million winter kit items have been deployed to Ukraine.

Alongside our global partners, we have implemented the most severe package of sanctions ever imposed on a major economy. Simultaneously, we have galvanised efforts to raise funds to support Ukraine. I chaired my first Ukraine donor conference on 25 February and have attended three since then. The UK has been instrumental, too, in bringing our northern European neighbours together in solidarity under the auspices of the joint expeditionary force, whose unity was apparent at its meeting yesterday in Riga. Together, this has ensured a steady supply of lethal and non-lethal aid to sustain Ukrainian resistance.

As the threats to European security rise, the UK has also been leading efforts to shore up regional security, deploying a number of units across the continent. President Putin wanted to see a weaker NATO. NATO will now be even stronger with Finland and Sweden's decision to accede to the alliance. As Secretary of State, I do all I can to make sure that the final hurdles are removed to allow their swift entry into the alliance.

Although our populations continue to struggle with the cost of living crisis, the global community must hold its course on Ukraine. The price of Putin's success is one none of us can afford. We must ensure that Russia maintains its commitment to the Black sea initiative, which has so far transported 14.3 million tonnes of grain in more than 500 outgoing voyages; we must stop its reckless shelling of nuclear facilities; and we must hold its enablers to account. Iran has become one of Russia's top military backers. In return for Iran's supply of more than 300 kamikaze drones, Russia intends to provide it with advanced military components, undermining both middle east and international security. We must expose that deal—in fact, I have just done so.

Make no mistake: the UK's assistance to Ukraine will remain unwavering. I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his continuing support. We have already committed to match or exceed the £2.3 billion in military aid we have spent in the last year. We have secured a major deal to keep up the ongoing supply of artillery rounds and will continue refreshing Ukraine's stocks of air defence and other missiles, as well as our own. Where we have equipment to gift, we will replace from our own stocks; where we have no more to gift, we shall purchase alongside our allies. The UK has been joined in its huge level of support by the US, as well as by EU members—Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic states in particular.

We are determined to maintain and sustain the Ukraine equipment pipeline for the longer term. Our international fund, which we co-chair with Denmark, has to date received pledges worth half a billion pounds, and it has just concluded its first round of bids for capabilities that we plan to rapidly procure for Ukraine in the new year.

Our armed forces are doing everything possible to develop the battle skills of Ukrainian men and women, having put almost 10,000 through their paces in the UK in 2022. My ambition is for our armed forces, alongside our allies, to train at least double that number in 2023. I want to place on record my thanks to Canada, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, New Zealand, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Australia for their contributions of troops to join that endeavour, training Ukrainian troops here in the United Kingdom. Finally, we must help Ukraine rebuild. The reconstruction conference that we will host next year will accelerate that process.

Throughout this year, I have kept open communication channels with my opposite number, Defence Minister Shoigu, in order to avoid miscalculations and reduce the risk of escalation. Through written correspondence and a phone call on 23 October, I have repeatedly stressed that Russia must stop targeting civilians, end its invasion, and withdraw its forces from Ukraine.

This year, the Ukrainians have been fighting not only for their freedoms but for ours. We must be clear that three days, or even 300 days, is not the maximum attention span of the international community. The UK and the international community's dedication to help Ukraine is solid and enduring, and will not let up through 2023 and beyond. We cannot stand by while Russia sends waves of drones to escalate its attack on innocent civilians.

Just as the UK's support has evolved as the conflict has unfolded, we are doing so again now in this latest phase of Russian brutality by developing options to respond in a calibrated and determined manner should the escalation continue. If the Kremlin persists in its disregard for human rights and the Geneva conventions, we must insist on Ukraine's right to self-defence and the protection of civilians. The next year will be critical for all of us who believe in standing up for freedom, international law and human rights. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Secretary of State for Defence.

1.50 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I congratulate and welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his extended statement and for the Ukraine briefings that he has provided to the shadow Front-Bench team throughout the year.

Today marks the 300th day of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Winter has slowed the fighting, Russian forces are digging defensive lines and strikes on critical civilian infrastructure continue, but the Ukrainian determination to defeat Russia remains as strong as ever. Liberating more than half the territory that Russia seized after 24 February is a remarkable achievement; Ukraine is winning and western military assistance is working. As a Ukrainian MP said to me last month, "weapons are the best humanitarian aid".

Since the start of the invasion, there has been united UK support for Ukraine and united UK condemnation of Russia for its attacks and war crimes. On Britain's military help to Ukraine, and on reinforcing NATO allies, the Government have had and will continue to have throughout 2023 Labour's fullest support.

Today also marks two months since the Defence Secretary last gave a statement to the House on Ukraine. Since then, multiple ad hoc announcements have been made through news headlines on ministerial visits—for example, £50 million in defence aid when the Prime Minister was in Kyiv; three Sea King helicopters when the Defence Secretary was in Norway; six armoured vehicles when the Foreign Secretary was in Ukraine; and yesterday, £250 million for artillery ammunition when the Prime Minister was in Riga.

That is exactly the type of support that the UK should be providing, but the full 2023 action plan for Ukraine that the Secretary of State promised four months ago has still not been published. Can he explain why not? That would help to give Ukraine confidence in future supplies, gear up British industry, encourage allies to do more, and make it clear that things will get worse, not better, for Russia.

The Secretary of State's statement was largely backward-looking, so I have some questions. As winter sets in, what extra support is the UK giving to ensure that the Ukrainians can continue fighting? As reports suggest that Russia is preparing a big early spring offensive, what extra military assistance is the UK providing? As Putin continues to bomb Ukraine's energy infrastructure, what support is the UK giving to help to repair and protect it? As Russia constantly breaks the Geneva conventions, the Defence Secretary said that he was "open-minded" about sending longer range weapons systems. Has he made up his mind yet about whether to send that support? As Putin reinforces his relations with Belarus, does he expect its more direct involvement in the conflict?

Two weeks ago, on day 287 of the war, the Defence Secretary finally got the Ministry of Defence's act together and announced that he had signed a contract to produce new next-generation light anti-tank weapons, which is welcome. Replenishing stockpiles is a matter of public and parliamentary concern, so we know that our armed forces can fight, fulfil our NATO obligations and continue to support Ukraine. That also sets a precedent. To meet the same standards of accountability, will he tell the House why he published a press release about the NLAW contract but stonewalled my questions about other contracts to restock weapons sent to Ukraine? Will he confirm that the Prime Minister has now ordered a data-driven review of military aid to Ukraine, and for what purpose?

In 2023, NATO will be stronger, larger and more unified with new military plans. How will Britain's NATO contribution change? How will the Defence Secretary ensure that the UK's obligations are fulfilled? Since Putin's brutal illegal invasion began in February, 22 NATO nations have rebooted their defence plans, yet it took six months for Ministers to accept the Opposition's argument that the Government needed to do the same to its integrated review. That was first promised by the end of the year and then in the new year, but the Chief of the Defence Staff's interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* suggested that the updated IR will not come out until April.

[John Healey]

The spring Budget is on 15 March. The Chancellor said in his autumn statement that before any decisions are taken on defence spending,

“it is necessary to revise and update the integrated review, written as it was before the Ukraine invasion.”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 848.]

Where does that leave the Defence Secretary? How will he manage another year with real-terms cuts that he agreed to his revenue budget? Although the Kremlin maintains its declared hostility to the west and clearly prepares for the war in Ukraine to run long, 2023 could nevertheless become the turning point for this conflict as long as we and other allies maintain our ability, not just our will, to provide the military, economic and humanitarian assistance that the Ukrainians need to win.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions and for the cross-party support across the political divide—from not just the official Opposition but the Scottish National party and Liberal Democrats, who have provided clear leadership. Britain has been at its best on this issue, which has helped to inspire other nations across Europe to lean in, whatever their politics. There have been many changes in the Governments across Europe—perhaps not as many as in ours, but a fair few—and whether they have gone from left to right or right to left, they have embraced the cross-party view that what is going on is wrong and that we should stand together.

The biggest surprise to President Putin and his cynical calculations is that, funnily enough, across age groups and political divides, we all care about human rights and the values that we share across Europe as much as our grandparents’ generation did, and we are prepared to stand tall. I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his support and I will continue to give as many briefings as possible or give access to intelligence briefings. I know that he will have a briefing on stockpiles soon; I was told this morning that we are starting to arrange the dates for January, and I will make a similar facility available to other Opposition parties.

That is part of the answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question. We obviously keep some of our stockpiles secret, because it would benefit an enemy or adversary to know what we are strong or weak in. I have said, however, that I will happily share some of those details with Opposition Members, albeit not in the public domain. That is why we are prepared to talk about the replenishment of some weapons systems, such as NLAWs. With the gifting of more than 5,500 or 6,000 NLAWs, they need to be replaced, which is why we signed that contract on 7 December.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point about getting my act together. One of the challenges for stockpile replenishment has been that when many of those orders were fulfilled 10 or 15 years ago, the supply chain switched off. I sat in on the previous statement about getting contracts right; when negotiating for new prices, history says that we should not give a blank cheque but make sure that we have the real prices that will be reflected in the contract. For the NLAWs, we joined forces with the Swedes and the Finns to place a joint order, and in the meantime, the manufacturer found that new supply chains could give us an accurate price.

That is the reason for the delay—simply to get an accurate price, and not because we were scrimping and saving or trying to do anything differently. As soon as we could, we placed that order.

The backfilling of the 155 mm artillery shells is already in an existing framework, and they are starting to be commissioned. In November, we signed a contract for the low-velocity anti-aircraft defence missiles that will replace the ones that we had gifted—we continue to supply some—to Ukraine. On top of that, in the autumn statement there was a £560 million increase for our own stockpiles.

The right hon. Gentleman’s point about the action plan is valid. At the beginning of next month, I will seek to make sure, if possible, that we have a debate on the action plan for next year. I am disappointed that I do not have one for him. As he will understand, some of the issue is about different allies and different requests from Ukrainians—this is not always a static thing; it is a dynamic situation. Nevertheless, the right hon. Gentleman is correct. I totally support and agree with his observation that an action plan is a good signal to Russia, let alone our allies, about what we intend to do.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Prime Minister’s review. It is understandable that, being new in post, the Prime Minister would seek an update on Ukraine and want to take a stock check of where we are. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that that process in no way weakens or undermines the Prime Minister’s resolve to support Ukraine this year, next year and onwards. It is perfectly reasonable for him to have wanted to take stock. The media report was half right, let us say, rather than fully right, but let us not let facts get in the way of a good news story.

On the integrated review, I have always tried to be honest about the problems that defence has. Defence has always had the problem of appetites being bigger than budgets and of strategy documents being written without the budget being known. The autumn statement has started to dictate what we could do in the short term, and that has had a clear and direct impact on the timeline of the IR. I hope that by March the IR refresh will be aligned to a Budget promise, as that would be sensible. Otherwise, we will be back to hollowing out or trying to produce a document that does not match that appetite or spend. It is regrettable that the refresh has not come earlier, but I would rather get it right. Then we can have a healthy debate about whether I am spending the money in the right or wrong place.

I am happy to share with the House, if it wishes—perhaps in a written statement—the full list of supplies that we can talk about that we have put in over the past year. The most recent, obviously, was nearly 1,000 surface-to-air missiles to help deal with the Iranian kamikaze drones. We announced and put those in only last month, as a response to the current situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is fair to say that there has been a bit of domestic turbulence in British politics over the past six months or so, but, as we saw in our Defence Committee visit to Ukraine, the support that Britain provides is so appreciated. That is

largely down to the leadership, commitment and consistency from the Defence Secretary. It is important to put that on the record.

Bearing in mind the huge contribution that Britain has provided in allowing a series of counter-offensives to take place, does my right hon. Friend agree that the threat from Russia remains? Putin is mobilising more of his forces and retooling many of his industries, potentially for a spring offensive. He is increasingly framing this conflict as, to use his own words, “a wider struggle against a hostile west”. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is therefore not just a Ukraine war, but a European one? The longer it lasts, the more it will damage not just Ukraine but our own security and economy—all the more reason why it is important that we put this fire out.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend and I totally agree that it is important that Putin fails in Ukraine, because if he were successful the consequences would be felt right here in the United Kingdom and right across Europe. Yes, it is a battle of European geography, given that Ukraine was invaded illegally, but it is also a battle of European values. From Putin’s point of view, the people of Ukraine seem to have had the cheek of looking towards Europe and wishing to share its values, and he felt that that was one of the reasons to invade.

Of course, the west is not buying the almost monthly recasting of Putin’s reasons for invading, which have varied over time. At one stage, it was to denazify and get rid of gays, apparently; if that was the case, the gay people of Ukraine are doing a fantastic job of beating that view—more power to their elbows. Then the reason was that NATO was threatening Russia, although of course when Sweden and Finland chose to join NATO that no longer seemed to be the core issue. The latest narrative is that it is the US versus Russia, with all the rest of us between those great powers—I suspect that that is how Putin sees it. That moving narrative is a sign of Russian desperation.

At heart, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right: Russia as a threat is not going away. It has exposed itself as having no regard for international human rights, for the rule of law, for minorities or for the respect of sovereignty—whether that of a neighbour or further afield. It seems to have no regard for the consequences on its own soldiers, who are being lost in their thousands because of incompetent generalship.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesman.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): More than 17,000 civilians are estimated to have been killed in Ukraine, with increasing hybridisation displacing the failed kinetic offensive by Russia—failed but no less destructive for its want of just purpose. The figure seems destined to grow amid the missile attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine’s harsh winter. The Odesa Oblast energy department advises that fully restoring electricity supplies could take as long as three months, confirming that Russia is deliberately bombing hospitals and other medical facilities to sow and cultivate terror in over 700 such attacks since February.

Russian attacks on energy infrastructure on Sunday 11 December left 1.5 million people without power in Odesa in the middle of winter. Ukraine’s armed forces

advised that Russia launched 15 Iranian-made drones in the region of Odesa and neighbouring Mykolaiv, 10 of which, thankfully, were shot down. Determined to engage the world in his conflict, Putin has weaponised not only energy, as we now see all across Europe in these winter temperatures, but the blocking and now consistent frustrating of the meagre ship traffic into and out of Ukraine, limiting food to the global south, impacting grain prices globally and challenging the storage of the 2022 harvest.

This is hybrid hostile action against a global civilian community, designed to show the strength of the Russian nation but so woefully misguided and miscalculated that it reveals principally the unity of Europe, the steadfast shield of NATO and the indefatigability of the Ukrainian people fighting and suffering with just cause on their side and the world at their backs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the UK Government like to reflect on the help, support, training and other interventions given to Ukraine to date—I note the 900 generators detailed in the Secretary of State’s statement and the unity that he rightly refers to across the House. He can continue to rely on Scottish National party support in this one distinct area. Can he assure the House that he will be ever vigilant for cracks of fatigue in the international community as we continue to support Ukraine, and have a strategy to deal with those cracks should they ever—I hope they do not—appear?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Yes, the international community works collectively, including through the Joint Expeditionary Force. I invited his colleague, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the former leader of the SNP, to JEF meetings when they were hosted in Rutland and Edinburgh recently. It is important that Opposition Members get to meet a number of our international colleagues: demonstrating that unity changes things and moves the dial.

I have made 41 international visits over the last 12 months, mainly around Europe, although some were further afield. Defence diplomacy matters fundamentally; one thing to come from the defence Command Paper was that defence diplomacy is one of the ways to avoid wars, making sure that we are helping countries be resilient in their own defence so that war does not happen. It is a Cinderella part of defence, but incredibly important.

On the wider area of humanitarian aid, it is important to remember the £220 million aid package. The support is not just about lethal aid; it is about helping the broader community and society. Economic failure in Ukraine would be another plank towards a Putin victory, and therefore we must help, including with a £73 million fiscal support grant and £100 million for energy security and reforms. A further list is growing around the work we have done, with things such as medical assistance from the Department of Health and Social Care, and others, and also with things such as grain. That is just as important as the military fight, helping Ukraine’s resilience through the winter and against the appalling attempts to switch off its energy, and helping to ensure that its economy survives in 2023.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend share his assessment of likely Russian military doctrinal changes as we go into next year? Does he believe that Gerasimov has indeed been fired? Will he reassure us that he has been having strong conversations with his Belarusian counterparts following Putin's visit yesterday, to deter them from becoming combatants in this illegal renewed war?

Mr Wallace: I am always happy to speak to my Belarusian counterpart. I have not engaged directly with Belarus—perhaps I should try, and I will. The open source commentary around Gerasimov's future is matched by open source commentary about the future of other generals, but we can say for sure that the generals around Putin are not in agreement about the success or failure rate of the special operation, and that is causing significant frictions. We will see what the outcome is, but we should be under no illusion that President Putin is still in charge of Russia, and as long as he is, he is determined to drive the special operation along, and we in Europe must stand and resist.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. This week Vladimir Putin flew to Minsk to meet President Lukashenko. In the press conference that followed, President Lukashenko described himself and President Putin as the most hated and “toxic” individuals in the world—something I am sure we could all agree with. Picking up on the point raised by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the potential for Belarus to join this conflict, to get Putin out of the quagmire he has got into?

Mr Wallace: I think it is unlikely in the short term that Belarus will join, but it has allowed its territory to be used for the launching of weapons systems, and at some stage of Russian forces into Ukraine, and I do not see that changing. It is notable, however, that by his absence the President of Belarus has managed to navigate a tightrope, and to date he has not sent his forces into Ukraine. Perhaps that is because his forces are best deployed securing him and his future, rather than going to Ukraine and suffering the same fate as the Russian forces.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Since Ukraine was attacked by a robotic and cowardly psychopath we have been led by three rather varied Prime Ministers, but fortunately only one Defence Secretary. Will he confirm that 300 days into Putin's criminal campaign our Government remain as resolutely committed to its defeat as they were on day one, and may we therefore anticipate a long overdue rise in the defence budget to 3% of GDP?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend has been right for years about the threat posed by Russia, and as Defence Secretary I say he has been right for years about the funding for defence. But I am not the Prime Minister, or indeed the Chancellor, who has a difficult job of balancing the other demands on the public purse. However, I shall continue to fight for that 3%. On my right hon. Friend's kind comments about continuity, may I say that the shadow Secretary of State has also been in a place of continuity, and that makes a difference. I hope party

leaders recognise that the best way to get over all those stories about how the civil service does this or that is through continuity in office.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Defence Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for their focus and the approach that they have taken to this conflict, unifying our country and also unifying the world. However, increasingly there are rogue states to that position on the war and the supply of weapons, which is deeply troubling. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that we isolate those actors that are supplying Putin for his war?

Mr Wallace: We work with a number of countries to make very clear that that is unacceptable, and where we can we take steps to frustrate that process. Fundamentally, once weapons systems are in the hands of Russians or on Ukrainian territory, they are legitimate targets for the Ukrainian armed forces, and we have already seen that success. As I said in my statement, this is not always about hardware. Britain's know-how in ensuring that air defences are better co-ordinated has helped significantly to defeat some of the Iranian drones that are being fired, almost like V-1 bombs from the second world war. It points to the heart of the regime that we are all up against that its solution to failure on the battlefield is to fire those things indiscriminately at civilian infrastructure, and at civilian areas where people live.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that we were assisting Ukraine in its air defence against drones, but do we have other troops helping Ukraine within Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: We do not need to be in Ukraine to help with our knowledge, and to help to better co-ordinate, explain and train. That is why we have brought nearly 10,000 Ukrainian troops here. Many Ukrainians received specialist troop training outside Ukraine. The Germans and, I think, the Dutch did training on long-range artillery for the Ukrainians, and we obviously helped with combat engineer training in neighbouring states.

I have noticed some misleading media comments about the Royal Marines. We have a small contingent for force protection around the embassy, as would be expected, to ensure that we always protect our diplomats and our areas. We are not directly engaged in conflict with Russia—we have been very clear about that—but we have been providing hardware and know-how to assist Ukraine to defend itself.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Of course Putin has got to be defeated, but that means not just going down a military set of avenues but ensuring that every part of British society is doing whatever it can to bring Putin to his knees. Will the Secretary of State—he is the fixed point in an ever turning world with this Government—explain why Unilever is still selling Cornettos and Magnums in Russia, why Infosys is still functioning in Russia, and why many months after Abramovich's Chelsea was sold, the charity is still not in place to be able to deliver £2.5 billion of that money into the rebuilding of Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: On the latter point, I am happy to write to the sports Minister to find out that detail, as I am not across that part of the process.

The hon. Gentleman is right about brands. If I was running any one of those international companies I would not want my brand to be associated with what is going on in Russia and the Russian regime. As I said in my statement, what is going on in Ukraine is not a few isolated units but part of the system, as is Russia's treatment of its own people who disagree with the policy, which includes people being locked up for long periods simply for criticising the special military operation. I urge those international brands to think very carefully about continuing to trade in Russia.

On what more we can do, I think—I am happy to be corrected, perhaps by the Leader of the House, who is sitting next to me—that the next steps of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill will make it harder for people to keep and launder money in the United Kingdom. That has got to be the right thing. When I was Security Minister I did a considerable amount on that, and there is still more to do.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I am proud of the military equipment and aid that we have been giving the Ukrainians, and also of the humanitarian aid that communities such as mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme have sent to Ukraine over the past year. As the conflict evolves and Ukraine is perhaps more on the offensive than the defensive, we may need to change the types of weapons and aid we are sending. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is open to sending new types of weapons to the Ukrainians, and if so what new kinds might those be?

Mr Wallace: I will not speculate further on the specific types of weapons systems. Obviously we have longer-range, smarter weapons in our stock that could be used should Russia continue to escalate in the way that it has. It is important that we keep that ambiguous for now, because the last thing we want is Russia preparing defences against certain capabilities. However, it should be under no illusion—I have communicated this to my counterpart—that we view what it is doing now as an escalation. In the past, when the Russians started bombing civilian areas, such escalations have seen a response such as my authorising the supply of high-velocity anti-air missiles.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I welcome the right hon. Member's statement, including his conclusion that we in the UK believe in standing up for international law. The crime of aggression perpetrated by Russia's leadership should be regarded as the supreme international crime. It is from this aggression that breaches of the law of armed conflict and other crimes flow. Allies in Europe are advocating that we seek to secure justice for war crimes, including the crime of aggression. Will the Secretary of State, when talking to the Attorney General, advocate for the UK speaking favourably about the special tribunal so that we might see future accountability for this crime of aggression?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I will. What is unifying us is the egregious breaches of international humanitarian law and international human rights laws that are going on before our eyes on the continent of Europe. That, in the end, must be dealt with through courts of law. The message we need to send is that there are two

types of country: those that believe in the rule of law and will prosecute it to see justice done, and those that do not.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As "Game of Thrones" taught us, winter is coming. While Putin has failed to defeat the Ukrainians militarily, he is now trying to freeze them into submission. I welcome what the Secretary of State said about 900 generators, which must help. When I visited Ukraine with the Chair of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and others, we heard pleas for more generator capacity, particularly for schools and hospitals. Will the MOD talk to Departments such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury to co-ordinate the donation by businesses and companies of spare generators to Ukraine to keep the lights on and save lives?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is always more that we can do. The international community has put in a lot of generators. I do not have the overall figure, but I can talk about the 900 that Defence and the UK have put in. In the non-military space, there is also a vast line of donations, with individuals and groups raising money and sending in equipment. I think that a group in Yorkshire raised money, donated some armoured ambulances and took them to Ukraine.

It is sometimes hard to have a track on exactly what is going on, but there is a vibrant community doing that and we will do everything we can to support it, including dealing with any blockages at the borders that may be unnecessary or bureaucratic, because speed is definitely of the essence. I can stand here as Secretary of State and talk about military aid, both lethal and non-lethal, but humanitarian aid and support for the economy are as important if we are to get through 2023. I will ensure that my colleagues in the Foreign Office are absolutely on it.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I also reiterate my support for Ukraine and my condemnation of the Putin regime.

The Secretary of State spoke briefly about the threat of a Russian offensive in the spring. Will he update the House on what further steps the UK will take to try to help the Ukrainians if that takes place?

Mr Wallace: The United Kingdom and the international community are trying to ensure that, by spring next year, Ukraine has the tools that it needs to do the job of either defending itself or the counter-offensive that it will need to continue to push Russia out. By contrast, Russia no doubt has ambitions to do the same, and has some offensive ambitions, as colleagues have referenced. Its problem at the moment is re-equipping itself; it is finding that hard in its supply chain. It has mobilised troops, some of whom are being sent to the front without food, without socks, without the proper uniforms and without pay. That is how poorly the mobilisation has gone. At the same time, with bickering among generals, there is a problem in its leadership about exactly what it is going to do. However, that does not stop Russia's ambition to continue on its failed special operation and, with some determination, it is prepared to sacrifice the lives of its own citizens to do it.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Welcome to your position, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State has shown immense leadership and hard work in the last few months. I thank him for his service in that area. He will know that Lancashire is absolutely peppered with Ukrainians hosted through the generosity of people in South Ribble and beyond. They are here to work and find solace, but what they really want to do is go home. We have supported the Ukraine military with £2.3 billion this year, and I welcome his and the Prime Minister's commitment to extend that into next year. Will he update me, the House and Ukrainians in Lancashire on what he is doing to bring a broad coalition together and ensure that others continue to show a united front to Putin and help Ukrainians win?

Mr Wallace: So far, 201,300 visas have been issued for Ukrainian people in the United Kingdom. That shows the scale of support, and is something to be welcomed. A number of countries, including our friends and allies, have hosted and are putting together conferences. The French recently had a donor conference on helping to rebuild parts of Ukraine, and we will have one in the new year. One of the best ways to help those wishing to go home is to ensure that they have an economy to go home to and that their infrastructure has been rebuilt so that they can continue their lives.

One of the cruellest things is that, early on in the war, the Russians targeted shopping centres in Ukraine to put people out of jobs. It was not anything other than that—it was not about the military. The Russians decided early on to hit big shopping centres on the outskirts of cities deliberately to put lots of people out of a job and to try to break the economy. That was striking to see, and that was their level of callousness. It is therefore important that our funds, and those of the international community, go to rebuilding that economy alongside the military effort.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Recent concerning remarks from Putin regarding the tracking down of traitors, spies and saboteurs could lead to further witch hunts of ordinary Russian citizens and scientists involved in international research under the guise of dubious foreign agent laws. How will the UK support such individuals and work with our international partners to ensure their safety?

Mr Wallace: We sadly saw the consequences of that in Salisbury, where a British citizen, Dawn Sturgess, was murdered as a result of the actions of the GRU, which used Novichok nerve agent on the street. Indeed, that was part of Putin's speech when he referred to making traitors "kick the bucket". President Putin indicated his true colours early on when it comes to respect for sovereignty.

One way in which we deal with that is using our intelligence services and our police force to protect people in this country as well as working with the international community to ensure that where we identify Russian intelligence officers acting outwith the conventions, they are expelled. We saw 163 "diplomats" expelled after the Salisbury poisoning, and continued expulsions have gone on. As hon. Members will remember, the Dutch discovered the GRU trying to bug or disrupt the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,

which monitors chemical weapons use, and people were obviously expelled as a result of that. That is one of the best ways of going about it, as well as by being open and honest about standing for what we stand for. People who oppose the Russian Government are welcome here, to ensure that they too can work for the cause of freedom and international law.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine and someone with a considerable Ukrainian community in Colne Valley and Huddersfield—many families came to our part of Yorkshire after the second world war—I appreciate the opportunity, in my final question of the year, to highlight and welcome the amazing support that the United Kingdom has given to Ukraine in weapons, training, generators and, now, cold weather kit. How does the Secretary of State see the NATO alliance, including our new NATO allies of Sweden and Finland, continuing to take the fight to those involved in the evil invasion of Ukraine in the coming year?

Mr Wallace: It is important to remind the House that this is not NATO fighting Russia—that is the narrative Russia would like. NATO's job in this process has been to improve and increase the resilience of NATO members that border Ukraine and Russia itself, to send a strong message to Russia that it is not going to contaminate further with its aggression or be allowed to push people around. Most assistance to Ukraine is bilateral—it is bilateral on many fronts. NATO has ensured it stood up its readiness. It has deployed NATO member state forces right across NATO itself. We have had troops in Poland, Estonia and Bulgaria, and flights over the Black sea by Typhoons to help with air policing in both the north and south of Europe. We have had more deployments of ships, as have many other countries. If we look at the overall map of NATO deployments, we can see that NATO has been incredibly active in not only reassuring its member states but some of its neighbours, such as Finland and Sweden, who, as yet, are not in. In summer, we sent a squadron of tanks to Finland for the first time ever to exercise with the Finnish armed forces. NATO has been busy. It is busy modernising its regional plans to come to terms with what is going to happen in the medium and long term, but at the same time it stands ready to defend its members under article 5 and article 4 should Russia take the unwise view that what it needs to do next is try to broaden the conflict.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement, as well as the response from the shadow Defence Secretary, and in particular what he said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about brands and Russia. Should not anybody who holds shares in those companies, including Infosys, who are profiting by getting dividends from the activities of those companies in Putin's Russia, divest themselves of those shares and invest their money in investments that will assist the people of Ukraine, rather than assist Putin's illegal war in Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: I do not know the company concerned. No doubt somebody I am supposed to know has shareholdings. What I would certainly say is that I take the view that I would not wish to take money from anyone connected with the Russian state or Russian

activities. I just do not think that is the right way to go. Brands that seek to sell into Russia and allow normality to be accepted on the streets of Moscow should think again. What Russia wants is to get away with this and to be able to mix in civilised society. It should not be allowed to partake in luxury brands or other brands. It should realise that the consequences of its actions are greater isolation, not a broader coalition.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The UK should be proud of its role in training 22,000 Ukrainian forces to get them ready to defend themselves and supplying defensive weaponry. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that our UK-led, and now internationally supported, training programme continues to adapt to give our Ukrainian friends the skills they need to take on Russian forces?

Mr Wallace: Yes. The operation we run to teach Ukrainians, with bases in Cumbria, Yorkshire, Wiltshire and down at Lydd, started life as a three-week course. It is now over five weeks and is fully equipped. Our forces and international forces are now learning from Ukrainians, because a number of their directing staff who return have been on the frontline. I had a conversation with a platoon commander who had himself used British NLAWs to destroy two Russian tanks. We are learning from each other about what to do, which is incredibly important for our resilience and our future. It also helps to refine the course. We are now teaching Ukrainian non-commissioned officers: we are doing an NCO course to ensure that we develop their junior leadership, too.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Royal United Services Institute has confirmed that component parts from the UK are appearing in Russian weaponry. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the Government are looking at further sanctions, much like those announced by the US in October, to prevent both Russia and, for the reasons he outlined, Iran from being able to use UK components in their weaponry being used in Ukraine?

Mr Wallace: It is an incredibly important point that time and time again we see international components. I noticed that in some of the Iranian drones there were, I think, 28 components that came from the United States, all through smuggling, illicit means or dual use issues. One job our intelligence services have is monitoring and trying to understand supply chains, to find when covert agencies or covert agents of Russia, Iran or others are out trying to buy them, and ensure that we frustrate them. That is easier said than done in a world where highly complex supply chains exist—indeed, you can do anything on the internet and DHL will deliver it in 24 hours to a third country—but it is a really important part of our vulnerability in the west. Our intellectual property can be stolen and we have to do more to keep an eye on it. We have done quite a lot more recently, but this is a timely reminder of what we are finding inside Russian equipment.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Thousands of UK troops are placed all across the world, including, as the Secretary of State mentioned, in some NATO states. That can be tough at Christmas, so will he give our thanks from this House? Does he also have a message for why they are actually there?

Mr Wallace: Yes. The sad thing about what we have seen in Ukraine is that Russia will be a threat for some time to come. The world is more unstable and more anxious wherever that may be in the globe. The stability we so desperately need is provided by soft and hard power. We need to be better at it in the international community and certainly in the west, where our open liberal societies get taken for granted or are easily attacked by our adversaries. As we speak, the men and women of our armed forces are deployed, whether that is in Estonia, to send a message to Russia that just because Estonia is small, it is not going to be vulnerable and left on its own, or policing the air to ensure that when we have Russian breaches of our own air space we are there to send a strong message. Those men and women will be working over Christmas and new year, through the cold not only here but all over the world, ensuring that British values are upheld and that we send reassurance to our allies. Part of this is about reassurance and resilience, as well as being ready should anything happen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his leadership and the confidence he gives. I believe it inspires us all in this House, and inspires the people of Ukraine and across the world, and it is certainly worth noting. In recent weeks, as Ukraine has retaken territory seized by Russia, there has been a significant number of discoveries of mass graves, the use of cluster munitions, and the torture and execution of prisoners of war. Ukraine estimates that Russia has committed at least 34,000 war crimes, including 400 in Kherson alone as it targeted civilians before abandoning that city. Given Russia's continued role on the UN Security Council and the veto that gives it, what steps will be taken to ensure that Russia is held accountable for those crimes? It should never ever get away with them and it should know that.

Mr Wallace: Russia can veto all it likes at the UN Security Council, but the International Criminal Court investigations will endure and continue. We will support it in collecting evidence. It is very important that we send the message that no one can escape justice for what is going on and that justice should be delivered blind of nation. It should be delivered on what crimes are alleged and people should face the full wrath of the law.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I share the widespread pride in Britain's support for Ukraine over the last year, and the satisfaction that that support will go on over the course of 2023, in particular the 200,000 visas for Ukrainians to come here and the 20,000 soldiers we will train in the United Kingdom to assist the Ukrainians. Will my right hon. Friend have a word with the Home Secretary to ensure that Ukrainian combatants whose relatives are here in sanctuary get the visas they need to come and spend their short time on leave with their loved ones?

Mr Wallace: I am happy to write to the Home Secretary on their behalf. When you visit the troops being trained, you often find that the interpreters are the women of the men fighting, who have volunteered their services to help translate for the troops we are training. It is incredibly important that we help so that when they have their rest and relaxation, they try to meet up. I would be happy to write to my right hon. and learned Friend.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, many of us are increasingly concerned by the growing list of human rights and war crimes committed in this conflict. How can we offer specialist support to Ukraine to keep records? We know that rape is used as a weapon of war, and we have mass deportations into Russia. How can we ensure that evidence will be there so that those crimes can be fully prosecuted?

Mr Wallace: Sadly, Britain has some experience from the past because of the proliferation of war crimes. The UK military and the police are currently providing technical assistance to the investigations. The Metropolitan police war crimes unit has commenced the collection of evidence. We are working closely with the Ukrainian Government to make sure that continues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank you for your patience, Robin Millar.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. It sets out a compelling narrative of, on the one hand, Russian terror, overreach and folly, on the other hand, the bravery of the Ukrainian troops and the resilience of the Ukrainian people. I know that many people in Aberconwy will welcome the role that the Government have played in supporting Ukraine and the role of our British troops. Can he offer assurances that UK armed forces will remain in Ukraine, not least in support of our diplomatic presence in the country?

Mr Wallace: As long as our diplomats are there and people need that type of protection, the military are often part of providing security. It is not an offensive capability and they are in small numbers but they will do that.

It is Christmas time and I want to pay tribute to the men and women of our armed forces and the civil servants in the Ministry of Defence who will be working through Christmas and new year. We have heard in the previous question about the inadequacies of the accommodation, which is simply not good enough and needs to be fixed. I am determined that we stand by those men and women. They are doing what many others are not doing at Christmas—they are separated from their families. They will be keeping us safe, and I want to wish them all a very happy Christmas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let me wish both Front Benches a happy and peaceful Christmas.

Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement)

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

2.42 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about shared parental leave and pay in certain cases where one or both of a child's parents has died; and for connected purposes.

I want to start by telling the House Aaron's story. I was visited at a constituency surgery in February by my constituent Aaron Horsey, who is in the Gallery today with his family. Aaron had his three-week-old son Tim in his arms. His wife Bernadette had sadly passed away in childbirth. Bernadette would no doubt have been the most loving, dedicated mother, and had ambitious plans for continuing a long career in the NHS. She is missed tremendously by her loved ones.

While grieving the passing of his wife and looking after his new-born son Tim, Aaron discovered that he was not entitled to shared parental leave. That put the plan that Aaron had put in place with his wife Bernadette into jeopardy. Luckily, in Aaron's case, he worked for an incredibly understanding employer, which gave him the leave he needed to look after Tim, but others are not so lucky. This Bill attempts to ensure that there is a right to leave and pay for individuals such as Aaron in the case of a spouse passing away. That right would be there regardless of the length of time that a person had been with their employer. This Bill would help not only employees in such circumstances but businesses that wish to give leave.

During the process of securing this ten-minute rule Bill, I have been contacted by other individuals around the UK with similar stories to Aaron. It is my belief that we must work to close the gap and ensure that leave and pay are made available for those in circumstances such as Aaron's. It is important to state that this issue does not affect thousands of people across the country, but for those it does affect, the consequences are huge. Changing the law to ensure that leave and pay are available to those who find themselves in situations such as Aaron's will ensure that no parent is faced with the devastating position of raising a child and grieving in the shadow of avoidable job insecurity.

Parental leave in the UK is something we should be proud of. Since the Employment Rights Act 1996 and the Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations 1999, entitlement and access to maternity leave and pay have been very straightforward. On a similar note, entitlement and access to paternity leave or shared parental leave, although more limited, are also fairly straightforward. When shared parental leave was introduced in 2015, the Government stated that they wished to

"move away from the current old-fashioned and inflexible arrangements and create a new, more equal system which allows both parents to keep a strong link to their workplace."

Shared parental leave was established to allow parents access to their workplace and their family. That is precisely what is being prevented in cases such as Aaron's. It seems that in such cases the people whom shared parental leave was created to help are often the ones missing out. When faced with this life-altering set of circumstances, Aaron was confronted with having to

cope with the challenges of being a new parent and the prospect of new job insecurity, all while in the midst of extraordinary grief. That is more than many of us could handle.

This Bill is not contentious. It simply seeks to allow individuals the right, under circumstances beyond their control, to take leave and be with their child. As I have mentioned, it would affect not a vast amount of our population, but a small number in our society who need the help of the Government and their employers.

Aaron brought it to my attention that there are circumstances, in the event of the death of a child's parent during childbirth, in which the surviving partner is not entitled to parental leave. To be eligible for shared parental leave and statutory shared parental pay, both parents must share responsibility for the child at birth and meet work and pay criteria. As the law stands, for the mother's partner to take shared parental leave and shared parental pay, the mother must have been working for at least 26 weeks of the 66 weeks before the baby is due, and must have earned at least £390 in total across any 30 of the 66 weeks. The mother's partner must have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the due date. They must also stay with the same employer until they start their shared parental leave.

Practically speaking, a surviving partner could be entitled to take shared parental leave but they would not meet the criteria I have just mentioned. Aaron did not. That means that, under this requirement, many will not qualify for shared parental leave and pay. This Bill seeks to correct that. It seeks a day-one right for a parent to access both leave and pay. It seeks to ensure that employees who have to raise a child following the death of their partner will not be left without support. As a father, I know that being a parent to a newborn is a huge undertaking at the best of times. I cannot imagine being in that position while facing the fact your partner has died during birth. I want to ensure that people such as Aaron are never in the position of being without support.

I now come to why this Bill is needed. I truly hope that no one finds themselves in the position that Aaron found himself in, unable to share the beginning of

Tim's life with his loving wife. The aim of this Bill is to ensure that people facing that situation do not find themselves without the law behind them.

I thank all hon. Members who have supported the Bill. I have received overwhelming cross-party support on the issue. The Bill is not party political; it seeks to make a real impact to those in our society who find themselves in tragic circumstances through no fault of their own. As well as receiving support from colleagues, I have received a statement of concern from the Prime Minister. I have also had meetings with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, including with the Under-Secretary of State—my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is in his place on the Front Bench—to discuss these much-needed changes.

My last thanks go to Aaron. While he was dealing with all the hardship that I have set out, he was thinking not about himself, but about how to ensure that no one else finds themselves in his position. He is a truly selfless individual. I put on record my awe at the bravery and resilience that he has shown and continues to show.

There is a gap in our law that means that parents and guardians face impossible circumstances. That gap must be closed. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that the tragic circumstances of losing a loved one and raising a child alone are made that tiny bit easier, and that employment is one thing that need not cause further turmoil. I ask, with much hope, that due consideration be given to passing the Bill. The change it would make may seem small, but its impact on the life of an individual could be incalculable.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Darren Henry, Jim Shannon, Tracey Crouch, Sally-Ann Hart, Brendan Clarke-Smith, Philip Dunne, Wera Hobhouse, Mrs Pauline Latham, Tom Randall, Stella Creasy, Dr Philippa Whitford and Sarah Champion present the Bill.

Darren Henry accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2023, and to be printed (Bill 221).

Christmas Adjournment

2.52 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

A great event occurred in May: the Conservative party took control of Harrow Council for the first time in more than 12 years. The Conservative administration is already making a massive difference. More than half a million one-hour free parking tickets have been provided, revitalising the high streets in Harrow. I suggest that other councils might like to consider such a policy, because it increases footfall and people's use of local shops. It will be expanded to council-provided car parks next year.

A key issue being addressed right now is the enforcement of measures tackling illegal fly-tipping, illegal houses in multiple occupation and beds in sheds. I am pleased to say that the threatened development over Stanmore station car park has been put firmly on the back burner. Indeed, the new administration has reduced the permitted height in suburban settings to no more than six storeys, which will prevent any high-rise developments in suburban, leafy areas. I am pleased to see that. The new customer experience action plan for interactions with the council, which will enable residents to speak to a real person as opposed to a robot, is to be commended.

Before the election in May, Harrow Council was a catawampus in a state of complete disorganisation. The new administration has opened the books and is looking at the financial mess in which the council was left by Labour; those of us who were elected to this House in 2010 had a similar experience. There was an in-year deficit. Rather than constraining spending, the council had used up all its financial reserves—about £15 million—to plug the budgetary holes. Had it carried on, it would have gone bankrupt, as Croydon has done twice in the past year. It was all caused by overspending across departments and by the use of agency staff, who cost a lot more than contracted staff. I am pleased that the new chief executive and the new administration have announced a 10-point plan to control expenditure and ensure that the council lives within its means.

There is a debate in Westminster Hall right now about the outrageous decision by the Labour Mayor of London to introduce an ultra low emission zone across the whole of London from next year. This is another attack on drivers. In my constituency, in which the average household has two and a half cars, drivers will have to pay an extra £12.50 a day just to get to work, get to hospital, drop their kids off or do their weekly shop. Electric cars are still far too expensive and in very short supply, and public transport is certainly not frequent or reliable. That leaves most of my constituents in a very difficult position—particularly our key workers, who have to work the night shift when no public transport provision is available and driving is the only option.

The Mayor has clearly not taken public opinion into account, because more than 66% of those who were consulted opposed the expansion. Indeed, our estimate in my constituency is that only 1% of people are in favour, so the Mayor is flying in the face of the public's views. The recent strikes have exacerbated the position for those who rely on cars to get to work, school, hospital or the shops because public transport cannot

be trusted or relied on. He is, of course, a flibbertigibbet—a flaky, overly talkative person who delivers very little in his office. Very sadly, I understand that he is going to stand again in 2024.

On Home Office matters, I think the whole House agrees that there has been a lack of clarity for many constituents whose family members are stuck in Afghanistan. They believe that the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is still open, but we know that it is not. That is causing many problems, because many people were told that they should escape to a third country such as Pakistan and then apply. They did not get a response in time, so when their temporary visitor visas expired they were returned to Afghanistan, back into the hands of the Taliban.

I turn to Ukraine. We have been very generous across the country in receiving visitors to our shores, but as I warned the House at the start, there are security concerns about potential Russian spies posing as Ukrainian refugees. Two individuals in Harrow were posing as Ukrainian refugees and reporting back to the Russian authorities on people in Harrow. The sponsorships are coming to an end, and we are now seeing Ukrainian families turning up at local authorities up and down the country, having been declared homeless and evicted. We also still have 11,000 Afghan refugees stuck in hotels waiting for housing. There is serious work to be done to help the people we have agreed to assist.

The situation in Iran is critical. Hundreds of people have been killed, thousands have been imprisoned for protesting, and many tens of people have been put on trial and condemned to death. I condemn the Government of Iran for suppressing the protests, I deplore the violent behaviour of the Iranian police in regard to the protests, and I am extremely concerned to hear of threats being made to organisations and the press in this country, who are reporting on what is going on. Indeed, there was recently a petrol bomb attack on a National Council of Resistance of Iran base in outer London.

I continue to urge the Government to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and work with international counterparts to impose sanctions. The House will have an opportunity to express its opinion when we come back after the recess, because on Thursday 12 January I will be leading a debate on the matter. It has been nearly 100 days since the crowds started protesting, following the murder of Mahsa Amini. I look forward to that debate and to the Government responding in a timely fashion and actually doing something about it.

In September there were serious clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Leicester, and I took up the plight of the Hindus on whom attacks were being made. In my constituency more than 37% of people are of the Hindu faith, and they were extremely stressed by the actions of a small group of people from outside Leicester who came in and caused all the trouble. It is clear that that needs to be combated, and I hope that when we next look at the Government's listed places of worship grant scheme there will be appropriate provision for Hindu temples as well as other places of worship to ensure that they are safe.

In May, I was fortunate enough to be drawn in the ballot for private Members' Bills for the second time. My Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 has helped single homeless people and prevented others from becoming homeless, and now my new Supported Housing (Regulatory

Oversight) Bill is having a potentially good effect on the market. It is outrageous that rogue landlords are exploiting vulnerable people and forcing them into a position in which they should be receiving support. I look forward to the Bill Committee, which will meet on Wednesday 11 January—I thank those colleagues who have volunteered, or been volunteered, to serve on it—and to the Bill's coming to fruition in the new year.

I am receiving a substantial amount of constituency casework involving the many people who are being placed in emergency housing far away from Harrow. It is impractical for local authorities to keep doing this. It cannot be fair for people who have lived in Harrow for a long time to be placed in, for instance, Wolverhampton, Birmingham or Luton, and it forces up property prices in those areas as well.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, I strongly support the Government's smokefree goal for England, which is to reduce smoking prevalence to below 5% by 2030 and subsequently to make it obsolete. The long-awaited Khan report was published earlier this year, setting out strong guidance on what needs to be decided on and implemented. The key issue is that the Government have still not announced the position relating to the tobacco control plan. The APPG suggested licensing local retailers to sell tobacco, and we produced a ten-minute rule Bill on the subject. I look forward to the Government's support.

Let me now raise two international issues. The first is the India trade deal: I look forward to its coming to fruition early next year, because it presents a tremendous opportunity to both the United Kingdom and India. The second is Israel, which has experienced a series of interesting elections. Now that a stable Government seems to be in the process of being formed, I hope we can ensure that there is a proper trade deal with that country.

The 1922 Committee, of which I am secretary, has had rather a busy year, with a confidence vote and three leadership contests. I am pleased that we have reached the end of that year, and look forward to a much quieter year from the Committee's perspective.

Finally, I wish everyone a very merry Christmas, a happy Hanukkah and a happy, peaceful, prosperous and healthy new year. I myself look forward to a restful period with friends and family before coming back refreshed in 2023. I send Christmas wishes to all my colleagues in the House—including you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker—and all the staff who support us and enable us to do our jobs: the catering teams, the security teams, the cleaners, and everyone else who makes this job possible. I hope they all have a very merry Christmas and a good break, and that we can all come back refreshed in the new year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before we commence the debate, let me remind all Members of Mr Speaker's expectation that those who speak in it will remain for the winding-up speeches. Let me also say that Back-Bench speeches will probably have to be confined to about seven minutes. If all Members adhere to that, we should get everyone in. If not, Mr Evans may find it necessary to reduce the time limit later when he is in the Chair.

3.4 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I suspect that many Members, on this side anyway, have considered basing their speeches on Charles Dickens's famous Christmas ghost story. It may not be original, but who does not wish that the Prime Minister could be visited by spirits and wake up determined to lead a kinder, more compassionate Government—a Government with a plan to tackle the evils of poverty, low wages, homelessness, debt and desperation; a Government whose Ministers lie awake at night devising policies to free people from fear or hunger, rather than dreaming of deportation flights? I have seen many versions of "A Christmas Carol" over the years, but there is no doubt that this Government are best captured by the 1992 Brian Henson version, the one with a cast of Muppets.

For too many families in Britain, conditions this Christmas are nothing short of Dickensian. Pensioners are sitting in the dark with a tiny electric heater, too worried about their gas bill to turn on the central heating. Children are going to bed hungry, their parents not knowing how they are going to make ends meet. I think Dickens would be horrified that almost 180 years after his story was published, its lessons have still not been learnt. While gas and oil companies make extraordinary profits, this Government refuse to tax them effectively to protect our constituents from the cold of winter, as Labour has proposed, and they show a similar disregard for my constituents who rely on our health services.

Last week, when Nottinghamshire MPs met local NHS leaders, it was clear that the Government's stubborn refusal to negotiate on pay is utterly self-defeating. Those NHS representatives told us that nurses struggling to pay the bills are working fewer NHS hours and picking up bank or agency shifts instead, costing the NHS billions extra, while others are leaving the profession altogether. Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust has begun providing hot meals for £2—an initiative to help staff cope with the cost of living crisis—after becoming aware that some were going without decent meals. Ministers clapped NHS workers during the pandemic, but now they look away as those same staff are resorting to food banks. It is shameful that the Prime Minister and his Health Secretary are refusing to sit down with nurses and other NHS workers, listen to their concerns and talk about their pay. Bah humbug indeed!

However, it is not only NHS workers whose voices are shut out. Last Thursday, Nottinghamshire firefighters and support staff, the chief fire officer, the chair of the fire authority and the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union all travelled to Parliament to make the case for fair funding for our county's fire service. Not one of the seven Nottinghamshire Conservative Members attended, and the fire Minister was nowhere to be seen. Firefighters, like nurses and paramedics, often face unimaginable stress at work. Last month, despite the bravery and dedication of the emergency services, Fatoumatta Hydara and her two young children, Naeemah and Fatimah, were killed in a house fire in Clifton, in my constituency. I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the whole House will join me in sending condolences to their family and friends.

Incidents such as that remind us just how vital our fire services are, but in Nottinghamshire, since the Conservatives took power in 2010, firefighter numbers

[Lilian Greenwood]

have fallen by 29%, response times are substantially slower, and the service is stretched to the limit. Understaffing was so bad throughout last summer's wildfires that Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service had to telephone off-duty firefighters and ask them to do extra shifts. On at least one occasion, the nearest second appliance called to Nottingham was from High Peak, more than an hour away.

Underfunding and understaffing are having a very real impact on my constituents' ability to access vital public services. Record numbers are waiting for NHS treatment, some for more than two years. Patients are left waiting hours for ambulances. Yet another critical incident was declared at Nottingham University Hospitals yesterday, with operations and outpatient appointments cancelled. If the Government do not provide more funds for Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service, there will be even fewer firefighters and even longer response times. Right now, budget cuts are forcing the fire authority to consult on moving to have just one fire appliance at each of Nottingham's two fire stations. The chief fire officer describes this as the least worst option, but if the cuts go ahead they will make every one of my constituents less safe by next Christmas.

It is amazing that the Government still have the gall to suggest they are trying to level up this country. Since 2010, Nottingham City Council has had to make over £300 million of savings to its budgets. Government funding has been cut from £126 million to £26 million—almost £700 per resident. Like many other local authorities, it has had no choice but to raise council tax and bid for every pot of money going. Councils should have found out by the end of this month whether their bids for levelling up cash have been successful. Now they will have to wait until the end of January. Funding to redevelop Nottingham's Broadmarsh and invest in the Island Quarter would unlock further development of those areas, creating jobs, homes and opportunities in our city and stimulating economic growth for the wider region. It is very much needed. The east midlands remain at the bottom of the table for Government investment and as a result our region is unable to fulfil its potential. When will that change?

Christmas should be a time of joy and hope for the new year ahead. I hope that 2023 marks a turning point, although I am afraid that the real change my constituents need will come only when they have a Labour Government. A general election is top of my Christmas list, in case you're listening, Santa! I remain an optimist. Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to end by wishing you, the whole House and all parliamentary staff a happy and healthy Christmas break. As Dickens had it, "God bless us, every one!"

3.11 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I would like to raise a number of points in relation to both home and abroad. I raise the first on behalf of Eaton Bank Academy in Congleton. The energy efficiency payments that the Department for Education has provided this month will be put to excellent use on quick-win projects such as LED lighting, but to achieve longer-term efficiency saving goals such as photovoltaic panels or door and window replacements, the school is asking the Government

to consider a return to the Salix loan scheme that was recently available but seems to have been replaced by a more complex decarbonisation fund that is harder to access and targeted at larger multi-academy trusts. With energy prices on the rise, the return of Salix loans would be welcome, given that schools are not allowed to borrow money by any other route. While I am on schools, I want to thank the Government for including Sandbach School in the recent announcement of refurbishment funding under the Government's school rebuilding programme. Sarah Burns, the headteacher, says that

"this will secure the wonderful buildings that are part of the heritage of Sandbach town, ensuring the school can continue to provide the best possible learning environment for students."

Next I wish to ask a question of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on behalf of constituents who are seriously concerned about activities at their town council. They are at a loss as to how to have their concerns independently investigated and addressed. The principal unitary authority, Cheshire East Council, does not see this as its responsibility, saying:

"Cheshire East Council has no power over the town and parish councils within its Borough and has no legal or other standing to involve itself in a matter in respect of which it has had no involvement. Neither does Cheshire East Council have power to scrutinise the precepts issued by town and parish councils within its Borough."

The local government ombudsman does not cover town and parish councils either, so how can residents get their serious concerns about management by a town council effectively addressed?

I turn now to support for my farmers, whom I meet regularly. Cheshire farmers remain gravely concerned about bovine TB. The current policy of badger culling on a discreet basis in Cheshire has been evidently effective, and more effective than any alternative, according to my farmers. They are asking for Ministers to agree to an extension of the current policy for a further three years from when it would otherwise, very shortly, be finished.

I now turn to the issue of outstanding facilities and other services on new home sites. I welcome the advent of the new homes ombudsman service, and I hope it will be a great aid for the many homeowners who live in the plethora of newly built houses on a number of developments across my constituency who find themselves experiencing difficulties getting developers to complete sites, sometimes years after the last house was built. Homeowners can get support from the ombudsman service only if the builder has registered with the ombudsman. Will Ministers look at how constituents can get recourse to resolve such matters, particularly if the initial developer has passed the estate to a management company?

I want to speak briefly about the Alsager sports hub in my constituency. I fought a long local campaign with residents, in which Sport England was very helpful, to install new state-of-the-art sports pitches, but sadly, only three years later, the pitches have deteriorated to such an extent that I was obliged to indicate to Cheshire East Council that they have been deemed by some to be "unplayable". I was proposing to raise these concerns in the House, but I am pleased to say that after indicating that to Cheshire East Council, I have now received a letter stating that action is being taken to bring them

back up to their previous standard. It is regrettable that they have deteriorated in such a short amount of time. I want to place on record my continuing support for the Alsager community to help to ensure that these sports pitches are properly maintained.

I want to speak about concerns over local train services to Congleton station by Northern and CrossCountry. Constituents regularly tell me that the services are much worse since the pandemic. Indeed, last week on a day outside the strike times, I was unable to get any train from London to Congleton station at all. I call on Ministers to impress upon those operating companies the need to fulfil their franchise agreements and provide a viable service to the people of Congleton. Also, I need hardly mention that my constituents continue to raise concerns about Avanti West Coast services to stations across my constituency including Alsager, Sandbach, Holmes Chapel and Goostrey. This completely inadequate service cannot go on. I understand that the Secretary of State has extended the franchise to give Avanti time to fix matters, but can I press upon him the importance of resolving these issues as quickly as possible?

After the recent revaluation of business rates, one of my constituent business owners has had his rateable value increased by 10%, taking it just over the threshold for small business rate relief, which he will therefore lose, potentially along with other reliefs and grants. He suggests that, alongside a review of rateable values, the threshold for small and medium-sized enterprise relief should increase to £16,500 from April 2023. Can this be looked at?

Moving abroad to two issues on freedom of religion or belief, there is no let-up for persecuted minorities in Iran while the regime pursues its vicious crackdown on dissent. I condemn the recent sentencing of Baha'i leaders Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi to a second grievously unjust 10-year sentence after they have already lost 10 years of their lives incarcerated with five other Baha'is. They are mothers and grandmothers, and they are among the longest-suffering prisoners of conscience in the world.

Also, I draw Ministers' attention to the humanitarian plight of Armenians since a blockade was set up a few days ago on a road connecting the historically Armenian land of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and thus to the rest of the world, cutting off 120,000 Armenian residents. I will not go into in the detail I would like, because other Members need to speak, but I ask the Government to look at the urgent need for humanitarian relief for those people.

3.19 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not know how you feel, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it seems to me that everything in this country at the moment is broken and bust, including the Passport Office, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the asylum system, which even the Home Secretary says is broken. The Royal Mail never seems to deliver letters in a timely fashion any more, including those from GPs or for doctors appointments. There are repeated medicine shortages in several key areas. People cannot get an appointment with their GP, an ambulance never turns up on time and cancer results turn up weeks late. Trains are cancelled all the time—and that is when there are no strikes.

We have ploughed millions of pounds-worth of crops back into the fields because there are not enough people to harvest them. We are not training enough people to be GPs, dermatologists, radiologists or radiographers. We are wasting millions of pounds on agency staff, meaning nurses are working alongside agency nurses who are not able to do the same job but are being paid twice as much. We have a 7.1 million-person backlog in the NHS in England, and that is not all the fault of covid: it was 4.8 million before covid even arrived. Bars, restaurants and people who work on building and construction sites are desperate for additional staff. Lots of bars and restaurants are not opening on Monday evenings, or are closing early, because they cannot get enough staff.

Inflation is running at 10.7%, despite the fact that in February the then Prime Minister—it was a few of them ago—said we should not be worrying about inflation. Well, lots of families are, because they have also seen mortgage rates rise, in large part due to the actions of the crazy Government we had a few weeks ago. Public sector staff are understandably angry, worried and determined, because they have faced real-terms cuts in their living conditions year on year for 12 years now. People are losing their homes: the number of people who have turned up in my constituency office in recent weeks who are terrified of eviction over the next few days is worrying.

Frankly, I just think it is time we pressed the reset button in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, I do not think that will happen until there is a complete change of Government. We need not just the endless recycling of Government Ministers we have had this year but a proper change of Government, so I want to say to everybody on the Government Benches, in the words of the Sugababes: “Push the button”—it is time for a reset.

I want to talk about energy, because a quarter of the constituents who have come to my office recently are really worried about the price of their energy. Everybody knows that the cost of energy has grown very dramatically, but the service that some of the energy companies are providing is absolutely shocking. I am sure other Members will have heard the same. The customer service from OVO, British Gas and ScottishPower is just terrible. Replies to MPs' correspondence regularly take several months—even to correspondence marked “Urgent” or “Extremely urgent”. One constituent of mine died waiting for a reply from her energy company; another is still waiting for the resolution of a relatively minor matter six months after they got me involved. Companies make it very difficult for people to move to prepaid meters, which is what many of my constituents are desperate to do because they want actual control of their energy costs. Energy companies give up on a case after a single missed call; that is not customer service. They need to completely rethink it.

In addition, Rhondda homes are often very difficult to insulate. It sometimes sounds like a kind of Dickensian television programme but it is true: I have constituents who will sit all day long in a onesie, covered by a duvet, and who will put an electric bar on for only 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening to take the absolute chill off the house. That is going to lead to people in my constituency losing their lives.

[Chris Bryant]

Another problem that the Government have failed to address relates to local authorities, many of which have enormous gaps in their budgets for next year. They do not know what they are going to do about keeping open swimming pools, leisure centres and schools. Lots of schools are thinking about letting staff go because they simply have to pay very much increased bills. It is shocking that the Government have not yet come forward with a plan for what is going to happen in relation to non-domestic properties after March.

I want to talk briefly about what I call the botched, bungled Boris Brexit. Let us face it: it has been an absolute disaster for this country on every single level. It is not just that UK performing artists are not able to put together a viable tour around Europe any more—something that we used to be really good at and that the Government repeatedly say they are going to sort but still have not. It is not just the fact that we were promised frictionless trade—that was a fiction, not frictionless trade.

Even the Office for Budget Responsibility says:

“Comparing our recent overall trade performance with other advanced economies suggests that the UK saw a similar collapse in exports as other countries at the start of the pandemic but has since missed out on much of the recovery in global trade.”

In fact, we are 12% below pre-pandemic levels. The Minister who was talking about trade the other day could not decide whether we had done £800 billion or £80 billion of trade deals in recent years. That is leaving out the fact that since the Minister who was in charge of some of these trade deals was sacked, he has now confessed that he thinks they were terrible deals in the first place.

Let me turn to two final things. First, on standards, we still do not have an independent adviser on ministerial interests. That means we still do not even have a correct list on the Government website of who Ministers are and their financial interests. The most recent list was produced in May, which is obviously quite some time ago and several rounds of Ministers ago.

Secondly, the Government's arguments about personal protective equipment contracts have now completely collapsed. They kept on saying that they were all fine and hunky dory and that everything was done properly. We have been arguing for a long time that there was massive corruption in the way the contracts were dealt out. We now know that even the Government largely agree with us, because they are suing one of the companies in question.

Finally, as you may know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am very committed to trying to get a better result for people in this country with acquired brain injury. I have been co-chairing the Government's programme board, which is trying to get a national strategy together. It is great to see that rugby and football are just beginning to take the issue seriously, but there are far too many people in this country whose lives we magnificently save and who could be given a real quality of life if only we put in place all the support that they need. Up to now we have failed to do that. I hope that by next summer I will be able to say that we have a national strategy for acquired brain injury.

I wish the House a merry Christmas and a prosperous new year.

3.26 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I will try to be quick. I want to mark the fact that on 6 December 40 years ago, the Ballykelly bomb occurred. I heard it go off. I was the incident commander and I had to supervise the recovery of bodies and people who were badly hurt. I held a girl who died in my arms, which was awful—it really rendered me hors de combat for at least 20 minutes. In total, 17 people—young people—were killed that night. Five of them were ladies; one of them was a civilian boy; and the other 11 were soldiers.

I went out and represented all of us at the Ballykelly bomb commemoration earlier this month. I laid a House of Commons wreath on behalf of us all. When I was there, there were two men present who have just about always been there—when they could be, and with very few exceptions—over 40 years. Mr Peter Gresty, the chairman of the regimental association of the Cheshire Regiment, organised the event, which was extremely well done. Major Ron Goodwin, the regimental sergeant major of the Cheshires in December 1982, has been there almost every year since then to remember the 17 young people who were killed. His job was always to read out the roll call of those who lost their lives. I will end by doing the same, so that those people who lost their lives 40 years ago still live on in some small way. Their names are: Private Terrance Adam, Lance Corporal Steven Bagshaw, Mr Alan Callaghan, Lance Corporal Clinton Collins, Miss Patricia Cooke, Private Paul Delaney, Miss Ruth Dixon, Miss Angela Hoole, Lance Corporal Philip McDonough, Miss Valerie McIntyre, Private David Murray, Corporal David Salthouse, Private Steven Smith, Lance Corporal David Stitt, Miss Carol Watts, Private Neil Williams and Private Shaw Williamson. May they rest in peace. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

3.30 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in my first pre-recess debate. I have learned a lot over the past year, and indeed in the past 18 months since being elected. This time last year, I was still very much the new MP on the block, and *The Spectator* was kind enough to name me as newcomer of the year, although, to be fair, in 2021 there were not that many of us newbies to choose from, so I did not get too carried away with that accolade. This year, though, by my reckoning, there have been six by-elections—thankfully, none as toxic as the one I went through. With one Lib Dem, one Conservative and four new Labour MPs, I think we can say it has been a busy year, and overall a good year, at the ballot box.

It has been all change in many ways in 2022. One day last week, I found myself in the company of not only our new monarch, but four Prime Ministers—three ex-Prime Ministers and one current—which was something of a surreal experience. Of course, change can be positive and negative, and I am sure all of us in this place have our views on the many changes we have seen this year. However, I have worked hard to keep my promise to the people of Batley and Spen not to change just because I now have two extra letters after my name. I am a proud Yorkshirewoman and we are known for our straight talking. As such, I have always done my best to tell it how it is from the perspective of myself and my constituents,

but I always endeavour to do so with courtesy and respect, and a willingness to listen to other points of view.

As such, I was pleased to serve on the Online Safety Bill Committee this year, where you were in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I listened carefully to the points of view of a wide range of people and organisations, not once but twice, after the Government presented the Bill, got cold feet over it, sat on it and then recommitted it. Sadly, it is weaker now as a result, but it remains an important piece of legislation to protect children, and indeed all internet users, from harm. I pay tribute to the many organisations that gave evidence to the Committee, including the Carnegie UK Trust, HOPE not hate, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo's and of course the Epilepsy Society, which worked so hard with my office and colleagues from across the House to secure the inclusion of Zach's law in the Bill, to make the evil practice of epilepsy trolling illegal. My constituents Zach and his mum, Claire, from Hartshead, have been tireless in their campaigning, and I am delighted that this Christmas their efforts have finally been rewarded.

However, if we are to be truly world-leading in this work, we must include more powers in the Bill to address the serious dangers that the online world presents through content that falls below the threshold for being illegal but is seriously dangerous and potentially devastatingly harmful. Such content relates to a range of subjects, including self-harm, suicide, radicalisation and extremism. This content can change lives and cost lives.

Hon. Members may remember the story of six-year-old Beau from Roberttown, in my constituency, who has shown incredible strength and courage this year in her fight against neuroblastoma. I was proud to bring her into Parliament with her mum, Shirley, earlier this year to join a cross-party roundtable to discuss the possibility of a UK-led vaccine trial for this particular childhood cancer. I hope that the Leader of the House might pass on my request for a meeting with the Health Secretary and the charity Solving Kids' Cancer early in the new year to discuss that possibility.

Levelling up was claimed to be a priority of the Government this year, but after three Secretaries of State and countless delays to the levelling-up fund announcements, it does not feel as though much progress has been made. I am, however, extremely grateful to the current Secretary of State, who honoured the commitment he made to me in this House to visit Batley—he did it last week—to see the enormous potential of our levelling-up bid to transform and revitalise Batley town centre. I only wish I could secure funding for every town and village in my constituency, as I know that people in Heckmondwike, Cleckheaton, Birstall and the smaller villages I serve feel that Government investment in our area is long overdue. I am, however, hoping for good news for Batley in the new year, and I hope the Leader of the House can pass on my thanks to the Secretary of State for his time last week.

I always try to remain positive, but as I find myself in reflective mode, I think it is impossible to ignore the turmoil and chaos we have seen in Westminster this year. As a fairly new Member, I have been shocked and disappointed by how much of an impact this has had on the business of government, as my hon. Friend the

Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned. In the middle of it all are the British public, who are already disengaged from politics and, to say the least, cynical about politicians—a British public who are, in many cases, struggling in their own daily lives, and particularly with their household budgets and access to vital health and social care. Unfortunately, it seems as if the Government have become so preoccupied with their own internal issues that they have given up governing—this at a time when Britain needs strong, authoritative and decisive leadership more than ever. That does nothing for the reputation of us all in this place.

Despite the chaos, it is inspirational to see how people in communities up and down the UK just get on with things. They pull together and keep the country going. I wish to take this opportunity to reflect on all the amazing work that is done locally, in towns and villages across the country, and offer my thanks to the individuals, community groups, voluntary organisations, charities, sports clubs and local businesses across Batley and Spen that keep our community together through challenging times and devote their time and service to others. Without them, our communities would be more fragmented and divided, people would be more isolated, and families and individuals would be struggling even more than they are now.

Also at the heart of our communities are our emergency and public services. I pay tribute to police, fire and ambulance workers across Batley and Spen, and the whole country, along with the thousands of dedicated professionals working tirelessly to keep our NHS going under the most challenging of circumstances. I also pay tribute to those working in education, who I hope can have a well-earned break over the festive period.

I also wish to thank West Yorkshire police and, in particular, Chief Inspector Rebecca Calpin and Batley and Spen neighbourhood policing team for all their hard work and support on cracking down on issues from road safety to antisocial behaviour that have an enormous impact on the day-to-day lives of many of my constituents.

This year, we have also seen the shocking and devastating illegal war on Ukraine. Shortly after the invasion started, Angloco, a brilliant fire vehicle manufacturer in my constituency, stepped up and worked with the charity FireAid to donate and deliver four convoys of vehicles and equipment to support the Ukrainian effort. Vehicles and equipment from Batley have been used to tackle the fires and devastation in Ukraine, as well as help with logistical challenges such as collapsed bridges. I would like to thank Alistair, Sarah and the team from Angloco who have worked so selflessly this year to offer as much help and assistance as they can to the ongoing effort.

I also wish to pay tribute to the fantastic team in my constituency office in Heckmondwike, who have shown such dedication and compassion dealing with more than 2,000 cases, ranging from cost of living pressures to poor housing, urgent immigration and passport cases and everything that can possibly be imagined in between. I thank my local team—Sheikh, Sandra, Dave, Clare, Irfan and Tony—for their unfailing hard work this year. I have always said that we are only as good as our team, and, as I am sure everyone will agree, that is really true in this job. Along with Lance and Omar in my Westminster office, I feel confident that I am lucky enough to have one of the very best teams.

[Kim Leadbeater]

Finally, Mr Speaker, I would like to discuss the towns and villages that make up the constituency of Batley and Spen. It is a diverse, vibrant, no-nonsense community. Like many places, we have our differences, but when times are tough, we pull together. I am enormously proud to serve the constituency in which I was born and have lived all my life. Therefore, I am sure that colleagues will understand how very sad and disappointed I am at the splitting of the Batley and Spen constituency by the Boundary Commission. The constituency has a special place not just in the hearts of those of us who live and work there, but among many others around the country who have admired our resilience and strength in recent years. On a personal level, it will be very upsetting for my family and me to see Batley and Spen disappear from the map as an entity.

I will endeavour to tackle whatever challenges 2023 brings with my usual energy and enthusiasm. I will end by wishing you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers, all hon. and right hon. Members and the fantastic, tireless staff and Doorkeepers of this House, whom we rely on all year round, a very merry Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.

3.38 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Before the House adjourns for Christmas, I wish to raise several important constituency issues. First, we have a challenging situation at King Edmund School, just off the Ashingdon Road. The school is in the process of having a major block demolished, as part of a multimillion-pound Department for Education-financed improvement programme. Unfortunately, during the demolition process, quantities of asbestos were discovered. This led to the headteacher, Mr Jonathan Osborn, very reluctantly having to close the school several weeks ago, on safety grounds, on the basis of strong advice from DfE officials.

It was originally hoped that all the demolition rubble containing the asbestos would be cleared, using specialist contractors, by Christmas. That would have allowed for the site to be cleaned and checked to ensure that asbestos was no longer present, and for the school to reopen on 3 January, at the beginning of the new term. At least, that was what both I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge), whose constituents also attend the school, were originally told by the Department for Education. However, delays to the clearance process, caused in part by bad weather, have extended that process until at least mid-January.

My hon. Friend and I are now concerned that the timings are slipping and could yet slip even further. Regrettably, I detect no real sense of urgency among officials to fix the problem. The inconvenience is not just to pupils, many of whom have already had their education significantly disrupted due to covid, but to their parents, who have had to juggle commitments, including work, to keep their children at home, but who cannot necessarily rely on the good will of their employers forever.

Temporary arrangements are being organised to try to accommodate at least some pupils in neighbouring schools, but I do not want to see those arrangements somehow becoming semi-permanent while people play

pass the parcel with important safety issues. There is thus a pressing need to get the site completely cleared of all the building rubble and thoroughly retested, so that Mr Osborn can with confidence safely reopen the school with minimum further delay. I urge Ministers to use their good offices to keep up the pressure to permit the school to reopen safely as soon as practically possible in the new year.

Secondly, turning to Rayleigh, the residents of King George's Court have been plagued by persistent problems with their lift, which has now been out of operation for several months. That has led to not just inconvenience, but safety issues, not least when several weeks ago an elderly resident was taken to hospital by ambulance and had to be manhandled down multiple flights of stairs, as the lift was still out of action. I know that for a fact, as one of my local councillors, Councillor Cheryl Roe, was present and witnessed the event.

The block is run by a management company, FirstPort Property Services, which seems totally deaf to the pleas of the residents. I have written previously to Ms Kully Sahdra, the managing director of FirstPort and, on 27 November, I received a totally unsatisfactory reply from Mr Gareth Cayford, the company's "Director, Retirement", informing me that his company was "waiting for a part", an excuse it has apparently been using for months.

The residents of King George's Court are still paying their ground rent and have a perfect right to receive a decent service in return. I am sure the employees of FirstPort would not be happy if an elderly relative of theirs had to put up with such a situation, so I do not see why my constituents should have to put up with it either. Ironically, FirstPort's corporate strapline is "for great customer service"—well, you could have fooled me. I therefore call on FirstPort today to stop prevaricating and make sure the requisite part is sourced and installed as soon as possible, before I take this matter up with the Secretary of State in the new year.

Thirdly, I raised the issue of the Rochford oak tree in the House in early November. In short, this popular ancient oak is facing demolition as part of a major new housing development off the Ashingdon Road by Bloor Homes. Having raised the matter in the Commons, I wrote to Mr John Bloor, the chairman of Bloor Homes, on 9 November 2022, to inform him of that as a courtesy, and to ask him and his company to redesign the junction on the entrance to the proposed estate, not just to preserve the tree, but to improve the junction's safety, which lies directly opposite both an infants and a junior school. Despite having written personally to the chairman more than six weeks ago, I have not received even the basic courtesy of a two-line reply, let alone a substantive response. That is typical of Bloor Homes, which my constituents now routinely describe as "arrogant", a description with which I completely agree.

I note that the Levelling Up Secretary has recommended that the Competition and Markets Authority conduct a formal market survey into the overconcentration of the UK house building industry, which in recent years has become a highly oligopolistic market, totally dominated by just a few major players. Based on my experience as a constituency MP, especially with Bloor Homes, that is something I would wholeheartedly support and, if and when such an inquiry commences—the sooner the

better in my view—Bloor's peers in the house building industry can probably thank the company for helping to provoke it.

Last but by no means least, we have another pressing issue at Southend Hospital: the amassing of ambulances in the car park. Last Friday, I visited the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust—EEAST—at its Essex sub-control centre in Chelmsford. While there, I discussed with the trust's chief executive, Mr Tom Abell, and with several long-serving control room staff, the problem of severe pressures on ambulance crews. The best way I can summarise their reaction is to quote an experienced senior dispatcher, who, when I asked what the best solution was, replied:

"You have to do something about ambulance handovers at our hospitals and the people who are well enough to go home but can't. If you cannot solve that, we are just going to be queuing up in hospital car parks forever."

Like other MPs in South Essex, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), I have been pushing for the £118 million of capital improvements that we were promised back in 2017, when the merger of Basildon, Broomfield and Southend Hospitals was first proposed. I repeat that plea to Ministers again today. In fairness to the hard-pressed paramedics and their frontline hospital colleagues, given the bureaucratic nature of the modern NHS, the chief responsibility for organising post-hospital accommodation lies with the new integrated care board. At a recent hearing of the Public Accounts Committee, I highlighted that the new Mid and South Essex ICB is underperforming and that its current leadership seriously need to raise their game. I also believe that senior officials at the regional level of the NHS in Cambridge—some of whom promised us the £118 million in the first place—now need to take a far more proactive interest in all this. In essence, I believe that the EEAST dispatcher was right: we need to do this urgently, especially as we move into the depths of winter.

Finally, after what has been a challenging year all round, I conclude by wishing you all the best in your new responsibilities, Mr Deputy Speaker, and by wishing Mr Speaker, all House staff and my constituents what I hope will yet be a merry Christmas and an even happier new year.

3.46 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): This morning, I joined nurses on strike outside Great Ormond Street Hospital. They were out there not because they wished to be but because of their utter desperation about the situation they are in. After seven years of inadequate pay rises, huge workloads and a huge fall in nursing numbers—to the extent that the numbers recruited barely keep up with the numbers leaving—there is a crisis in the national health service. The strike by the Royal College of Nursing is an example of that.

The picket was joined by people from hospitals in other parts of the country, including a group from Southampton, who came with their own handwritten slogan that said to the Secretary of State:

"Open your fat purses and pay for the nurses".

They were demanding a decent pay rise. I would have thought that the very least the Secretary of State could do before the Christmas break is meet the nursing and health unions and listen to what they have to say, not

just about pay, but about their working conditions, the stress they are under and the poverty in which many of them live.

We surely cannot be proud of the national health service if we clap for its staff during the covid crisis but ignore the mental health stress that they go through the rest of the time and expect them to continue on what is often very low pay. Some of them even have to access food banks just to survive. Surely, we can do a lot better than that for our national health service workers. We must stop threatening them with more privatisation—of the ambulance service and so much else—and with bringing in the military to do the jobs of nurses and ambulance staff during this particular dispute. That is not what the military exists for; it should not be used as a battering ram to deliver those services by a Government who refuse to meet the workers' representatives.

Health workers are not the only people taking strike action. We should think for a moment of postal workers, who have now been taking strike action for several months. They are incredibly hardworking people. Everyone in this House loves their postie and likes to say what a great job their postie does, except when they want to be decently paid. They want to be decently paid for their work and recognised as the important part of the community that they are. Royal Mail—a privatised industry thanks to the Liberal Democrats during the coalition Government—is now paying out enormous dividends to its shareholders and an enormous salary to its chief executive, and it is refusing to give the postal workers an offer of at least an inflation-linked pay rise and insisting that any pay rise be attached to job losses, speed-ups at work and yet further pressures on them to undertake that work. I have talked to postal workers all over the country—not just in the past few weeks, but over many years—and they tell me how they once enjoyed the job they were doing and being part of the community, but are now so deeply stressed that they are leaving the service on mental health grounds, because of the pressure under which they have been placed.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Having visited the local Royal Mail workforce several times in the past few years, it seems to me that there is an agenda to basically reduce the job of postal workers to a zero-hours, gig economy, disposable job where they do not know what hours they are doing next week or tomorrow. We seem to have disgraceful behaviour by the chief executive and senior management at Royal Mail in their failure to reach an agreement with CWU.

Jeremy Corbyn: My friend is absolutely right. The management of Royal Mail is trying to reduce postal workers to gig workers and put them on a par with other delivery companies that pay far lower wages and have far worse conditions. Surely we should be proud of the fact that we have the universal service obligation Royal Mail that can deliver a letter or package to every single house in the UK. Royal Mail leadership wants to end that monopoly and the universality of the service and thus destroy our postal service. This is the time, surely, for the Government to intervene and not just to speculate on the sidelines and attack Dave Ward and all the other leaders of the Communication Workers Union. The Government should recognise that they are speaking up democratically on behalf of their members who want to deliver that service to us all.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

Postal workers are of course not the only group taking action; rail workers are also taking action and have announced new strike days. Before anyone gets up and immediately condemns Mick Lynch, Eddie Dempsey and everyone else in the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, I will say two things. They should stop calling the elected leaders of unions “union bosses”; they are elected leaders, democratically appointed by their members, just like we are all elected to this particular Parliament. They are taking action with the agreement of their members through a balloting process, and the members have shown they are prepared to make the sacrifice of losing pay to try to persuade the Government, essentially, that they deserve decent pay and that the strings attached to that should not be further job losses in the railway industry.

Instead, there should be recognition that the public have invested a great deal in the rail industry, and a great deal of money has been made out of the rail industry by the private sector. The only people not doing well out of it are those who actually work in it, run it safely and give us the service we need and deserve. Again, I hope that the Government will just think for a moment that using the newspapers to attack union leaders only gets them so far. They have to think of why people are taking action, which is that they want to be able to live decently and not rely on food banks to survive.

Sadly, in the new year the situation will not get better unless the Government intervene. Our teachers all over the country do an amazing job under enormous stress, with over-stressed, over-tested children, and they are balloting to take strike action. Surely it is time to think carefully about the value of public service and how it is delivered in our society.

I will conclude with this, because I do not want to go over my time. In the covid crisis, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, now Prime Minister for a while had a dalliance with Keynesian economics. He paid money into the health service, local government and the furlough scheme to keep industry and so on going. That was done with general approval. After that, we have now had a series of financial statements, all of which redistribute wealth in the wrong direction and all of which make life better for the very wealthiest in our society on the basis of some strange idea of trickle-down economics that will help the poorest in our society, when it does not. We have a decline in working-class living standards, real wage levels and, with that, a loss of service as a whole. That creates enormous stress in our society, no more so than among young people. They are over-tested and overstretched in school, and over-indebted if they have the temerity to go to university. Because they are unable to access council housing due to the shortage of it, and unable to raise enough money to buy their own place, they end up paying huge rents in the private rented sector, certainly in London and all the other big cities. Can we not have some resolution that, in the new year, we will provide real hope for young people, value their contribution to our society, and not put them under such stress and in such debt?

We all represent constituencies, and I am very proud to represent mine. I thank all the public services in my constituency, and all the community centres, food banks

and food co-ops, for all that they do. That wonderful sense of community that was there through covid is there all the time, and the worst-off and hardest-up are supported and fed by the churches, synagogues, mosques and other places throughout this period.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we wish everyone a great Christmas, a great Hanukkah and a great new year. Above all, we wish everyone a peaceful new year in which we recognise that those desperate people who are seeking asylum in this country are not our enemies, but human beings just trying to survive in a cruel world.

3.56 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Before I outline one or two local issues, let me comment on what the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has just said. It is notable that he aligned himself with all those who are on strike. I give him credit for the fact that he has held that position consistently. I will be interested to note whether Opposition Front Benchers are equally prepared to align themselves with those who are causing great inconvenience and putting the public at risk.

Turning to local issues, I do not pretend by any means that everything is going perfectly, but I noticed that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is no longer in his place, said that everything was going wrong. He did not exclude the Labour party from that. Perhaps that was an oversight on his part, or perhaps he recognises the deficiencies in his party.

The most notable issue facing my constituents is the train service provided by TransPennine Express. I spoke about that in the summer Adjournment debate, when I suggested to Ministers that they should consider withdrawing the franchise from TransPennine, which has provided an appalling service to my constituents for over a year now. That is rather sad because, after it took over the franchise 15 years or more ago—I cannot remember exactly when—TPE built up good patronage and provided a great service. Sadly, since November last year, due to a whole range of issues to do with driver training, rest day working and the like, it has provided an appalling service.

Navendu Mishra: A few weeks ago, I raised the link between TransPennine Express and Avanti West Coast. I believe that TransPennine Express is entirely owned by FirstGroup, which also has a 70% stake in Avanti. It seems to me that FirstGroup is terribly mismanaging both franchises. Services are provided in Stockport by both companies. I believe that the hon. Gentleman is calling for TPE to be stripped of its franchise, and I am glad; I am certainly calling for FirstGroup to be stripped of the Avanti West Coast franchise.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I mentioned, I asked Ministers to consider the franchise position of TransPennine in the equivalent July debate, because these issues have been going on for more than a year. I am not interested in Avanti at the moment; I am focusing on TransPennine, which serves my constituents. It is supposed to provide an hourly service from 5.20 am until 9.20 pm. At the moment, the website says that the 16.24 from Cleethorpes is cancelled, the 17.24 is running, the 18.24 is cancelled, the 19.24 is cancelled, the 20.24 is cancelled and the

21.24 is cancelled. That emphasises the appalling state of affairs that TransPennine is delivering. I urge the Leader of the House to contact the Department for Transport and ask it to reconsider whether the franchise should be withdrawn.

On the subject of trains, I have long campaigned to reinstate the direct service from Cleethorpes through Grimsby, Market Rasen and Lincoln to King's Cross, which was withdrawn by the then nationalised British Rail in 1992. It is now in the draft timetable for the coming summer, so I hope that the Leader of the House will pass on to Transport Ministers my wish that it happens. At present, five or six trains run from King's Cross to Lincoln and it would be easy to continue those services to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Indeed, I understand that Azuma trains have done trial runs to ensure that there is clearance through to Cleethorpes. That is a vital part of levelling up north and north-east Lincolnshire.

On levelling up, as the Leader of the House will know, three freeports were given final approval only a week or two ago. I hope that work can be done to ensure that the Humber ports are also given that approval soon. That designation is vital to the levelling up and regeneration of the area, and the potential for thousands of jobs is of great value.

I fully support the Government's policy on renewable energy. My constituency and neighbouring Grimsby have greatly benefited from the offshore renewable sector in the North sea. I am told by Ørsted that the servicing and maintenance facility on Grimsby docks that overlaps into my constituency is the largest of its kind in the world, which is yet another reason to give maximum support to the area through infrastructure and the rail network.

We are close to a devolution deal for the whole of Lincolnshire. I urge the Leader of the House to pass on to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government the desire for the two unitary councils in the north of the county and the county council that serves the remainder of the county to be, for once, totally agreed on a devolution deal. I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all hon. Members and staff a happy Christmas, and I hope that the true Christmas message gets through to everyone in the coming weeks.

4.3 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I will take this opportunity to put on record a few thanks. First, I thank my friends, family and loved ones, who support me in doing my job as an MP and who I do not see as much as I would like—I speak for many hon. Members in that. I particularly thank my mum and dad, who have always been there for me, because I celebrated a significant birthday earlier this year.

Rather than worrying about my advancing years, I am embracing being a woman of a certain age and using what my friend calls “the power of menopause” to feel more confident in my albeit ageing skin—although the brain fog of menopause may mean that I cannot remember why I walked into a room or the names of the people there. I thank everyone who has raised the impact of menopause on women this year and kept campaigning for better access to menopause understanding and support, particularly in the workplace.

Reaching my significant milestone this year also meant that two weeks later, I received a letter inviting me to go for a mammogram, which I did at the brilliant Luton & Dunstable University Hospital, and all was well. Figures show, however, that too many breast screening appointments are missed, and I take the opportunity to encourage all women to cop a feel, check their boobs and take up the invitation to their mammograms. Please, everyone—encourage your mothers, your sisters and your daughters to do so. I do not just say this as a menopausal woman, or intellectually as a politician who has been given the stats. I say it personally. Rest in peace, Michelle Canny—you were a tour de force and a great craic, and we will miss you.

This year's experiences have brought me into more contact with the NHS and the brilliant nurses who work in it—overworked, understaffed and burnt out, yet professional, compassionate and deserving of more than just claps. Nurses have been let down by this Government's refusal to get round the table and negotiate a fair deal, even when nursing unions offered to suspend the strikes. Workers do not choose lightly to strike—days of pay are lost—but they have been driven to it by this Conservative Government.

I take this opportunity to say thank you to our nurses, all NHS workers and everyone working in our public services, from our frontline workers—the armed forces, paramedics, firefighters and police, putting themselves in the face of danger and trauma—to our often-unseen civil servants, local government staff and care workers, who do more for less as the years go by, as well as our key workers, who keep our country going: teachers, postal workers, train drivers and rail workers.

As a result of 12 years of cuts, we have seen our voluntary, community and charitable organisations increasingly having to step up—not just to fill the cracks, but to deliver support and care where this Conservative Government have failed in the provision of public services. I take this opportunity to thank our superb charity and community sector in Luton, which has come together to tackle the increased winter pressures. The list is as long as my arm, but here are a just a few. There is the excellent team at Citizens Advice Luton, which delivers vital advice and support to our community. The team is a vital lifeline for many who are struggling with the increased impact of the cost of living crisis. There are also the brilliant charities and faith groups that step up to simply feed those in need. The Sikh soup kitchen, curry kitchen at Discover Islam and Luton food bank, among others, are each making sure that no one goes hungry—not only during this festive period, but all year round.

I end my remarks back where I started, by referencing women's issues: particularly the work of great organisations in Luton that support women. Stepping Stones, Luton All Women's Centre and Women's Aid are all empowering women by working to create a safer, more equal society. Like myself, Women's Aid in Luton is celebrating a significant birthday this year—its 50th year, too. Congratulations to the team and all those who have worked with them over the years, including my mum back when I was a baby.

It is always a pleasure to speak in the “Matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment” debate. I finish by wishing my staff team, all Members and all House staff a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

4.8 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I think this may be a first. If the House will allow me, I am going to quote:

“Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past 12 months, the United Kingdom has faced many challenges and has made many important decisions. In the face of these challenges, the country has remained steadfast in its commitment to its values and principles. One of the key achievements of the UK over the past year has been its success in managing the economy. Despite the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has worked tirelessly to support businesses and protect jobs. This has included implementing a range of measures such as the furlough scheme, which has helped to keep millions of people in work.

The UK has also been successful in implementing its ambitious plan for Brexit. After years of negotiations, the country has finally left the European Union and has begun to forge a new path as an independent, global trading nation. This has not been without its challenges, but the UK has shown determination and resolve in securing a good deal for the country. In addition to these economic achievements, the UK has also made significant progress on a range of other issues. For example, the government has continued to invest in the NHS, providing it with the resources it needs to deliver high-quality care to patients. The country has also been committed to law and order, with a focus on ensuring that the justice system is fair and effective.

Of course, no country is perfect and there are always areas where improvements can be made. However, I believe that the UK has shown itself to be capable and resilient, and has demonstrated its commitment to its values and principles. As Winston Churchill once said, ‘Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.’ I believe that the UK has shown that courage over the past 12 months, and I have every confidence that it will continue to do so in the months and years ahead.”

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Did the hon. Gentleman write that himself, or was it written by artificial intelligence?

Dr Evans: The hon. Gentleman points out exactly the thing I have alluded to. That speech may have been one that Members would have heard in the House, but it was put together by ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence run by OpenAI. My command to it was simple: write a Churchillian speech on the state of the United Kingdom over the past 12 months. When we step into the House there are principles that we abide by. We learn from the past, we do not dwell on it; we live in the moment, but we do not get lost in it; we plan for the future, but we do not rely on it. This speech is all about the future.

This year there has been a seismic change in the way that artificial intelligence can be used. Gone are the days when generational knowledge was passed on from person to person. We had books and developed reading, and we then had the ability to put that on to computers. Further still, with the advent of the internet we suddenly did not need to know and retain knowledge; we needed only to find out where to go to get it. Now, with the AI in algorithms we can ask the computer how to use that information.

Let me give some examples. Other than writing political speeches, the AI can write copy for adverts or put together a running programme for someone who wants to train for a marathon. It can diarise someone’s potential work commitments, or put together recipes when they are not sure what is in the fridge. It can write apps when someone asks what kind of coding it would like. This is an incredible step forward, but with that come huge issues about autonomy, liability, fairness, safety, morality,

and even ownership of creativity. We in this House must ask ourselves how we govern this, because so much comes down to algorithms.

Algorithms are there to support, drive and work as a tool, but the problem with such intelligence is that we risk creating an echo chamber. Now when a sixteen-year-old writes a school essay on what happened with Brexit, the algorithm will drive an answer, which will be read and put into a marking algorithm, and there is the problem—cycles of algorithms going round. Further still, let us extrapolate it out to autonomous cars. We will get in the position where we know who is in the car, when there will be an accident, and their percentage chance of survival. How will we pit a pensioner in a single car versus a bus carrying 30 schoolchildren? That is some of the stuff that we in the House will deal with over the next 10, 20 or 30 years.

The Government have gone some way to dealing with this. The AI Council was formed in 2019, and the National AI Strategy is run by the Office for Artificial Intelligence. I think, however, that we are missing a trick, and that there should be a regulator for algorithms and artificial intelligence, to run concurrently and in synergy with the technology we are developing. If we take a leaf out of the vaccine book, that is exactly what the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency did. We can risk and mitigate the problems that the Online Safety Bill has had to deal with 20 or 30 years down the line. AI and algorithms will have a huge impact on the labour market, diagnosis, tools, education, and society, and that needs a far wider debate, but I wanted to put the issue on the record because such a debate will happen, and we as politicians need to be at the front of it.

This is a Christmas speech, so to demonstrate AI yet again, I thought I would ask ChatGPT to write a rhyming poem about the Houses of Parliament at Christmas, including talking about the Speaker:

“As Christmas approaches and the air grows cold,
The Houses of Parliament stand grand and bold.
The Speaker presides, with wisdom and grace
Over the debates, in this special place.

The halls are decked with holly and cheer,
As politicians gather, year after year,
To discuss the issues, that matter most
And find solutions, to the problems they host.

But on this festive night, as the fire burns bright
They pause for a moment, to appreciate the sight
Of the snow-covered streets, and the city aglow
And the warmth of the season, that we all know.

So on this Christmas Eve, as the clock ticks by,
We give thanks for all, both low and high,
For the Houses of Parliament, and all they do
Merry Christmas to all, from me and you.”

4.15 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): One of the key points that I want to cover is the debt collection practice employed by several local authorities. I recently had a constituent in my constituency surgery who was in council tax arrears. She had a difficult situation: she owed just over £681 and was struggling to pay that to Stockport Council. She worked in catering and, during the pandemic, she was unable to work due to the lockdown, so her debt was passed on by Stockport

Council to a debt collection agency. She came to see me and, in a difficult conversation for her, she made it clear that she was in a difficult situation when it came to her family as well as financially. She was being hounded by a debt collection agency to pay the money owed to the council. She felt that the debt collection agency's behaviour was "intimidating and aggressive" and that it was holding a gun to her head in trying to get her to pay off the debt. I wrote to Stockport Council about that earlier this year, asking it to clarify its policy on debt collection agencies, including what intervention and payment measures are offered to constituents before it proceeds to instruct its contractor, Jacobs Enforcement.

In January 2021, Citizens Advice estimated that more than 3.5 million people were behind on their council tax, of whom 51% were not behind before the pandemic. As the cost of living crisis deepens, that, sadly, will only get worse. It also found that bailiff fees add an average £310 of debt for people struggling with council tax arrears.

Research last year by Policy in Practice found that, primarily, there is

"no clear relationship between stricter council tax collection policies and higher council tax collection rates".

I urge the Minister to look into that.

I recently submitted a freedom of information request to Stockport Council, asking it to detail the number of residents referred to enforcement agents and, subsequently, the data for people classed as vulnerable. I welcome the fact that the number went from 588 people in 2021-22 to 270 in 2022-23, although I appreciate that this year is not over. It is clearly an inappropriate course of action to use debt collection agencies to hound people who are struggling financially.

I have tabled a number of written parliamentary questions on the matter, including one asking

"how many local authorities have stopped using bailiffs to collect unpaid council tax."

The Government's answers have been weak, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities seems to have no oversight on the use of bailiffs. It is important that it publishes a proper policy on that, outlining alternative ways for collecting council tax that do not create further stress for vulnerable people.

In response to written question 108439, the Minister said:

"The Department does not collect data on the enforcement methods used by local authorities to collect unpaid council tax."

I do not think that is good enough. The Government should do better. I must highlight, though, that Stockport Council has seen a 32.5% reduction in its settlement funding since 2015-16. We know that the austerity programme instigated by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government was a disaster for local authorities, and now we see increasing moves to decentralise spending decisions to local government without providing it with adequate funding. That is not levelling up; clearly it is levelling down.

I want to highlight that Stockport Council staff do a really important job in challenging circumstances. I thank them, as well as Debt Justice, the campaigning group, which has done a lot of work on this issue.

The issue I receive most correspondence on every week is Stockport Homes, the local social housing

provider in my borough. Sadly, over 7,000 households—not people, households—are on the waiting list in my borough. People are desperate to get a property they can call home. We have seen levels of poverty increasing and the challenges that households are facing. Communities are seeing an increased level of antisocial behaviour and low-level crime. I also receive a lot of correspondence on that issue. Stockport Homes does a really good job and I am grateful to the staff, but it needs proper settlement funding for building new social housing and for allocating people houses that are good to live in.

I will not dwell too much on Avanti West Coast, because I spoke in the Backbench Business debate last week, but I will reiterate the fact that Avanti West Coast is not fit to provide that service. It should be stripped of the contract and it should be taken under public ownership so that the service is provided for the benefit of our communities, cutting carbon emissions and congestion on our roads. It simply cannot run the railway system.

I will be going to see local postal workers in my constituency later in the week. I have been in touch with them over the last few months and years. In particular, I want to place on record my thanks to Mr David Kennedy, the Communication Workers Union branch secretary for north-west central amalgamated branch, which is my local CWU branch. Its offices are based a five-minute walk from my constituency office. I intervened earlier on the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on the disgraceful behaviour of the chief executive of Royal Mail. A lot of people will not be receiving letters, Christmas cards and Christmas presents because Royal Mail senior management has failed to resolve the dispute. I thank Mr David Kennedy for his support and for keeping me up to date with the dispute.

I congratulate the former hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston, Kate Green. She will take up her new role in January as the new Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester, covering police, crime and fire. I will continue to call out the Government on their cuts to firefighters. We have lost over 600 full-time firefighter roles in Greater Manchester since 2010 and that is simply not acceptable.

Manchester Airport is the third largest airport in Britain. It is an international gateway for trade and travel, acting as a major draw for investment and development in Greater Manchester and the wider north-west region. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned the trade deal currently being negotiated between Britain and India. I want to put on record that the trade deal must benefit people in Stockport and Greater Manchester, not just the south of England. I tabled a written parliamentary question earlier this year. The Minister responded:

"A United Kingdom-India trade deal...could boost the economy in the North West of England by up to £304 million. The North West of England exported over £350 million of goods to India in 2021."

I also tabled a number of questions subsequently. The trade deal must benefit people in Stockport and Greater Manchester, not just when it comes to trade but cultural and educational links too. Currently, Manchester Airport does not provide direct flights to key cities in India and people have to travel to Heathrow. The economy of Stockport, Greater Manchester and the wider north-west would benefit from direct air links between Manchester Airport and key cities in India. That would make it easier for trade, and educational and cultural links between both nations.

[Navendu Mishra]

I will finish by wishing everyone who works in this House, from cleaners to clerks to lawyers, a merry Christmas. I hope they manage to get some rest. I wish colleagues—including you, Mr Deputy Speaker—on both sides of the House a merry Christmas. I hope they manage to get some rest over new year. Finally, I want to thank everyone who works in my constituency office and Charlie who works in the office here. I thank them for everything they do. I wish them all a very prosperous 2023.

4.24 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): The past year has been a hugely exciting one for Darlington as we continue to go from strength to strength. By my calculations, including funds for my hard-working constituents during covid and the current cost of living challenges, Darlington has received around £620 million in support and investment from the Government since I was elected in 2019. We are already seeing what that investment is delivering, such as the £23.3 million from the towns fund, which is improving our historic yards, Victoria Road and Northgate.

We have seen the announcement of the permanent location of the Darlington economic campus, which continues to grow. Treasury civil servants are joined by those from Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for International Trade, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Education, the Office for National Statistics and the Competition and Markets Authority. More than 80% of those new jobs have gone to people from the region, allowing people to stay local but go far. I want to put on the record my thanks to my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, for his decision as Chancellor to choose Darlington.

T-levels have now come to Darlington. They offer a fantastic new educational route for young people, helping to train the next generation of skilled workers. Darlington College has benefited from £2.69 million from the towns fund for a new engineering block. I have invited the Secretary of State for Education to open the extension, and I look forward to welcoming her to Darlington in the new year.

Diggers are on site as the £139 million investment in Bank Top station gets under way. This will be transformational for the station and is key to ensuring Darlington's position as the gateway to the region. Darlington's rail heritage quarter is taking shape, with £35 million in investment from Ben Houchen and Darlington Borough Council. We look to the future and the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway on 27 September 2025. Darlington Borough Council is already setting out plans to commemorate this milestone. I hope that the Government will commemorate the anniversary in a fitting way.

On railways, I have had the railway bridges on Yarm Road and North Road painted. I am campaigning for tactile edging at Bank Top station and I am pulling people together to see improvements at North Road station. I have campaigned to ensure that we see no reduction in services from London North Eastern Railway and I want to see price and provider competition at

Darlington from the likes of Lumo. I support calls for the reopening of the Leamside line and I am backing the restoration of services through to Weardale. It is not just about rail in Darlington. It is also about roads. I continue to press for the inclusion of Darlington's northern link road in road investment strategy 3.

Delivering as a Member of Parliament is not just about fighting for jobs and investment. It is also about strengthening our communities. I have spent as much time as possible in Darlington talking to residents and delivering on local priorities. Last year, I co-ordinated and helped to deliver a new playground at Corporation Road Community Primary School. I am delighted to have been able to repeat that project twice more this year, first at Maidendale Nursery and then at the Coleridge Centre in Skerne Park, and have worked with fantastic organisations such as Splash and Hands On, in partnership with local businesses and community groups.

It was a huge honour to secure my very first Adjournment debate finally, on the posthumous recognition of Pilot Officer William McMullen. For the benefit of those who were not able to attend the debate, William is a true hero to the people of Darlington for saving the lives of countless Darlingtonians at the cost of his own life. I became the first Member of Parliament for Darlington to tell his story on the Floor of the House. His story is now rightly recorded in *Hansard*.

As a hospice trustee and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hospice and end of life care, I look forward to the publication of our report in the new year. I welcome the obligations on palliative care in the Health and Care Act 2022. I will always continue to push for further support and recognition of these important organisations, just like St Teresa's in Darlington, which does so much good work.

Being a constituency MP affords us the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and to experience the roles they play in our communities. Over the past year, I have cleaned rivers with the Environment Agency, I have been on patrol with the police, I have emptied bins with the fantastic guys from the Darlington Council refuse team, I have painted railway bridges with the guys from Network Rail, I have built children's playgrounds alongside community volunteers, I have called bingo, danced the conga and participated in quizzes in clubs across my constituency, I have attended almost every denomination of faith represented in Darlington—and I have loved every minute of it.

I thank everyone I have engaged with for their support, their encouragement and their willingness to share their stories and experiences with me: it helps me to learn and helps me to serve my community better. I wish everybody across Darlington, all Members of this House, the House's incredible staff and my exceptional staff team—Rachael, Kevin, Jonathan, Berni, Gemma and Theo, who do so much to support me—a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

4.30 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on his speech. My intervention on him was generated by KI, or Kevin intelligence, rather than AI. I had hoped to speak earlier in the debate, but despite my having been in the House for 21 years, I think my name got lost in

the ether somewhere. I congratulate him on introducing the subject of artificial intelligence and its capability; he is absolutely right. Let me give the House a further example:

“As we all know, artificial intelligence is rapidly advancing and finding its way into all sorts of industries and sectors. The creative industries are no exception, and the music industry in particular is already starting to feel the impact of AI. But what does that mean for us as music lovers?

On the positive side, AI has the potential to help artists and musicians create new compositions more efficiently and quickly. It's like having a trusty sidekick who can handle all the tedious tasks while you focus on the creative work. And with AI's ability to analyze data about music trends and consumer preferences, it could also help artists and music labels create music that is more likely to be successful. It's like having a crystal ball that can predict which songs are going to be hits and which ones will be misses.

But on the negative side, there's the potential for AI to replace human musicians and composers. While AI-generated music can be impressive, it's also important to remember that it lacks the creativity and originality that comes from a human artist. It's like trying to compare a machine-made painting to a masterpiece by Vincent van Gogh. Sure, they both might be visually appealing, but one has a level of depth and soul that the other just can't match.

There's also the potential for AI to be used to create counterfeit or pirated music. With AI, it's possible to create songs that are very similar to existing ones, which could lead to the creation of fake or unauthorized copies of popular songs. It's like trying to pass off a knockoff designer bag as the real deal. Sure, it might look the same on the outside, but it lacks the quality and craftsmanship of the original.

Despite these potential negative implications, it's important to remember that AI has the potential to bring many benefits to the music industry as well. And as with any new technology, it's up to us as a society to find a balance and figure out how to use it in a responsible and ethical way. It's like finding the sweet spot on a see-saw. We don't want to lean too far in either direction, but rather find a comfortable and sustainable middle ground.

In conclusion, the impact of AI on the music industry is a complex and multifaceted issue. While it has the potential to bring many benefits, it also carries with it a number of potential risks and challenges. But with a little bit of thought and consideration, we can navigate these challenges and find a way to use AI in a way that benefits everyone.”

As I suspect hon. Members may have spotted, that speech was not written by me. Nor was it written by my brilliant, trusty parliamentary assistant, George Leach-Hutchings, or by my very clever niece, who played around with the technology with us this morning. It was written by an artificial intelligence programme—the same one that the hon. Member for Bosworth highlighted earlier.

I know that all this is giving trouble to the Clerks, who are thinking, “Is this a lengthy quotation? It shouldn't be allowed,” and so on, but in this instance I think we have to face up to the fact that the hon. Gentleman and I may not be the first Members who have used AI to deliver speeches. Someone might have done it already and not fessed up to the House—you might like to bear that in mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, before the Clerks turn to you and say that my speech is out of order.

This technology is with us now, and it is very, very real. It has very many positive potential implications. If you ask it what it is, it will tell you that it is basically

“a large artificial intelligence language model trained by OpenAI. It exists purely as a collection of algorithms and data and”

—listen to this bit—

“does not have a physical body. Its primary function is to generate human-like text in response to prompts given to it by users. It was trained on a large dataset of texts and can generate responses on a wide variety of topics”,

as we have shown this afternoon.

“Since it does not have the ability to browse the internet or access new information, its knowledge is limited to what was available to it at the time of its training. It is not a real person and does not have personal experiences or feelings. Its responses are generated solely based on the data and algorithms that make up its programming.”

I think it important for us to discuss this subject, not least because our parliamentary assistants will be very nervous about the potential of the programme to write speeches for us all; but there are a number of others in society who, as well as understanding the benefits of this technology, also understand that we, as parliamentarians, need to understand its policy implications for many different aspects of our economy. As many Members know, I take a strong interest in the creative industries, and the music industry in particular. We in the UK do not currently have any regulations that cover this adequately, and nor does the EU, which is also considering the matter.

The Government held a consultation last year on the implications for music, and reached a conclusion that caused a great deal of consternation in the music industry. Thankfully they are now thinking again, but had that conclusion been implemented, it would have allowed any tech company to “scrape” the creative output of our great songwriters and composers and then use this technology to create facsimiles, or similar types of music, based on the data—after all, all information is essentially data—contained in those creative works without the creators themselves, the songwriters, composers and rights holders, having to give permission, and without the activity having to be licensed in any way. As Members will imagine, that caused considerable concern in our brilliant and world-leading creative industries, and not just in the music industry. This issue affects many other industries, including the film industry. It affects actors, and, dare I say it, politicians, because it can recreate their voices, their mannerisms and so on.

I think that all of us, as parliamentarians and policymakers, need to engage more readily and in more depth with the implications of this technology. It is a delicate balance, but a key one. I think it imperative that we defend our copyright institutions and allow rights holders to license the use of their creative output, including music, by AI to ensure that songwriters and composers can continue to receive remuneration when their works are used, especially for commercial AI purposes. I hope that the UK Government will think about that in reconsidering their decision to allow third parties to use not just music but artistic works in general for data mining purposes without authorisation from creators and other rights holders.

The one small relief that I gained from the speech of the hon. Member for Bosworth was the fact that the poem with which he ended it was not exactly William Wordsworth. However, this technology will clearly improve as it develops, and it is developing very rapidly. Let us make sure that we do not allow ourselves to become slaves to the algorithm.

4.38 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many speakers who have talked of successes and of subjects that are of interest to us all, such as artificial intelligence. However, these Christmas Adjournment debates also give us a chance to appreciate some of those who would not normally be mentioned, and there is no better way for me to start than by thanking those in the Gloucestershire health and care trusts whose staff serve so many of my constituents and those of my Gloucestershire colleagues so well, often at home and sometimes giving palliative care at the end of life. I have been honoured to see them in action from time to time when volunteering with the NHS each summer, but this year I feel more deeply than ever about this, because Alice Roberts and her team were helping my younger brother, who died of cancer three weeks ago. My sister-in-law Sophie described Alice and her colleagues as “amazing, kind and empathetic”, and I know what a difference their approach made in the last few days of his life. I am incredibly grateful to all the district nurses in Gloucestershire, many of whom I know will carry on helping patients like my brother at the end of their lives through this difficult winter.

Let me just add that I find it hard to say much about Royal College of Nursing or ambulance strikes, or to make judgments, when emotions, respect, responsibility for public finances and the politics of union strikes clash so uncomfortably for me at the moment. I have chaired regular meetings between our county’s MPs, our NHS trusts, public health and our county council for almost three years now, and with huge respect to all the health professionals involved, the question that I ask myself is: if nurses are stressed by volumes of work and lack of resources, as they are, what will happen to the backlogs? They will only increase. That is why I can only encourage all those responsible to think of creative solutions to capacity in our A&E hospitals. Is it right, for example, that alcoholics return regularly to these hospitals, including the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital, both for their detox treatment and for a 10-day monitored recovery? Is that really what an A&E hospital should do when beds are needed for real accidents, not recurring addiction? This is not to downplay the importance of such help, but just to ask whether it could be done elsewhere than in our A&E hospitals.

Let me now move on and appreciate those who serve us abroad: not only our armed forces, who have been mentioned several times today, but our diplomatic service, our international trade officers and others, including the British Council and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Some work in countries where there may be more sun but also, until recently, many more covid restrictions. Many of those people did not see family back here for well over two years, and I want to thank them all.

Official trade statistics may not show great growth in trade with Asia, but Opposition Members such as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) should be careful about rubbishing what is being done on behalf of our country. The trans-Pacific partnership, the free trade agreement talks with India and the joint economic trade committees with Thailand and Indonesia will achieve much, although not overnight, and I commend

to the hon. Gentleman and other Eeyores here today the thought of the day in Pimlico underground station this morning:

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old but on building the new.”

Having just celebrated 10 years as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy for parts of south-east Asia, I will go on building the new: the satellites, cyber, education, life sciences and green energy partnerships and links that are good for our partners in south-east Asia—indeed, all of Asia—and for us.

That leads me to the sensitive bilateral relationship that we have with China. This House has had no shortage of urgent questions on human rights in, and sometimes outside, China. We have had more debates on abuses of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang in the past two years than on human rights everywhere else in the world put together. No one here imagines that what has happened in Xinjiang or in other minority ethnic parts of China—I have seen many of these myself at first hand—would be remotely acceptable here, but what we have almost completely missed is the real human rights success in China this year, which is the near-complete reversal of the zero covid policy, and to a lesser extent in Hong Kong, where it is modestly disguised as flexible zero covid.

The people of China, seeing random restrictions harshly imposed on them in the name of an impossible goal, made their feelings clear across the nation, unconsciously echoing the remark by Dr Li Wenliang, the famous Wuhan doctor, that there must be more than one voice. There are three interesting aspects to the speed of the policy U-turn: first, it shows that the Communist party of China can listen; secondly, it is good for global supply chains and growth; and thirdly, it was domestic, not international, pressure that achieved such important change.

The latter aspect is the subject of a new book by Jamie Gruffydd-Jones called “Hostile Forces: How the Chinese Communist Party Resists International Pressure on Human Rights”. Jamie notes that

“foreign pressure may raise citizens’ awareness of human rights violations...or it may spark nationalist sentiments, lead to a backlash against the international community and drive support for their government’s actions.”

He highlights how, for example, changes to the death penalty in China came from the domestic outcry over the execution of Mr Nie Shubin for a rape and murder that another man subsequently admitted to. Jamie goes on to say that the CCP has, so far, been successful in ensuring a tight link between party and nation in opposing criticism on human rights from the west and, indeed, has been able to

“weaponise such international pressure for its own propaganda purposes”.

The reinforcement of the CCP’s depiction of US and UK pressure on human rights may be the unintended achievement of those in this House who are relentlessly focused on China’s domestic human rights abuses. This approach has not been very successful in Tibet and I wonder whether it is achieving much in Xinjiang—not because calling out human rights issues in China is wrong, but because it may be counterproductive, while missing the dramatic success for the wider human rights of the Chinese people over zero covid that was achieved without our help. This matters because in an uncertain

world we should, as western leaders rightly concluded at the Bali G20, de-escalate tensions and engage, even when engagement is difficult with major nations with very different systems, values and histories.

On that note, let me come back to my Gloucester constituency. There is lots that some of my constituents may disagree with me on, but as a small city we are much more successful when we pull together for the common good. We have the country's first ever conversion of a department store into a university teaching campus. Debenhams has been converted into a University of Gloucestershire campus, with all its health courses as well as a wellbeing centre and a relocated library. That is us at our best. That work is complemented by the work of Reef plc 100 yards away at the Forum, where a Roman statue of Venus was found under the old bus station and a huge new tech hub will sit beside Gloucester's first four-star hotel before long.

Both projects are funded by the Government's levelling-up fund. We know levelling up when we see it because it brings pride to our city—or to different parts of the country—as will rectifying the underpass that connects these areas, under our railway station and lines, to Great Western Road and our Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. This key route for many will be improved, straightened and stripped of steps to make it much more user friendly. That work starts in the new year. There are many strands of good things being done locally and nationally that we should never forget when we criticise ourselves for not being perfect.

I want to finish by thanking all those who work in the House of Commons for their great help to me, not least Mr Anam Uddin, who on two separate occasions has recovered my backpack when it has been lost—once at almost midnight. I wish him and everybody else here—all the servants of us fortunate MPs—a very happy Christmas.

4.48 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). I offer my condolences to him on the loss of his brother and pay tribute to all those who comforted him and his family at the end of life. The hon. Gentleman obviously touched on the health service, which is where I want to focus my remarks. I will touch on rail services if I have time.

I had the privilege of being elected to this place three years and one week ago. I had something of a baptism of fire as a brand-new MP: I was appointed the Liberal Democrats' health spokesperson and we found ourselves in a global pandemic. Although I spoke a lot about health in my first two years here, that time was understandably dominated by covid and all the surrounding issues.

I wish to spend a little time today touching on the wider challenges facing primary care and ambulance services, not just in my constituency, but, more broadly, in Greater London and across the south-east. I do so not least because with the Government's levelling up generally focusing on the midlands and the north, London and the south-east, the capital and the commuter belt, have seen and continue to see such huge population growth and have been really underinvested in, particularly in terms of GPs, dentists and ambulance services. I will mention a few places today and I humbly request the

Leader of the House to ask Ministers at the Department of Health and Social Care to visit some of them, so that they can see at the coal face across the south-east some of the challenges that residents, patients and health workers are facing. On that note, I would like to thank health and care workers across my constituency and across the country for the amazing job they do, day in, day out, in the most difficult circumstances.

Earlier this year, I was alerted to a shocking case in my constituency, that of a full-time carer in Hampton who looks after her daughter with special needs. As she could not find access to an NHS dentist in the entire area, having rung each one faithfully, she had to use her disability benefits, her food and her heating money to pay for her daughter to go private. She even begged one dentist to allow her daughter to take her place on the NHS list. I pay tribute to Healthwatch Richmond, which works in my constituency and with Healthwatch England to secure extra money for dentistry. Frankly, however, that has been a drop in the ocean. We know that the national average is that nine out of 10 NHS dentists are not accepting new patients and that this rises to a shocking 98% out towards the south-west of the country. That means that people are suffering in pain or, as I have described, are forced to fork out for private care, in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Just down the train line from my constituency, no dental practices are taking on new NHS patients in areas such as Wokingham—not a single one of the 12 practices across that town is doing so. I ask the Leader of the House to ask DHSC Ministers to go to Wokingham to see for themselves how this underfunding is bringing the local dentistry and health services to their knees. We know that without core preventive care, be it in oral health or in other areas, things just end up in crisis care, often at accident and emergency, and we do not want that being replicated in constituencies across the country. I hope that the Minister will heed Liberal Democrat calls for the dental contract to be fundamentally reformed—we are not just talking about the tinkering around the edges announced in November—and for a real focus on long-term workforce planning.

The strains on essential primary care services such as dentistry and access to GPs are well reported. Unfortunately, but understandably, they often lead to frustration for patients. There are those who are understandably desperate for an appointment, given the challenges of their situation. The fact that NHS services are under strain is not the fault of those working in the NHS—I would lay that squarely at the Government's feet. That means that hard-working primary care staff are often on the receiving end of some of the strain that constituents are feeling, especially those who are administering the system, who are often wrongly and pejoratively referred to as “faceless bureaucrats”. I am sorry to say that that is why tomorrow morning I will be having a meeting with partners at a local GP surgery in Hampton Hill, because they wrote to me to raise the issue of the level of abuse their staff receive on a regular basis. That medical centre in my constituency is not alone. Reports reached me recently about a GP surgery just down the road in Walton-on-Thames, in Surrey, where staff were left in tears and needing to call the police about abuse because people were unable to get an appointment. Again, I ask the Leader of the House whether Ministers at the DHSC would visit that surgery in Walton-on-Thames and the one in Hampton Hill to offer an apology to those staff,

[Munira Wilson]

who are under such immense pressure in our health system. Again, I hope that calls will be heeded to train more GPs by offering more training places to those students who want to go into the medical profession and to look to reform pension rules for more experienced staff.

As we are on the brink of an ambulance workers' strike tomorrow over pay and conditions, I was alarmed to read the words of one NHS ambulance chief in *The Times* this morning. He said:

"The best we can hope for is that everyone stays indoors, no one falls over, no one gets ill and no one has a car crash."

Indeed, a Health and Social Care Minister on 5 Live this morning told people to avoid risky activities, including running, if it is icy.

Having had to take both my young daughter and my elderly father to A&E in recent months, I have seen for myself the level of strain and pressure under which A&E is operating. Obviously, this then translates into the pressures on the London ambulance services that are operating at capacity day in, day out, and that applies to ambulance services across the country.

I was sent a story from Winchester of a 96-year-old woman who slipped and fell and was left in pain on the floor. Thankfully, a neighbour heard and called an ambulance, but that took seven hours to arrive. Even when they arrived at the hospital, it was still another six-hour wait to see a doctor. Again, I hope that Health Ministers will visit that ambulance station and speak to those heroic paramedics to understand the resources that both their ambulance station and the South Central Ambulance Service need in order to improve the waiting times and the care for patients in that area.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) introduced a Bill earlier this year calling for localised waiting times for ambulance services. The Liberal Democrats have also called for rural ambulance stations to be reopened and for urgent funding to recruit paramedics.

In the couple of minutes I have left, I wish to touch on the issue of the South Western Railway service, which has affected my constituency, south-west London, Surrey and a number of other areas down to the south-west of England over the past few days. The Minister may or may not be aware that 40 stations across the South Western Railway network have absolutely no services; they have all been cancelled between now and the new year. That is despite the fact that there are no rail strikes on a number of those days during that period. It is ruining the Christmas break for people who want to visit loved ones, for people who desperately need to get to work and for those who need to attend medical appointments.

I have heard from a police officer in my constituency who is struggling to get to work for his shift and from a cancer nurse, who is not striking today, but who is struggling to get to hospital. Her hospital is having to fork out to pay for overnight stays for staff so that they can be there to treat patients.

The impact on the wider community and the hospitality industry is immense. My local rugby club, Harlequins, was due to have its big match, which it has every year, at the big Twickenham stadium the day after Boxing day.

Eighty thousand spectators were expected, but the event has had to be cancelled. Quins lost more than £15 million during covid, and it fears losing, potentially, hundreds of thousands more as a result of having to move the match to March. It employs, both directly and indirectly, hundreds of people in the local area. The matches and the event days benefit local businesses in Twickenham. I implore rail Ministers to work closely with South Western Railway and with RMT to get this overtime ban and the strikes stopped, so that our constituents can get to work and our businesses, which are already struggling, do not go under.

Yesterday, there were reports, again, of schoolchildren in Surrey unable to get to school, because Thames Ditton, Claygate and other stations were closed. In my constituency, Whitton, St Margaret's and Strawberry Hill are all affected. However, I am very pleased that, as a result of my urgent meeting with South Western Railway yesterday, it was announced, just as I entered this Chamber, that it is now starting to run a few off-peak services, but that is not nearly enough. Our constituents deserve better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will do a bit of imploring myself. I have 14 names and about an hour and a half left of the debate before we come on to the wind-ups. That gives six minutes or so to each speaker. Please do not wildly go over that, otherwise the person who is last will hardly get any time at all and that is not in the spirit of Christmas.

4.59 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The lasting legacy of toddler Harper-Lee Fanthorpe, whose tragic death in my constituency last year touched us all, must be the introduction of a law relating to the safety of products containing button batteries. I promised Harper-Lee's mum Stacy, when we first met in July 2021, that I would campaign to raise awareness of this issue, to ensure that other families would not experience the pain and loss that she and her family were suffering. Much has happened since that meeting and I want to update the House before the forthcoming Adjournment.

The Harper-Lee Foundation was established as a charity a year ago and I have worked with the British and Irish Portable Battery Association, the European Portable Battery Association and the Child Accident Prevention Trust to try to reduce the likelihood and frequency of children's swallowing button batteries. At the parliamentary launch of the foundation earlier this year, many Members and key agencies signed a pledge to be button battery aware. In September, Stoke City Council was the first council in the country to pass a motion to be a button battery aware council—passed unanimously, because children's safety is an issue that transcends political divides.

As we approach Christmas, I have called for parents and grandparents to be aware as they buy gifts for their family, or the Christmas lights and decorations that fill our homes, to check whether they contain button batteries, and, if so, whether they are in a child-resistant compartment. I have also called on retailers to be aware of the safety standards of any products they have on sale that could be harmful to children, and to remove unsafe products from their shelves or websites.

Last December, we sadly saw another button battery death, in Motherwell, Scotland. Hughie McMahon was just 17 months old. He swallowed a button battery from a toy, unlike the case of Harper-Lee, where the battery fell out of a remote control for an LED light. This is the issue that needs addressing. Button batteries are in so many different products with which a child may come into contact that a standard that applies to a single type of product, such as toys, is not the answer. We need what is called a horizontal standard that applies to anything containing a button or coin battery.

Why do we not have such a standard? The General Product Safety Regulations 2005 require new and used consumer products to be safe. In June 2019, the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch produced a report on undetected button and coin cell battery ingestion in children. One of the report's key recommendations was that a standard be produced to set out consistent safety requirements to apply throughout the lifecycle of such batteries.

That standard was introduced in April 2021. The publicly available specification PAS7055:2021 states that there are specific product safety requirements for batteries present in toys, electronic devices, and medical devices. However, there are no consistent definitions, warnings, test methods or global standards, and the key issue is that the PAS is voluntary, so there are no penalties for ignoring the recommendations.

The Government have defined the key safety requirements for button and coin batteries, but sadly, despite the introduction of those recommendations, there has been no evidence of a reduction in the incidence of injuries and fatalities caused by swallowing those batteries. It is time, therefore, to push for legislation. Legislation in Australia came into effect this year, following an eight-year campaign after the deaths of three children, and sets significant fines for businesses and individuals that breach the safety law. The US is also planning to take more action.

It is now time for the UK to introduce similar legislation to stipulate enforceable safety standards: all button battery-powered products must have a child-resistant battery compartment; button batteries of up to 32 mm diameter must be sold in child-resistant packaging; for products supplied with a button battery, batteries must be secured within the battery compartment and not loose in the product packaging and products that use or contain button batteries must have clear and concise warnings, making the risk clear to consumers at point of purchase, including online sales.

I look forward to discussing the matter with the safety standards Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy early in January and ask colleagues to support my campaign to introduce Harper-Lee's Law in 2023. The need to legislate is backed by clinicians who see the devastating and life-changing effects of button battery ingestion, as well as the tragic deaths. Now is the time to build on the awareness campaign of the past year and ensure that next year we enshrine greater protection in law.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I end by wishing you, everybody in this House and everybody in the country a happy and safe Christmas—and, more than anything, a button battery aware Christmas.

5.4 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), who I wish well in her campaign. I will take this opportunity to focus on three issues.

First, I will raise the story of a young child, Pearl Melody Black. In August 2017, 22-month-old Pearl from my Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney constituency was tragically killed while walking with her father and brother. Pearl was killed by an unoccupied vehicle that rolled from a private drive on to a highway and down a hill. It crashed into a wall, crushing Pearl and injuring her father and brother. In the months after the incident, officers from the serious collision unit at South Wales police worked tirelessly in putting together a case to provide justice for the family. In short, all tests concluded that the car was mechanically sound and that it had rolled because the handbrake was not fully engaged and the automatic transmission not fully placed in "park" mode.

The case was sent to the Crown Prosecution Service in March 2018. Everyone was hopeful of a conviction for death by dangerous driving. However, in June 2018, the CPS stated that it was unable to send the case to court as a glitch in the law states that the vehicle must have started its journey on a public road to make prosecution under the Road Traffic Act 1988 possible. Even though Pearl was killed on a public road, the fact that the vehicle had started its descent from a private drive meant that prosecution was not possible. The coroner stated that the vehicle was in fact well maintained, and it seemed that the issue was very much driver operation. The inquest heard that the handbrake had not been fully applied in "park" mode.

Over the past four years, I have met Pearl's parents, Gemma and Paul Black, on a few occasions to look at what could be done to change the legislation so that other families do not face this kind of injustice in future. The inquest into Pearl's death was held in October 2018, and the outcome declared was "accident". However, with the support of South Wales police and the CPS, Pearl's parents sought and continue to seek a change in the law to prevent other families—following such tragic and completely preventable incidents—from being in a similar situation of not being able to secure justice because of a legal loophole. As Gemma and Paul acknowledge, legislation is not retrospective, so the change will not help to bring justice for Pearl, but if the law can be changed to prevent anyone else from suffering this injustice, it may provide some comfort.

After speaking to the Public Bill Office and the Private Bill Office, and holding meetings with Government Ministers, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to at least start making some progress. Unfortunately, as is the case with most ten-minute rule Bills and private Member's Bills, that Bill fell because it did not progress before the parliamentary Session ended. It is wholly wrong that justice cannot be achieved in such tragic cases. There has been no conviction simply because the land on which the incident took place is not classified as public. Sadly, however, Pearl's case is by no means an isolated one. I know that other Members across the House have raised similar issues, hence the cross-party support for my ten-minute rule Bill.

The Minister at the time, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), acknowledged in a debate on a similar issue that an

[Gerald Jones]

overarching change in the law to cover driving offences occurring on private land in general would be a significant and difficult piece of legislation because of the wide-ranging nature of land that comes under the definition of “private”, and because of complications around other classifications of private land, such as land used for military, commercial and other purposes. I have discussed the difficulty of legislating broadly for such matters in correspondence with Ministers, and although I appreciate that that remains the case, we could, at the very least, start to look at changing the law. More focused legislation would allow for driving offences that occur on private land adjoining public land to be prosecuted. That would apply to cases such as the death of my constituents’ daughter, Pearl, and to similar cases brought to the House. If the law were changed on driving offences that occur on private land adjoining public land, it would be a very powerful deterrent to road users’ carelessness.

There are a huge number of instances in which private land adjoining public land is regularly used and is potentially dangerous to those in the area, including residential driveways, schools and nurseries, supermarkets, shopping centres, hospitals and doctors’ surgeries, to name some of the most common. When we consider those examples, we can see that driving on that specific category of land can present a high risk to people in everyday situations, especially children, the elderly and some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

The legislation that I am seeking to amend and update would give my constituents and many others the peace of mind that there are consequences for dangerous driving—no matter where it occurs—and help to prevent such needless and avoidable tragedies from ever happening in future. Will the Leader of the House look carefully over my draft Bill and discuss with me and with appropriate Ministers how it might be included in any forthcoming Government legislation?

The second issue that I wish to focus on is the case of a boxer from Merthyr Tydfil. I have previously raised this case in Westminster Hall in the hope that the British Boxing Board of Control would consider acknowledging the family’s call for an apology, which I support. For some people in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, Cuthbert Taylor is a local sporting legend. An amateur and professional boxer, he fought 500 bouts in his career lasting 20 years between 1928 and 1947. Many were in Merthyr Tydfil, but he also fought across south Wales, the UK and Europe. He was knocked out only once in his career, and he was once described as the best in Europe. In 1927, he won the flyweight championship title, and he defended the title in 1928. He also became the British amateur flyweight champion. That same year, he represented Great Britain at the Amsterdam summer Olympics, reaching the quarter-finals in that category. He was the first black boxer to represent Britain at the Olympics. Although well known by some in Merthyr Tydfil, and despite a successful and exciting career, Cuthbert Taylor never got the same recognition on a national or international scale as other boxers. This was because of one simple thing: the colour of his skin.

Cuthbert Taylor was born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1909 to parents of different ethnic backgrounds. His father, also called Cuthbert, was an amateur boxer in Liverpool.

He was of Caribbean descent, and his mother, Margaret, described herself as white Welsh. He was judged at the time to be

“not white enough to be British”

by the British Boxing Board of Control, and he was prevented from ever challenging for a British title or a world title professionally by the body’s colour bar rule, which was in place between 1911 and 1948 and which stated that fighters had to have two white parents to compete for professional titles. The colour bar serves as an uncomfortable reminder of a different time. Although we cannot go back and give Cuthbert Taylor the professional titles and success his career deserved, we can ensure that he has true and just recognition.

The previous Minister for Sport, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), supported the letter to the British Boxing Board of Control to ask it to consider an apology for Cuthbert Taylor, which is something his family deeply want. Will the Leader of the House consider supporting that case and the call to the British Boxing Board of Control?

Finally, turning to the present, this truly is a winter of discontent visited upon the country by the Conservative Government. Railway staff are on strike, as are posties, ambulance staff, bus drivers, border staff, highway workers and driving examiners. For the first time in their 106-year history, nurses are on strike. Rather than threatening hard-pressed workers, the Government should be sitting around the negotiating table, trying to secure a solution. As a lifelong trade unionist and member of the GMB and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I support the trade unions and colleagues at the Trades Union Congress who work tirelessly day in, day out to make life better for working people.

I am proud as a Labour Member of Parliament to be working alongside our trade unions to secure a Labour Government, who would provide a new deal for working people, and to oppose any attempt by this Government to undermine trade unions or workers’ rights. A new Labour Government would repeal any such measures, sign an employment Bill into law within the first 100 days, strengthen individual and collective rights at work and achieve a high-growth, high-wage economy for all. Workers in Britain know that Labour is on their side, so let us have that general election and now. In conclusion, I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all colleagues and all staff who help us do our duty a happy Christmas and new year. I thank my constituency and Westminster staff for supporting me with the work they do helping constituents across Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am introducing a six-minute limit to protect everybody and ensure they all get their fair share.

5.12 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): As this is the Christmas Adjournment debate, I have a list. It is not a list of the things I hope to find lovingly wrapped under the Christmas tree on Christmas morning, but of issues I wish to raise not for the first time in this House, in the hope and confidence that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, through her good offices, can nudge them up the priority list in various Departments.

First, on off-grid properties, about one third of the households in my constituency use oil or LPG for their heating. There was good news yesterday in a written ministerial statement that the £200 support for them will start in February, but I gently urge the Government to see whether that payment is right for all off-grid properties, because there are significant pricing differentials with domestic heating oil and even within LPG pricing, particularly for those who do not have the land to have an LPG bulk tank on their property and so still rely on the 47 kg bottles, which are exceedingly expensive.

Secondly, on GP access, I cannot be the only Member of this House who hears from constituents struggling to get an appointment with their GP. In my constituency, there are many parts expecting new primary care facilities, but we have not got there yet.

The key example I give is the village of Long Crendon, where the doctor's surgery was closed during the pandemic because the building simply was not fit for purpose. The parish council has secured land for a new healthcare centre, and the old clinical commissioning group—now the integrated care board—has agreed the rent to put the GP partnership Unity Health into the building to provide GP services. In this new, innovative model, the land was secured through planning gain but it is owned by the parish council and it is the parish council that wishes to develop the building. I made significant progress with my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) when he was Minister for Health, but I fear that the project has become a little lost in some of the changes that have occurred during the year. I would be grateful if the Department of Health and Social Care would look at the project to see if we can finally deliver that new healthcare centre for Long Crendon and surrounding villages.

On banking, it is preposterous that, across the 335 square miles of my constituency, there is one high street bank left standing; we just have the Nationwide in the town of Princes Risborough. TSB closed in Winslow, Barclays closed in Buckingham and Princes Risborough, and Lloyds has recently closed in Buckingham. There was a suggestion that Buckingham would get a banking hub, but I see little evidence of it. I would appreciate the Government's support in making that happen.

Of course, this would not be a speech of mine if I did not mention the railway whose name we dare not speak—but I will. Some 19 miles of HS2 is being built through my constituency. Along with East West Rail, it continues to dominate my working week, with countless problems arising from construction. Both projects are simply bad neighbours, despite promising the opposite.

I have three key asks. First, let us finally get resolution on fixing that which the projects have broken—namely our roads, though thousands of HGV movements, sometimes daily. Despite strong efforts by Buckinghamshire Council, there seems to be no agreement to secure the funding from HS2 and East West Rail to fix those roads. I would greatly appreciate the support of the Department for Transport in making that happen.

We also need real compensation for businesses affected by these construction projects. The Crooked Billet pub in Newton Longville has already closed its doors because of the duration for which roads into the village have been closed by East West Rail, yet there is no compensation on the table. With similar road closures coming up in the village of Steeple Claydon, the Prince of Wales pub,

which has already been badly affected financially by other road closures, looks to have another grim year financially if the roads to nearby villages cannot be reopened.

Further down the road, the Government seemingly remain intent on building a new mega-prison next to Grendon Underwood and Edgcott, just a mile from where HS2 and East West Rail cross. It is simply inappropriate and unfair to lumber communities already so badly affected by the construction of Government infrastructure projects with another one. My right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), when she was Prime Minister, agreed to look again at the prison, and I urge the current Government to look at it and deliver fairness for my constituents.

East West Rail still plans to launch next year with diesel-only rolling stock. As we head to net zero, that simply cannot be right, and I urge the Government to look again at that, too.

In the few seconds that I have left, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Mr Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers, all Members of the House and all the staff who support us here in Parliament a very merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and prosperous new year.

5.18 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I had to shorten my speech because there are too many issues that need to be raised as a result of the Government's ongoing failures. However, since it is Christmas, I considered how to approach the debate positively and, after careful deliberation, I decided that the best thing I could do for my constituents was to tell their stories. It is positive for them to have their voices heard, in the hope that the Government are listening and will make a difference. If the Government cannot make a difference, they should call a general election.

Our children are our future. I feel that, when we put children at the centre of our legislative considerations, we have the right benchmark. All Government decisions affect children, directly or indirectly. I impress on the Government the need to focus on keeping children safe: in the air they breathe, at school, on the roads, in police custody, in their homes and overseas. I have mentioned only a few examples; there are many more.

We all have a right to breathe clean air. One of the most surprising and distressing things that I was recently told by a paediatrician is that a new-born baby was found to have ultrafine particles and carbon monoxide concentrations in their lungs—they breathe in what their mother breathes in—which is why I absolutely support the Mayor of London's expansion of the ultra low emission zone. We know that children die from polluted air; in fact, there are 4,000 premature deaths a year in London due to toxic air. The case of Ella, in my neighbouring constituency, is a tragic reminder of that, and I encourage the Government to get behind Ella's law fully. The school streets programme is about having green walls and less traffic around schools. It has faced challenges and delays, but if the Government are serious about delivering clean air, they will redouble their efforts to roll it out. I hope that the Government will work more vigorously with local authorities to achieve that.

In 2013 under the coalition Government, I set up a community food bank. Since then, communities have become ever more reliant on charity. The meaning of

[Janet Daby]

charity is love—communities are showing love to one another, but what are the Government showing when they blame and demonise families on benefits? The drastic increase in the number of people who use food banks includes people on benefits, low-wage earners and key workers, which is partly why those key workers are on strike today. They simply cannot afford the wages they are living on.

Everything about universal credit is harsh, because it says that people must live in poverty and that they must suffer and have much less than everybody else. Benefits are easily frozen and the five-week delay sets the scene. There is also the bedroom tax and the local housing allowance does not go far enough. The Government have been failing the economy and they are failing families.

When we think about young people and crime, the Government never say that crime is linked to poverty, deprivation, discrimination and disadvantage. They should sort that out, along with legal aid, appropriate adults in custody, the custody threshold for children, the court backlogs and, I could not forget, prison spaces.

Staying on the theme of children, teachers and schools across my constituency already provide unofficial breakfast support for children in the classroom, but schools need more help—and they need it now. I have recently been contacted by several headteachers about the shortfall of funding to pay for free school meals. If the Government had not noticed, there is a food crisis as prices have risen by 12.4%, which is extraordinarily high. That affects the price of food for all organisations in the public and charity sectors that provide food, as well as for consumers.

In England, the price of each child's free school meal is rising. One teacher told me that that is an extra £20,000 from their budget each year, which gets taken away from other staffing costs. The Government need to ensure that the quality of food is not compromised, and that neither is the child's health and nutrition. If the child's health is compromised, that will only transfer the cost to another Department and another budget. I am sure that all hon. Members agree that prevention is better than cure.

I turn to a case where Government intervention is desperately needed. The longer that they delay in processing people's visas, the more that the state pays for them. The Government then demonise them for being dependent on the state—a vicious circle. In the summer, I visited an Afghan family who fled Afghanistan during the collapse of Kabul and came to the UK. They were here lawfully but were made to live in two rooms in a hostel for more than a year. They had two autistic children, a toddler and a teenager, and they were in a severely overcrowded situation. The parents were given pocket money and were unable to cook their own food. They could not rest properly and were, of course, deeply traumatised. It is no wonder that the parents ended up on mental health medication.

That is what the Government offered that war-torn family, when all they wanted to do was work and provide a home for their family. More than a year later, they were given the shell of a home that was miles away from the place that they had come to know well. I am pleased that the Government demonstrate a greater

level of compassion to Ukrainian refugees, which I fully support, but I impress on the Home Office to do more for Afghan refugees and asylum seekers.

I also make a plea for the Home Office to help my nine-year-old constituent who needs a life-saving bone marrow transplant on 24 December—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sadly, the six minutes are up, but I thank the hon. Lady none the less.

5.25 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): It has been a difficult year for many and a mixed bag for Doncaster, too. It started so well, with the award of city status and the shortlisting into the final six of 43 applicants to be the headquarters of Great British Railways. There was also levelling-up funding and our becoming an educational investment area.

Yet one event has hit Doncaster extremely hard: the loss of our international airport, Doncaster Sheffield airport. If it remains closed, a public inquiry will be needed as the loss of the strategic and key economic asset for Doncaster's—indeed, South Yorkshire's—economy is so damaging. Questions need to be asked. How did this happen? Who allowed it to happen? Why did the South Yorkshire Mayor not invest and make the £20 million loan? Why did our very own Doncaster Mayor not shout up for our airport when that was needed most? Why have Peel been able to do this a second time to our region? So many questions need answers. Only a public inquiry can establish the truth.

The South Yorkshire Mayor said he could not buy the airport as he did not know how to run one; he also does not know how to run the trams. Yet he has top-sliced £110 million from Government funds for the sole benefit of Sheffield, his own city. Doncaster's share of that is over £24 million. We want our money back. I ask on behalf of the good people of Doncaster for the South Yorkshire Mayor to return to us what is ours: £24 million—not as a gift or early Christmas present, but in recognition that it is our money and not for Sheffield but for Doncaster. If he believes that the tram is an asset for the whole of South Yorkshire, then wonderful. I think our airport is, too. If he does not want to return our £24 million and continues his support for the tram, I will go along with that—but only if Doncaster can have £110 million for its airport, too. I will get the answers that my constituents deserve and press for a fair share of their money.

However, I do not want to dwell entirely on the past in this speech; I want to look forward to what can be a wonderful future. My hopes for 2023 would see an end to the war in Ukraine, inflation down, cost of living crisis at an end and no more strikes—a Minister for men and a men's health strategy, too. I also hope to see a change in how we as politicians speak to each other. Much as we need to challenge each other—and I do—I hope that the politics of hostility disappear and to see much more of politicians who speak to each other with respect, both in here and on Twitter.

We should show the rest of the country how to be with each other. Hopefully, that will translate down to how we as a nation speak to our police, nurses, teachers and GPs as well as how we all speak to and about each

other. That includes how we speak of the west as whole, the UK and our city of Doncaster. We all know that there are many injustices, but speaking badly of where we live and our way of life will never help. I often hear how bad this country is and many parts of the west, too. If it is so bad, why do so many people want to come here? No, we need to start respecting each other and our way of life a little more.

As a very well known author said, we need to start having an attitude of gratitude. We all want things to get better, but just to keep them the way they are takes so much effort. To all who make this country function, I say thank you—whether it is roads to drive down, paths to walk on, fields to play on, schools to go to, hospitals to make us well, energy to keep us warm and keep out the dark, or even the ability to speak freely. To both the public and private sector alike, I say thank you. I believe that we live in the greatest country and I have the great good fortune to live in the greatest city: Doncaster is great.

As I have already mentioned, this year Doncaster became a city and lost an airport, but whether it is a town with an airport or a city without one, I will always love it. I believe it is a fantastic place and can have the best of futures. My hopes for Doncaster's future include the reopening of our airport, a new hospital, an advanced manufacturing research facility, for Doncaster to be the home of hybrid air vehicles and perhaps even Boeing, plus a second university technical college, levelling up funding and—who knows?—even a revitalised market. James Hart has my full support in his campaign. We need a new school in Bawtry and a new health centre for Rossington, and I will champion them all. Most of all, I want the next generation to say, “I can and I will”, and for them to believe that much is possible where they live, and that all it takes is the right attitude and hard work. I therefore ask every parent in Doncaster to say to their child this Christmas, “Speak up for England, speak up for Doncaster, and speak up for each other.”

Finally, Christian friends across the House tried to secure a Backbench debate on Christmas and Christianity, but by all accounts we were not successful. While I have this moment, I want to remind those in this place, and anyone who cares to watch, that although Christmas is celebrated in many ways across the world, the real reason is the birth of our saviour, Jesus Christ. He was sent as a saviour, and with the promise that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. I do not want anyone ever to forget that. Merry Christmas everybody.

5.31 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher).

I wish to raise an important local issue from my constituency, which also affects many people in the surrounding area and across the country and the wider world: the future of Reading jail. That iconic, historically important building is currently mothballed. It is the most famous building in our town, and we are proud of it and of its association with Oscar Wilde and other historical figures. At the moment, the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and I are working with the Ministry of Justice, Reading Borough Council, Banksy and arts groups to try to secure the future of the jail, save it, and turn it into an arts hub, which we

believe would be a fitting use for that wonderful historic Victorian building. I would like to update the House on our progress, and call on the Ministry of Justice to focus on this issue and offer local residents, the arts community and many others a wonderful Christmas present by saving the jail.

In short, we have been waiting some time. I would like to explain what has happened so far and some of the issues we face, and point out of the potential of the marvellous Victorian building. For a number of years the jail has been mothballed by the MOJ. It is, however, suited to becoming an arts hub, and it has already a meanwhile use for filming and for art installations. We believe there is scope for that to be developed more fully if the building were allowed to be redeveloped, saved, and turned into an arts centre for local and wider use.

The problem seems to be that, having run a competition to sell the building, the MOJ now has one preferred bidder, which we understand has lost interest in the site, and appears to be holding on to the building but without a clear plan for its future. We would like to reorientate the MOJ's interest into a bid by Reading Council, which has offered more than £2.6 million for the historic building. We believe we can add to that with donations from the arts community—indeed, we have had some initial interest from Banksy in supporting that bid. I ask the Leader of the House to refer the matter back to the Ministry of Justice and ask it to look again at this important matter, rethink its current approach, and look again at Reading Council's bid for the site. We believe it is possible that the issue could be looked at again, and the site considered for alternative use.

In addition to the future of Reading jail, I wish to mention a number of other important historic buildings in my constituency, in particular the future of Caversham Park House, Cemetery Junction arch, and the Adwest building in Woodley. All those are important buildings that I hope can be preserved and saved for future community use. I am currently working with a number of partners on those issues, and I thank local partners and councillors for their interest in such matters.

There are a couple of other campaigns that I would like to mention. In particular, there is the need for further Government action on legal but harmful content in the Online Safety Bill. That has been discussed recently, but I am afraid that the Government have failed to fully take on board the concerns expressed by many people, and in particular the Stephens family from Reading, who tragically lost their son in a brutal attack nearly two years ago, which was linked to young people's social media use—the filming and photographing of knives and the sharing of that online, which had the most dreadful impact on the young people involved in the attack. I ask the Leader of the House to refer the matter back to the relevant Ministers and ask them to reconsider the Government's approach to legal but harmful content.

I would like to mention a couple of other local matters. I ask the Government to look again at their policy on business rates. There have been a number of cases in my constituency of small businesses struggling because of the high rental value of shops and other physical businesses in Reading town centre and other locations. Business rates should be reformed, with the current system scrapped and replaced with one based

[*Matt Rodda*]

on a more genuine assessment of the value of sites so that internet giants pay a fair share and small businesses get treated equally.

I also call on the Government to look again at Gurkha pensions. I have been talking to the retired Gurkha community and working with them on the matter. I know that the Government are in negotiation with the Government of Nepal, but, as of yet, there is no solution to the issue. Gurkhas who retired from the British military before 1997 do not receive the same pensions as other British soldiers. Again, I ask the Leader of the House to refer that to the Ministry of Defence and urge it once again to renew its focus on the issue.

Finally—I appreciate that time is running out—I wish all the House staff, colleagues across the House and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you very much.

5.36 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Before we enter the Christmas recess, I want to take the opportunity to look at some of the progress that we have made in the last 12 months in Warrington South and at some of the things that we have still to do. I start by thanking the nurses in Warrington who did not back strike action in the latest industrial dispute and pay tribute to all those who work in the NHS, as the Prime Minister did when he came to Warrington to open a new MRI and CT scanning centre at Warrington Hospital. Since then, we have opened a new same-day emergency care centre at Warrington Hospital, with about £6 million of investment at the Lovely Lane site to try to take the pressure off A&E.

However, I have to say that we need a new hospital and have been working with NHS leaders to submit a £317 million bid to build one. Two weeks ago, the Health Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and said that we would get an answer as to whether the bid had been successful by the time we went into recess. So when we get to the wind-ups, the Leader of the House may have some great news for me. If not, I look forward to speaking to the Secretary of State in the new year. We really do need a new hospital in Warrington, because there is lots of development planned—I have seen recommendations for another 14,000 homes to be built over the next 10 years—and we simply cannot manage with the capacity of the current hospital. There are not enough beds and the facility is really not fit for purpose.

When I was elected, I promised to campaign to secure better facilities for schools in Warrington South, too. We are making some progress on that, working with headteachers, academy trusts and governors. I congratulate the team at Penketh High School, led by Mr Carlin, who earlier this year secured £6 million from the school rebuilding programme. Through his leadership, we have seen the school really making improvements. I recently attended its student council elections. It is a fantastic learning environment where young people really are able to flourish. I support and encourage the work done there.

I turn briefly to levelling up public transport in Warrington. We are looking forward to the delivery of 120 new zero-emission buses under the Government's zero-emission bus regional areas scheme. When I added up all the money given to Warrington's own buses in the last 12 months, it totalled about £42 million, in addition to investment in supporting bus services and extending routes off peak and at weekends. We are absolutely engaged in levelling up to help people get around our great town.

There is one issue I want to see more action taken on next year. Some time ago, I raised my concerns about the mis-selling of leasehold homes to families who bought new properties from David Wilson Homes 12 years ago on Steinbeck Grange. I raised the experience of my constituent Mr Mike Carrol and about 50 families who had also purchased homes thinking they were buying freehold when they later found out they were actually leasehold. The solicitors they used had been provided by the builders. All have since folded and simply cannot be traced.

I am very grateful for the investigation undertaken by the Competition and Markets Authority, which came to Warrington and interviewed some of those who had been mis-sold houses. However, I have to say it was a great disappointment to receive information from the CMA advising that it was not pursuing the Steinbeck Grange cases because it could deliver only limited remedies, and because it would be difficult as the unlawful conduct of David Wilson Homes had since stopped. Well, I say to the CMA that a limited remedy is still a remedy and that if there is evidence of unlawful conduct, even though it has now stopped, it should perhaps be taking action to put those errors right. I share the disappointment expressed by many of my constituents.

During the investigation, I was approached by an ex-member of staff from David Wilson Homes who was involved in the sale of houses on the Chapelford estate. The former staff member shared with my office evidence that highlighted properties were sold without pertinent information being disclosed to residents on Steinbeck Grange. They were not in receipt of that information until after the Steinbeck Grange development had been sold in its entirety. The individual also highlighted that sales staff received cash incentives for promoting to buyers conveyancers who all subsequently went bust. The director of the company that now owns the leasehold was also contacted by David Wilson Homes, with a view to buying back the freeholds for Steinbeck Grange residents so the matter could be resolved for residents. We certainly do not have a resolution here. I think there is evidence of unlawful conduct and negligent practises by the developer. I am very pleased that Cheshire police is looking very closely at this matter. I urge the Serious Fraud Office to consider whether it, too, should be looking at an investigation.

I am in no doubt about the tough times we are facing as we recover from the long tail of the pandemic and stand up to the aggression shown by Putin in Ukraine. My focus remains on tackling the many challenges facing constituents in Warrington South, trying to make life better for everyone, securing a new hospital, keeping families safe, and backing business small and large to create jobs for today and the skills for tomorrow. I wish everybody in Warrington South a very merry Christmas and extend my thanks to everybody here in the House

of Commons, and particularly to my team in this place and in the constituency: Stephen, Stewart, Lyndsay, Julie, Oliver and James. I am very grateful for their hard work and the commitment they have shown over the last 12 months. I look forward even more to a productive and proactive 2023.

5.42 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My beautiful constituency is steeped in history, being designated a world heritage site twice over. However, Bath is not just a living museum. The beating heart of Bath is the people and organisations that help to make it a better place. I pay tribute to organisations such as VOICES, a charity supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse and violence, and the Somerset and Wessex Eating Disorders Association for its important work in helping the growing number of people suffering with eating disorders. We have the wonderful Bath College and our two fantastic universities which, with their thousands of young people, bring energy, fun and new ideas to our city. We have hundreds of new, innovative small businesses, such as S&J Roofing, which I visited last week and which passionate about solar panel installations and how to get to net zero.

We all have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in society, and I give my warmest thanks to Bath's health workers. I visited several health centres this year and I am always amazed by the dedication of staff. I warmly commend our Royal United Hospitals, RICE—the Research Institute for the Care of Older People, a local dementia care and research institute—the Heart of Bath surgery, Bath Mind, and all those who support the increasing number of people grappling with health issues. However, our health workers deserve more than just a pat on the shoulder. They deserve material support from Government. The Government have left our local health services in a huge mess.

Let us look at Bath's dental crisis. Nearly 15% of NHS dentists have been lost from Bath clinical commissioning group since 2016. Only three in 10 adults in Bath have been able to secure an appointment with an NHS dentist in the past two years. The Government must reform the NHS dental contract and give proper incentives to take on new NHS patients, instead of leaving dentists out of pocket. A review was promised earlier this year—where is it?

GP services are faring no better. The south-west lags behind the country in GP recruitment. Local GPs have told me of their worries for this winter, as demand for their services continues to soar. The Government urgently need a credible, long-term workforce plan, so that our precious NHS can continue to exist. The crisis for emergency care and ambulance services has been looming for a long time, but the Government have deliberately ignored it.

South Western Ambulance Service is under severe pressure. I commend it for everything it does in this crisis, but only this morning I heard another heartbreaking story from a patient in Cheltenham who, on several occasions, has had to wait outside Gloucestershire Royal Hospital in an ambulance—sometimes overnight—and then has been discharged back to his carers without making it into the hospital. Perhaps the Health Minister should visit places such as Bath and Cheltenham, to hear the stories from South Western Ambulance Service for himself.

Earlier this year, I led a debate on ambulance and emergency department waiting times, after the Royal College of Emergency Medicine published its report, "Tip of the Iceberg". Three years ago, an ambulance taking 50 minutes to reach a stroke patient would have been a national scandal, but this Government have allowed it to become the norm. The Government need to urgently fund thousands of extra beds to stop handover delays in A&E, so that ambulances can get back on the road as soon as possible. My constituents cannot wait any longer. We all know that this is really a crisis of social care. We cannot let it loom any longer without Government grappling with the problem.

Soaring energy bills have hit everyone hard this winter, yet the Government have proven slow to protect those in need. The energy bill support scheme provides £400 to domestic consumers via their bills. However, the Government have yet to devise a method to get money to residential boaters in my constituency, leaving them facing serious financial hardship this Christmas. A mechanism must be urgently put in place to ensure that they, too, get the support they need.

From healthcare to the economy to climate change—I did not have time to talk about net zero this afternoon, which is a subject that I raise time and again—we are in a state of crisis. I hope that Government will return to this place in the new year with the resolve we need to get our country back on track. Radical, progressive change is needed, now more than ever.

Since I have a little time left, in the spirit of Christmas I want to give you an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish everybody across the House, our wonderful staff, my Bath constituents and last but not least you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very Merry Christmas and all the best for 2023.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will follow your lead and give everyone else an extra minute. So, it is seven minutes now.

5.48 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Let me I start by commending the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on what she said in her speech. I got to know her a bit through the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I know it will have been a difficult thing to talk about, but it was powerful and an important message to people to check themselves for cancer, because it can affect any of us.

I must start with a note of sadness on behalf of the local community that I represent, because last week we lost Hasnath Miah, who was a sort of champion or local hero in the Didcot area where I live. He had been homeless for part of his life and had been helped by the Didcot community, including through free meals, to get back on his feet. He swore that if he was ever in a position to help other people, he would do so. He had a hugely successful restaurant called Indian Dream, and in the pandemic began giving free meals to key workers, the homeless and young carers, just in the way he had been given food. In total he gave away more than 10,000 free meals. Very sadly, after a stroke two weeks ago, he died at the age of just 49. There has been a huge outpouring of grief for him in the Didcot community. I send my condolences to his family—may he rest in peace.

[David Johnston]

I will pick out a couple of greatest hits from the subjects I always talk about in this Chamber. The first is the lack of GP surgeries. We have had huge population growth across my constituency, particularly in the Didcot area. GP surgeries are always promised, but never arrive. It is a total failure by the local council and local health leaders: they say they are committed to more surgeries and they keep promising them, particularly in the run-up to local elections, but they never emerge. Meanwhile, our existing GP surgeries work flat out all year round and are now closing their books because they simply cannot cope. They do not have the buildings to be able to take on more patients, never mind the doctors and so on. We have to make progress on the issue, which I will be talking about even more next year.

This month marks 58 years since Grove station—or Wantage Road station, as some prefer to call it—closed under the Beeching cuts. We took part in the bidding process for new stations; the Department for Transport was impressed with our bid, but we were not successful this time. I will keep going until we are. Our area has had huge population growth, so the station makes economic sense, social sense and environmental sense. I am absolutely determined that we will get it reopened.

Sticking with the environmental theme, I am the lead sponsor of the Local Electricity Bill, a totally cross-party initiative that now has the support of 314 Members—tantalisingly close to half the Members of this House. If any hon. Members listening have not yet supported it, will they please take a look? It is a complete no-brainer. Our local communities would very much like to generate more renewable energy, but the start-up costs are far too high at the moment. Essentially, the Bill would remove start-up costs so that energy generated can be sold to the local community.

We have worked hard with the campaign team and with officials in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to change the nature of the Bill. It is now much more about local energy and renewable energy sources acting as “sleeves” for bigger suppliers and teaming up with them for metering and maintenance purposes. It would mean a flowering of renewable energy, which lots of people would like to see locally. I am hopeful that we can make progress with the Government on the Bill next year, particularly in relation to the Energy Bill.

I did a couple of things for the first time this year. I held a crime summit locally, because I was increasingly getting reports of all sorts of crimes, from business break-ins to drug dealing. The theme that probably came out most strongly from people who attended the event, which I held with Thames Valley police, was antisocial behaviour. We have a tendency to underplay antisocial behaviour: if it does not involve great violence, murder or someone’s house being robbed, we do not take it as seriously as we should. For people who are not used to it, in an area where they have not seen it before, a sudden increase in antisocial behaviour is very unsettling. I will be doing more work on the issue next year with the police, whose response I was pleased with: they are going to go away and look at how they handle these things.

This year I also started a work experience campaign with local employers—partly because that was what I did in my previous life as a charity chief exec, but also

because work experience had all but disappeared during covid. I encourage hon. Members to do that sort of thing, if they are not doing it already, because it is clear that as a result of covid many employers now have a lot of staff working at home and have simply got out of the habit of providing work experience. They sometimes offer virtual work experience, which is fine—it is better than nothing—but it is not the same as being in the workplace. I was really pleased with all the employers that got involved: Rebellion, Hachette, Astroscale and lots of others.

5.54 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The nurses are striking, and the people are rising up in support of them. They are striking for the first time in more than 100 years, and it was of course completely avoidable. It could be avoided, if only the Government would negotiate. These professional, loving, caring nurses would prefer to be tending their patients, but instead are taking action because it is unsafe on those wards. If more of them leave, pressure builds, and then even more leave. It is a vicious cycle. They are the canary in the mine, and the Government must heed the warning of these strikes. There are 7.2 million people on waiting lists, sickness levels are rising, and A&E waiting time targets have not been met since April 2021. There are 133,000 vacancies in the NHS, and the staff are burning out.

Poor pay has an impact on retention. Staff cannot afford to work in the NHS, and those who remain are under such pressure that they are walking too. Holding on to staff is an impossible task for employers when those staff are not paid the rate that they should receive. As a recent OECD report pointed out, their rate is one of the lowest in Europe. They are paid for four days but expected to work for five. The real-terms pay cut since 2010 has pushed the profession into poverty—a profession that Labour honoured, and one that Labour paid. Band 5 nurses on pay point 23 have lost 20% of their pay since this Government have been in place, while band 6 nurses on pay point 28 have lost 21% in real terms.

The cost of living, the cost of housing, the cost of travel and the cost of just registering to practice clears out nurses’ monthly wage packets, and it is becoming harder to balance the books. Many are now living on the edge. Some retire early, some just walk, and many are turning to agencies where they are paid more to survive for now, although they will lose their pension and other benefits in years to come. Of course, NHS trusts are being ripped off because they have to pay more to the agencies that profit from this crisis. I searched the agencies, and found that a band 5 nurse earning £27,000 a year in the NHS could be earning £32,000 working for an agency. It is a false economy. Instead of paying nurses, the Health Secretary is paying the profiteers, with £4.5 billion spent on temporary staff over the last five years. To date, my local trust has paid £13.8 million, and it will have paid £20 million by the end of the year, while its underspend on employed nursing staff is £13 million. Do the maths: if you pay the staff more, you do not pay the agencies but you retain your staff.

NHS officials are travelling around the globe to recruit nurses. It costs £11,500 per nurse, and many then struggle to live on the poor wages here in the UK. According to

the Royal College of Nursing, the NHS is currently carrying 47,496 registered nurse vacancies. That figure does not take account of the non-funded posts that are needed to address the backlog, increased demand and more acute sickness. Some specialties are really struggling: there has been a 46.9% decline in disability nursing, a 47.8% fall in the number of district nurses, and a 32.9% reduction in number of school nurses. The Nursing and Midwifery Council has also seen more people leave the register. We discussed demand this morning at the Health and Social Care Committee; the demand for paramedics has risen by 16% in just three years, and they too will be on strike tomorrow.

There is a way to stop this scandal, plain and simple: pay our nurses and other NHS staff what they are owed. The Secretary of State last met the unions on 15 November, when he avoided talk about pay. Pat Cullen, who has been an amazing leader of the RCN, spoke to him, but he would not discuss pay. On the “Today” programme yesterday, Christina McAnea, Unison’s general secretary, said that she had had just 15 minutes with the Secretary of State five weeks ago, and, of course, pay was not on the agenda. Instead of grandstanding, touring media studios and hiding behind the pay review body, the Secretary of State should be negotiating. Let us be clear: it is the Secretary of State who appoints the pay review body. He and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury provide the pay envelope, the remit and the parameters of that body, and within that straitjacket the PRB works out the best way of distributing the money that it is given on the basis of evidence taken from a range of stakeholders, including NHS employers, umbrella groups and trade unions. There is no negotiation; pay is then imposed. But the unions rejected this proposal as it was fundamentally flawed and fundamentally too low. When the remit was set, inflation was just 4%, there was no war in Ukraine, and there was no reckless Prime Minister losing £30 billion from the economy. Of course, inflation has risen since then.

Let us face it, the reason that NHS workers’ pay is so low is that 76.7% of the workforce are women. There is an institutional assessment that because women are in caring roles they will not stand up for themselves, but they are and their voices must be valued and heard. The Secretary of State must negotiate now. It is no good his saying that there is no more to pay, because he can always find the money when he needs it. If he values the NHS staff, he needs to pay them and to do it quickly. Tomorrow, as the paramedics walk out, other ballots will be coming in. That is why it is so important that these talks get under way. The Government keep quoting ridiculous sums, but until they talk, they do not know the cost. That is the art of negotiation, which this Government seem to have lost.

Poor staffing is costing lives and chasing our NHS staff out of their jobs. The NHS crisis will not be resolved until the staffing crisis is resolved, and the staffing crisis will not be resolved until the pay crisis is resolved. The Chancellor and the Secretary of State need to stop hiding behind the pay review body, come to the table with a bigger envelope and make nurses and all NHS staff the necessary offer to end this dispute, to value the staff and to start addressing the major challenges across the NHS. If they will not do that, a Labour Government will clearly be needed to sort out the NHS. We have always valued the staff and we will always keep

patients safe. I want to thank all NHS staff for their tenacity and care, and I wish them all a happy Christmas, as I do to all in this House.

6.1 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Recently the Chancellor said that we have a national genius for innovation, and nowhere is that genius more obvious than in the new city of Southend. Southend’s 3,700 companies include Drivershields, which won the Queen’s award for innovation this year, Ipeco, Borough plating and Tapp’d cocktails. These are some of the most innovative companies in the country. Last weekend I had the pleasure of opening the new City Wheel at Adventure Island. Rising to a height of nearly 120 feet, it is the tallest Ferris wheel in the south-east, and this was the first time it had rotated fully loaded. It paused for a rather uncomfortable length of time while I was at the top, but it afforded me a wonderful view of my picturesque constituency.

However, it is Southend’s public services that I really want to talk about when I talk about innovation. We have the brilliant South Essex College and Southend’s brilliant schools, including our four leading grammar schools, which are creating the innovators of the future. As the Skills Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), saw with his own eyes last week, the array of T-level programmes and apprenticeships is extremely impressive.

When it comes to policing, our brilliant community inspector Paul Hogben came to me with a plan to tackle knife crime by purchasing innovative electronic knife poles that he had sourced online and needed my support to purchase. The first set has been purchased, and they have proved so successful because of the number of people that have been screened and the number of objects removed that the police are now investing in another set to make Southend safer.

But it is our NHS that is truly outstanding, despite our still awaiting the £118 million of capital funding in South Essex, including £51 million for Southend Hospital, which I have talked about repeatedly in this Chamber. Southend Hospital is not standing still; it is innovating. With support from other South Essex colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who was in the Chamber earlier, and in conjunction with the East of England Ambulance Service, we have helped the hospital to create not one but two state-of-the-art ambulance handover units and a new enhanced active discharge centre to help the flow of people going through Southend Hospital. How much more could they do if that essential capital funding was at last released? In the famous words of Cuba Gooding Jr. that I have mentioned in the Chamber previously, I say to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and/or the Treasury: “Show me the money!”

In recognition of their immense efforts, I thank all our wonderful NHS staff in Southend for their incredible work this year and for the fact that not a single nurse, porter, GP or mental health worker is on strike this Christmas in Southend. Such recognition of our national position and their dedication to their job deserves the admiration of us all. In particular, I congratulate the amazing Valerie Adams, who is choosing to finish her

[Anna Firth]

50 years of service to the NHS by going in and looking after others on Christmas day. She is a superhero and deserves a medal for long service. I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that in the new year you will join my campaign for a new long-service medal for outstanding NHS workers, as we have already for workers in the police, the fire service and the military.

Southend was made a city in Sir David's honour, but we all know that he would not have stopped there. I am determined to build on his impressive legacy by having Southend become the city of culture in 2029. It is unbelievable that at a meeting on 8 November Labour-led Southend-on-Sea City Council completely dismissed going for such a positive vision for our new city, despite our not having to apply for another four years. We will not stand for this lack of confidence in and ambition for our new city. I assure the House and, indeed, all the naysayers at Labour-led Southend-on-Sea City Council that the Conservatives and the community in Southend will continue to pursue this incredible opportunity. We will not let it slip by because of a lack of ambition. Labour in Southend needs to learn that success is not a destination: it is a journey.

Finally, music and culture is one of the most innovative sectors in Southend, as shown by our brilliant and inspirational Music Man Project, which is currently powering its way up the charts to become the Christmas No. 1. Sir David never missed an opportunity to shout about how brilliant the Music Man Project is. If Members have not already heard it, "Music is Magic" is available to download on iTunes, Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music, Apple Music, Deezer, SoundCloud and Tidal. It is even available to stream on smart speakers: all Members need to say is, "Alexa, play 'Music is Magic'"—or they can come and see me afterwards.

Finally, I take this opportunity to wish everybody a wonderful Christmas and to thank my amazing team, my family, my mother and everyone who has supported me. For me, it has been the privilege of my life to represent Southend West this year; for them, it has been a year like no other. They have exchanged a parliamentary superstar of 39 years' experience for a complete newbie. I thank them all for their help. In particular, I thank my office manager Gill Lee. I am very proud that she was nominated for staffer of the year, which I am sure was much deserved.

With only five seconds left, I wish everyone a very happy Christmas.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On that point, we all remember David Amess today with huge, huge gratitude for his service here.

6.9 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is normal at this time to reflect on our constituencies and events that have affected them over time. My part of Devon found itself the subject of national attention on Christmas day in 1839, when the great Bindon landslip occurred between Axmouth and Uplyme. A substantial earthquake occurred on that Christmas day and about 50 acres of fertile farmland fell into the sea. Questions were raised here in Parliament and Queen Victoria sailed to Devon in her yacht to see what had happened.

From a landslip to a landslide, we fast forward to 2022. On 23 June, Liberal Democrat activists overturned a majority of more than 24,000. That is the largest majority ever overturned at a parliamentary by-election. Many commentators attributed the win to the way that once safe territory had been taken for granted by the Conservatives, who have since seemed all at sea. The Government responded to Lib Dem lobbying last week with a pledge of funding to finally rebuild the dilapidated Tiverton High School. I ask the Government to ensure that we see work begin on the school in the next 18 months, given that, if I understand this right, the majority of the schools that were pledged funding in last week's announcements are not due to see building commence for the next couple of years.

At the end of July, the people of Honiton were graced with a visit by Mr Speaker. People might think that the wine in the south of France is the best thing for their annual vacation or they may prefer to go beyond European shores, but I know that Mr Speaker has the experience and wisdom to know that there is no better place to holiday than on the east Devon coast. While he was visiting Honiton, I did not think it appropriate to ask him whether he had witnessed the sewage discharges that we know have plagued Britain's coastline this year. But summer holidays are not the only time of year when people in my part of Devon are affected by underinvestment from South West Water. Several communities where I live have been without running water this week, owing to not one but six burst water mains. I spent yesterday finding out how that had affected people in my part of Devon. Local communities have been very good at rallying to each other's aid, but people in my patch are still without drinking water, three days after they first reported this—or at least tried to report it. I hope that both the Government and Ofwat will ensure that in 2023 South West Water's priority is investment in its infrastructure, rather than paying out such handsome rewards to its senior executives. I should point out that some of the people who are still without drinking water in my part of Devon are the same people who are off grid for energy and are still waiting patiently for a £200 voucher.

Still, not all is going badly, as yesterday I was pleased to have spent some time with Network Rail in Cullompton talking about the re-opening of the Cullompton railway station. The Government are spending £5 million on a feasibility study, and reopening the station in that commuter town will be a good earner for a train operating company. Given that there was a functioning station at Cullompton for most of the past 150 years, we look forward to its reinstatement, we hope, in 2025.

At this time of year, the town of Seaton is host to The Polar Express tram ride. I have ridden on the tram at Seaton twice this year and I can recommend it, as it is well worth a journey. I have to say though that it is easier to get from Seaton to Lapland by tram than it is to get from Seaton to Exeter by bus. I would like to see the Government require that Stagecoach stops supposing that it needs to drive its buses with the reliability and punctuality of Victorian stagecoaches, and instead provides rural areas such as mine with a service that can be relied upon.

To conclude, I urge the Government to give the Tiverton and Honiton constituency a few modest new year's gifts, including: school buildings at Tiverton High

School to fulfil the Government's pledge; proper regulation of water companies; a railway station at Cullompton; and the restoration of bus services in Axminster, Uffculme and Seaton. An alternative is that the Conservative party may once again risk losing parts of the constituency by a landslide.

Finally, as we rightly thank House staff and return to our families, it would be worth our thinking also about the plight of Ukrainians. MPs from Ukraine have suggested that we might turn off our festive lights for one hour from 8 pm tomorrow so as to remember that Putin has denied them more than we can imagine.

6.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a real pleasure to speak in this Christmas Adjournment debate. I remember Sir David Amess. We all were enthralled when he gave us a list of 30 things that he wanted done in Southend, and, by the new year, they were nearly all done. He was a formidable gentleman.

It is no secret that I love this time of year—I may have mentioned that a time or three in this House. There are so many things to love about Christmas: time with family; good food; fellowship; and, for me, the singing of an old Christmas carol as we gather in church. But the most wonderful thing about Christmas for me is the hope that it holds. I wish to speak this year about the Christ in Christmas, because, too often, we miss that. It would be good this year to focus on what Christmas is really all about. I ask Members to stick with me on this one.

The message of Christmas is not simply the nativity scene that is so beautifully portrayed in schools and churches throughout this country, but rather the hope that lies in the fact that the baby was born to provide a better future for each one of us in this House and across the world. What a message of hope that is; it is a message that each one of us needs. No matter who we are in the UK, life is tough. The past three years have been really, really tough—for those who wonder how to heat their homes; for those who have received bad news from their doctor; for those whose children have not caught up from the covid school closures; for those who mourn the loss of a loved one; for those who mourn the breakdown of a family unit; and for those who are alone and isolated. This life is not easy, and yet there is hope. That is because of the Christmas story. It is because Christ came to this world and took on the form of man so that redemption's plan could be fulfilled. There is hope for each one of us to have that personal relationship with Christ that enables us to read the scriptures in the Bible and understand that the creator, God, stands by his promises.

I want to quote, if I may, from four Bible texts. To know that

"my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."

That is from the Philippians 4:19.

To trust that

"I am the Lord that heals you."

To believe that

"all things are possible."

That is Matthew 17:20.

We can be comforted by Psalm 147:3:

"He heals the brokenhearted, And binds up their wounds."

Isaiah 41:10 says:

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

The strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow come only when we understand who Christ is. One of my favourite Christmas passages is actually not the account of his birth, but the promise of who he is. We all know this:

"For to us a Child shall be born, to us a Son shall be given; And the government shall be upon His shoulder, And His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

In a world where our very foundation seems to be shifting, how awesome it is to know that this our God is only a prayer away. A group of people come to the House of Commons two or three times a week, and pray for Parliament. I have to say how important it is to have those prayers.

As we think of this passing year—something that many of us do—we think about what has happened and perhaps look forward to 2023 with renewed hope for the future. I think we should look forward with hope; we have to do that. We should always try to be positive. In this passing year, my mind goes to the loss of Her Majesty the Queen. Many of us felt that so deeply, and yet her passing also carried the message of hope, because of Christ. I quoted this when we had the tributes to Her Majesty. It is important, I think, to put it on the record again.

The wonderful message that the Queen gave in one of her cherished Christmas messages—this one was in 2014—was crystal clear:

"For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life."

That was Her Majesty talking.

"A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none."

It is my firm belief that this true message of Christmas is what can bring hope and healing to a nation that can seem so fractured. When I look at the headlines, I sometimes despair, but that is also when I most enjoy my constituency work, and getting to see glimpses of community spirit and goodness that are done daily and yet are rarely reported. Her Majesty's speech in 2016 reflected that, when she said:

"Billions of people now follow Christ's teaching and find in him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them because Christ's example helps me to see the value of doing small things with great love, whoever does them and whatever they themselves believe."

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is heart-warming and refreshing to hear the hon. Gentleman's plain and confident affirmation of his faith, and our faith too. By the way he speaks, he encourages all of us to reflect on the Judeo-Christian foundations on which our society and our civilisation are built, and I just wanted to thank him for that.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman is most kind. I am giving just a slight reminder of what Christmas is about. I think we all realise that, but sometimes it is good to remind ourselves of it. The example of Christ is one of humility, coming to the earth as a vulnerable baby, and of purpose, as we see the gold given that symbolises royalty, the frankincense to highlight his deity and myrrh to symbolise his purposeful death to redeem us all.

I am a strong advocate in this House for freedom of religion or belief, as the Leader of the House knows. She is always very kind; every week, when I suggest something that should be highlighted, she always takes those things back to the Ministers responsible. I appreciate that very much, as do others in this House. I am proud to be associated with that wonderful cause, and as long as God spares me I will speak for the downtrodden of my own faith and others. I speak for all faiths, because that is who I am, and so do others in this House with the same belief.

At the same time, however, like Her late Majesty, I am proud to be a follower of Christ. At this time of year I simply want the House to know the hope that can be found in Christ, not simply at Christmas, but for a lifetime. The babe of Bethlehem was Christ on the cross and our redeemer at the resurrection, and that gives me hope and offers hope for those who accept him and it.

From the bottom of my heart, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you in particular, since you have presided over this speech and the past few hours. I thank Mr Speaker and all the other Deputy Speakers, with all the things that are happening to them, the Clerks and every staff member in this place for the tremendous job they do and the graceful spirit in which everything has been carried out in the last year. I thank right hon. and hon. Members, who are friends all—I say that honestly to everyone.

I thank my long-suffering wife, who is definitely long-suffering, and my mum—

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The hon. Gentleman has often summed up how people feel, particularly at this time of year. I know he has had losses over the past few years, and he always manages to sum up the feeling of this House. Many Members in this debate have spoken about constituents or family they have lost, and we appreciate his bringing up these issues, as I appreciate all Members' doing so. There will be some people thinking about spending Christmas apart from family they are not able to see, or having suffered those losses. I thank him and we are all willing him strength as he continues his speech.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Leader of the House for that. I mentioned my long-suffering wife; we have been married 34 years, so she is very long-suffering, and that is probably a good thing, because we are still together. My mum is 91 years old and I suspect she is sitting watching the Parliament channel right now to see what her eldest son is up to and what he is saying, so again that is something.

I also thank my staff members. I told one of my Opposition colleagues last week that I live in a woman's world, because I have six girls in my office who look after me and make sure I am right. The hon. Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and for Cardiff West (Kevin

Brennan) referred to AI, but I must say I am not converted to it. I am not even sure what it is, to be perfectly honest. However, I know one thing: when it comes to writing speeches, Naomi writes the speeches for me and she does it extremely well, and I will maintain that human touch as long as I can.

Lastly, I thank my Strangford constituents, who have stuck by me as a councillor, as a Member of the Legislative Assembly and as a Member of Parliament in this House. This is my 30th year of service in local government and elsewhere. They have been tremendously kind to me and I appreciate them. I want to put on record what a privilege it is to serve them in this House and to do my best for them.

I wish everyone a happy Christmas, and may everyone have a prosperous, peaceful and blessed new year, as we take the example of Christ and act with humility and purpose in this place to effect the change that we all want and that is so needed in our nation—this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, always better together.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Your mother and wife will be as proud of you as we all are, Jim. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] As a person of faith, I thank you very much for putting the Christ back into Christmas in your speech. We come now to the wind-ups.

6.24 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to respond for the SNP to this type of debate, which is officially called “Matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment” but has, as I had to explain to the Chief Whip, the nickname “Whinge-fest”—that seemed to have passed him and me by. This has not been a whinge-fest at all; I think it has been a wide-ranging and excellent debate. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his contribution, and to my good friend, the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for her excellent contribution.

Of course, the debate was opened by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who made pertinent criticisms of the Home Office. I know that he has raised those issues before, and I join him in doing so. I was particularly taken with his view that, as a member of the 1922 committee executive, he wishes to keep a low profile for the next year, and no wonder! In 2022, we have had three Prime Ministers, four Chancellors, three Secretaries of State for the Department for Work and Pensions, three Leaders of the House, a mini-Budget bombshell that crashed the economy, and an ongoing cost of living crisis, which is, of course, a Tory-made failing of the nations and regions of this United Kingdom and these islands. Of course, the Prime Minister lost the first ballot, did he not? He then secured the job when it was accepted that what he was looking for was inevitable. Thinking about it, that is a bit like the Scottish constitutional question. Six polls in a row have shown that Scottish independence is now in the lead.

I will concentrate on what many others have touched on: the cost of living crisis and who has been asked to pay the price. On that, I was very much taken with the contribution from the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who quite rightly spoke about

the number of workers across public services and elsewhere who are taking industrial action. I have to say that I have no problem with being on a picket line. First, because those strikers are constituents, we go to picket lines to understand the problems and see how we can help to resolve a dispute. I do not see any particular problem in that. My message to people who criticise those of us who are on picket lines is, “Why don’t you talk to your constituents? Why don’t you try to find out where the problems are? Why don’t you try to fix these issues?”

The simple fact is that we have some of the most restrictive trade union laws in the world. Given that trade unions have to go through all these hurdles to take industrial action in the first place, there has to be some acknowledgment that people are on strike for very real reasons. They are not on strike because somebody told them to do it, or because some trade union official or steward has Jedi-like powers and can wave their hand to say, “This is the strike you are looking for.” It just does not work that way.

The worry for the Government is the number of civil service workers who have started striking and will strike in the next few weeks, including in the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, Border Force, the outsourced services of the Disclosure and Barring Service, and the justice sector. As a Government of small government, why do they not sort out this peculiar nonsense of there being more than 200 negotiating positions for 200 different pay negotiations in the civil service? That seems a completely nonsensical position.

People tell me that one of the reasons they are having to take industrial action at the moment is the price of food. Food inflation is at 16%—that is incredible when I think about it. It is incredible to think about the number of people who have to use food banks. One of the things that I have tried to do since being elected as a Member is to help people step up from food banks through affordable projects. I am thinking, for example, of the Threehills Larder; the Linthouse Larder, which was opened last week; the larders and pantries that will be opening in Cardonald, and Scotland’s first community supermarket, which will also be opening.

These are very real issues, and it is not just working people who are having to use these sorts of services. We are now seeing the return of sanctions as an aggressive policy instigated by the Department for Work and Pensions. In August this year, £36 million was recouped in DWP sanctions—that is in one month in England, Wales and Scotland. That is an incredible figure. The month before it was £35 million and the month before it was £34 million. There is certainly an increase in the use of sanctions, which we will have to debate in this House in the next year.

To back up the hon. Member for Harrow East, the Home Office needs to start corresponding with Members of Parliament when we raise issues. The number of outstanding pieces of correspondence I have with the Home Office is utterly incredible, and I hope the Leader of the House will take that back to the Home Office. The issue of Afghans has been raised, but there are many other constituent cases with the Home Office on which I am not getting any answers at all, and the number of delays is ridiculous.

I hope in the coming year we will see an end to some of the more aggressive anti-immigration rhetoric that we sometimes hear in this place and elsewhere. Glasgow

led the way, of course. In Scotland, we elected the first refugee councillor: the great Roza Salih, who was an office manager in the Glasgow South West constituency office, but has been retained as a part-time caseworker.

I end by saying that some people will suggest we are all going on holiday after today; it is not a holiday, but a recess. Some of us might get Christmas day off if we are lucky, but it is a recess. There is still a lot of work to be done, but we could not do it were it not for the staff of this House and, more importantly, the great constituency office staff we all have. I pay tribute to and thank Scott McFarlane, Roza Salih, Keith Gibb, Alistair Shaw, Tony McCue, Dominique Ucbas, Raz Salih, Linsey Wilson and Greg McCarra for their outstanding work in the past year. I wish them and all other Members’ constituency office staff a happy and peaceful Christmas, and a good new year when it comes.

6.32 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): May I start where the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) ended, by most importantly wishing all those who work with us in this place a very merry and restful Christmas and new year? It has been yet another historic year; one in which all those who work to support us in this place have yet again stepped up extremely well. There are too many teams and individuals to mention, but if I may, I sneak in a special thanks from me to Adouni in Portcullis House. I give a massive thanks to all those working in constituency offices across the land, whose work in these difficult times is much appreciated. If I may, I just say to the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) that that includes Sarah, who actually won parliamentary caseworker of the year in this year’s awards as well.

As regulars in this debate will know, it is an impossible task to wind up four hours of such a debate, with 30 Members having covered a wide range and breadth of issues so well this afternoon. Christmas is a time for tradition, and it is traditional in this place that the last Back-Bench speech in most debates goes to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). May I say to him, following his contribution today, that he is a much-loved Member of this House?

A recurrent theme from those on the Opposition Benches has been the chaos surrounding the Government this year and their dismal performance. On that note, I thought I would follow in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) at Prime Minister’s questions by offering a new interpretation of “The Twelve Days of Christmas”, as it is the end of term. This year, we have had: 12 years of Tory failure; 11 Ministers at the Ministry of Justice since June; at least 10 trips to Downing Street by removal teams, as well as 10 different Ministers at the Department for Transport since September; nine different Tory DEFRA Secretaries since 2010; 8 billion unusable PPE masks currently in storage, costing £2.2 million a week; seven candidates rumoured to have refused the Prime Minister’s offer to take up the role of ethics adviser, a post that still remains vacant; six different steel Ministers—an issue very important to Newport East—since the last general election; and, this year alone, five different Education Secretaries, four Chancellors, three PMs, two Tory leadership contests and slightly

[*Jessica Morden*]

less than one week between the Home Secretary losing her post after a serious security breach and being reappointed by the Prime Minister.

I also want to mention the number 30, because a constituent explained to me on Friday that her husband's pension pot was cut by 30% after the disastrous autumn mini-Budget, meaning that the couple will have to postpone a well-earned retirement for at least a few years. We must be clear that there has been a real human cost to this Government's failures and a distinct lack of contrition from those who crashed our economy—a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) in her excellent contribution.

The 12 days of Christmas are also insufficient to contain the number of overdue and forgotten Bills and White Papers promised by this Government; we would probably need at least two advent calendars. I will not list everything that is missing, as that would not be fair to anyone in the Chamber, but what on earth is happening with the Victims Bill, the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, the 10-year plan for dementia, the regulations on physician associates—I certainly have constituents who are waiting for those—the Gambling Act review White Paper, the promised White Paper on regional health inequalities and the football governance White Paper?

As the hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned, there are delays in responses from Departments, too. So much legislation and policy seems to have become stuck in the quagmire of chaos that has engulfed this Prime Minister's premiership, and his predecessor's, and her predecessor's. This Tory Government are the worst joke you will find in a Christmas cracker over the coming years.

On a cheerier note, there were excellent contributions from Members across the House. The theme of broken and bust Britain under this Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) called it, in his inimitable style, was raised by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham South, for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell)—there are a lot of Whips in here today. They rightly highlighted the Government's record this year on mortgage rises; the impact of inflation and the cost of living; the treatment of public sector workers, postal workers and more, and the need for the Government to get round the table, which many hon. Members mentioned; energy costs and the lack of a plan after March; and the terrible choices that local government is being forced to make due to Government cuts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen mentioned delays to the levelling-up process. I thank her for her work on online abuse, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East was right that if the Government cannot make a difference now, they should step aside—or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said, press the reset button. He was right: let us have a general election now.

A number of hon. Members mentioned rail services—a popular choice in these debates. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport was right in his criticism of Avanti. That gives me the opportunity to say again that the Government's record on rail investment is woeful. Wales has 11% of the rail network and 2% of rail enhancement funding. The Government must do better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South did a great service highlighting the need to talk about the take-up of mammograms. We are very sorry for her loss. It must have been difficult to speak about that today, but she has done a really good thing.

My Whips Office colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport, raised debt collection practices and the use of bailiffs in collecting council tax debt, which is important to highlight.

I thank the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for talking about AI, although, knowing my hon. Friend—we grew up together in Cwmbran, as a point of trivia—I cannot imagine that he writes many speeches down and, given his wit and style, I am sure we could tell the difference. They were both right to highlight the benefits and threats of AI, and the need for us to engage with the technology and find a balance.

I wish the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney all the best with their safety campaigns following tragic incidents—and a special mention to the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his remembrance of Ballykelly.

At this time of year, we think of those in need, including those across the world facing the threats of malnutrition, persecution and war. That includes the people of Ukraine, who have suffered unimaginable pain and loss this year as a result of Russia's barbaric invasion. I also send our thoughts to the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who are facing that devastating blockade. I highlight to the House the remarks made in the Chamber last week by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who called on the UK Government to do what they can through their diplomatic links with Azerbaijan to bring an end to the blockade and the continued repression of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

At Christmas, we also think of all those facing hardship in the communities that we represent in the UK, and we know that this will be an especially difficult Christmas for many of our constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen referred to her community organisations and I, too, am grateful to all the organisations and volunteers in Newport East who provide support to people who need help. I also thank the many emergency service workers in my constituency and across the country who work hard to keep us safe over the festive period. On that note—I hope that I have not taken too much time—I say *Nadolig Llawn pawb*: a merry Christmas to everyone, and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, given your wonderful Welsh connections.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): *Ac i chi*—and to you.

6.41 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in today's debate. When we think of Adjournment debates, as many hon. Members have said, we think of our dear late colleague Sir David Amess. As the debate developed today and we spoke about AI, I wondered what would happen if we asked the relevant apps to write an pre-recess Adjournment debate speech in the style of Sir David. Many hon. Members spoke about lots of different issues and carefully crafted their speeches by weaving those issues into a central theme or linking them, but Sir David proved that that was totally unnecessary. We certainly miss him, and we miss his contributions.

I know that Sir David would be incredibly proud of the success of the Music Man project—a choir and orchestra of people with learning disabilities who have already played the London Palladium and the Royal Albert Hall and who now have a hit single out that went to No. 10 in the iTunes chart last week. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) for encouraging anyone who has not already bought it to please buy it, because it would be fantastic if it was the Christmas No. 1. That is just one of the many fantastic cultural organisations in Southend West. If she is having difficulty encouraging her local council to be as ambitious as the Music Man project, she might wish to play the single in the council chamber at its next meeting.

The speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) was a parliamentary first, and in using AI he gave me ideas about how I will handle my next meeting with the Standards Committee. He reminds us that we must pick up the pace and move with the speed that business and science needs us to. I thank him for his thoughtful speech. Similarly, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan)—henceforth known as KI—spoke about AI and the music industry. I hope that we can look forward to the standard of speeches in this place being considerably raised in the new year.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for opening the debate and I congratulate his local council on the reinvigoration of the high street. He mentioned the security fund for places of worship, which of course covers Hindu temples and has been bolstered. I also thank him for mentioning the trade negotiations with India, with which we already have a £30 billion trading relationship. It will be the third largest economy in the world by 2050, so it is vital that we can access it.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on securing £620 million for his constituency since 2019, on his playgrounds project and on commemorating Pilot Officer William McMullen of 428 Squadron, who perished because he remained at the controls and saved enormous numbers of lives. In a similar vein, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke movingly about the Ballykelly bombing; we thank him for placing on the record the names of all those who were killed. We will never forget.

The hon. Members for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about the Online Safety Bill. As the hon. Member for Batley and Spen will know, that is returning on 16 January. Although it is not exactly where she wants it to be, I

thank her for recognising that it is an important step forward. I will pass on to the Health Secretary her request for a meeting with Solving Kids' Cancer. I also thank her for raising the importance of voluntary and social organisations, especially at this time of year. We would all echo her thanks to emergency services and key workers at this time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) spoke movingly about his constituent Hasnath; we are sorry to hear of his passing. It sounds like he lived an incredible life and has left a very important legacy for the constituency.

I turn to the speech made by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). Like many others today, she spoke about a tragic event, and I put on the record my sympathies and condolences to her constituents. She gave us a Dickens-themed speech and I would like to reply in a similar vein. If we were visited by the ghost of Christmas past, we would remember that in the time it took us to put up council tax by 36%, Labour put it up by 110%, and in the time it took us to reduce fuel duty by 7.5%, Labour put it up by 42%—we would be paying £1,000 extra in council tax a year and £40 extra to fill up our cars. The defence budget is in balance now; when we came to office, it was £71 billion in deficit.

The ghost of Christmas present would look at the work we have been doing to assist people through this difficult period in the wake of the pandemic and because of the Ukraine war. There is a package of £26 billion in the next financial year to support people, the maintenance of the triple lock and the introduction of the largest ever increase in the national living wage for 2 million workers. I hope that the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) is able to appreciate the modernisation of the welfare system that universal credit has brought. Without it, I think legacy systems would have collapsed during the pandemic.

The wishes of the hon. Member for Nottingham South—that the ghost of Christmas future would bring a Labour Government—were echoed by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I would not share those wishes, having seen how Labour operates in Wales, where waiting lists are five times longer than in England and teacher numbers are down by 10%.

The hon. Member for Rhondda raised a number of important consumer issues, including energy companies; that theme was also echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). I am sorry to hear about the issues my right hon. Friend has been having with regard to King Edmund School and about the lift issues in his local block. The hon. Member for Rhondda also mentioned home insulation. The new £1 billion scheme, which is in addition to the £6.6 billion help to heat scheme, is helping improve the efficiency rating of homes. When we took office, 13% of homes had ratings of C or above; the figure is now 46% and we are on target to raise that to include every home.

The hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) also spoke about consumer-related issues, particularly in respect of his local authority. He is right to hold his local authority to account on debt collection, which is incredibly important. I encourage him to take up the services offered by the Department for International Trade with regard to opening up opportunities, particularly when it comes to the trade deal with India.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I am glad to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is pleased at the energy efficiency funds recently released for schools and that she is making progress on her football pitches. She raised a couple of questions, and she should talk to the district or borough monitoring officers about holding parish councils to account. I shall ensure that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard her concerns, as well as the development issues she raises. I have heard her suggestions on SMEs and, like many Members, she raised the quality of rail services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) also mentioned rail services, and particularly the franchise governing the TransPennine Express. He gave us his Christmas list, which includes a Cleethorpes to Kings Cross via Grimsby line, his campaign for Humber port, and to ensure that he gets a devolution deal for his county and unitary authorities. The hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) rightly thanked family and friends—we sometimes do not do that in this place—and raised the issue of the menopause campaign, which is something that Members across the House have worked on together and enabled good things to happen. More is needed, but good progress has been made this year. I put on record my sympathies for her friend Michelle, and thank her for raising the importance of screening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) raised the sad loss of his brother Jeremy, and my thoughts are with him and his sister-in-law, Sophie. He rightly raised the importance of innovation in healthcare, and often it is healthcare professionals who come up with the most innovative ideas. I agree completely with what he said about the importance of alcohol screening and getting bespoke services for people. I also thank him for raising the importance of CPTPP, a £9 trillion market that—critically—will also increase the number of high-wage jobs in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) also gave us his Christmas wish list, which includes a banking hub and road funding—I shall ensure that the Department for Transport has heard about the latter. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) spoke about a tragedy in his constituency, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) who mentioned the tragedy that has led to her button batteries campaign. I say to both colleagues that my door is always open to assist them with advice on legislation that they want to bring forward.

The hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) understandably focused on healthcare. Dental care is not just about funding—at the start of this year we had a massive increase in dental funding—but it is about workforce issues, and flexibility in commissioning. I know that the Minister is gripping that issue. Over the past 12 months there have been substantial changes and there will be more to follow. Patient care is at the heart of this. We have spoken a lot, understandably, about the strike situation, but our focus needs to be on patient care.

We had a huge catch-up job to do following the pandemic. It is the biggest and most ambitious catch-up job in the NHS's entire history, and just in the past

12 months immense progress has been made to reduce the backlog, through elective recovery—the first target in the elective recovery plan has been met—through taskforces, and through eliminating waits of over two years for treatment, as well as reducing the number of people waiting 18 months for treatment by almost 60% this year. As many colleagues have done, we must pay a huge tribute to our healthcare professionals and those who support them in that. I could mention many other things we have done, including new diagnostic centres. A lot of the waiting list is because of diagnostic care, and it is vital that we crack through that.

My hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter) also gave us their wish list. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley wished for a second university technical college and he is a diligent campaigner for his airport. He wants a new school and a health centre. The hon. Member for Warrington South is rightly celebrating his success in securing a new MRI scanner and the £42 million that he has for his local transport services.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), joined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), has been campaigning to save and preserve the jail, which I know well—not because I lived there; I lived in Reading for a time. I wish him good luck with that. I will certainly write to the MOD with regard to Gurkha pensions.

Many hon. Members have mentioned international issues, including Afghanistan, Iran—we will debate Iran on 12 January—the humanitarian situation in Armenia and, of course, Ukraine. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) for highlighting the campaign for us to switch off our Christmas lights for an hour.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), made traditionally consistent speeches in both the views and topics they raised, as praised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) should never have to apologise for mentioning Christ in this place—especially at Christmas. We are in a place where the architecture is designed to turn our faces to God. I thank him for his Christmas message.

We have had quotes from the Bible, the Sugababes, Grace Jones, Dickens, AI and the Pimlico tube board. I want to close by giving some other quotes. As we await the King's first Christmas speech, it is most appropriate to give hon. Members, in my last minute, a precis of Her late Majesty's messages to us at Christmas, because they chimed with me as the debate was going on. In 1957, she said:

"It has always been easy to hate and destroy. To build and to cherish is much more difficult."

In 1991, she said:

"None of us has a monopoly on wisdom...we must always be ready to listen and respect other points of view."

In 2018 she said that "faith, family and friends" are our constant. In 1974, she said:

"We may hold different points of view but it is in times of stress and difficulty that we...have much more in common than there is dividing us."

That particularly chimes with us today. Finally, in 2008, she said:

“When life seems hard, the courageous do not lie down and accept defeat; instead, they are all the more determined to struggle for a better future.”

That has run through many of the themes of the debate. My thanks also go to all the House staff, the Doorkeepers, cleaners, Clerks, catering, police and security staff, broadcasters, *Hansard* and, of course, our constituency staff and civil servants, who all come together to make this place function. Of course, our thanks go to Mr Speaker and his team. I wish you all a very merry and, hopefully, peaceful Christmas.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Mr Blackman, would you like the final word?

Bob Blackman *indicated dissent.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: In that case, I will take it. On behalf of—*[Interruption.]* I will put a two-minute limit on me. On behalf of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker team, I want to wish everybody who works here a merry Christmas and a happy 2023. Virtually everybody has mentioned their staff, so I had better mention Will, Amy and Michael in my office in London and those who support me in the Ribble Valley because they are on the frontline, dealing with the problems that we deal with, too. I thank them.

From the cleaners to the Clerks, the cooks and the security services and the police who look after us and protect us, I thank everyone who works on the parliamentary estate for what they do and wish them a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

There have been a lot of quotes. My late brother's favourite Christmas movie was “It's a Wonderful Life”, and it is one of my favourites, too. Just like Clarence, who got his wings several decades ago, I would like to give another angel their wings today and wish everybody a merry Christmas and a happy 2023.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Bus Routes: Local Consultation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

6.59 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I rise today for the final Adjournment debate of the year. The topic I am discussing is buses, specifically cancellations and timetables. I am very conscious that I am keeping everyone late, just like some buses for my constituents. More specifically, recent changes to timetables in Watford have caused serious issues for my constituents in their daily lives, whether they are trying to get to work, hospital appointments, GP appointments, or visiting friends and family. My request for a debate follows engagement and correspondence with my local community, including two bus community meetings with constituents. They were held with Arriva, the prominent bus service provider I will be talking about today, but there are other providers and the issues are not limited to Arriva.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this extremely important and timely debate. Does he agree that bus services are perhaps even more vital in rural areas? I think about my own constituency and Lesmahagow, which has an extremely poor service. One of the new estates in East Kilbride does not have a regular service at all. Surely it is incumbent on us all to work together, across party and across Governments, to ensure that people have vital services, particularly the most vulnerable?

Dean Russell: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. That is absolutely true in rural areas, but also in urban areas. Bus services provide a really important role for our communities. That role is not political. We do not catch a blue bus or a red bus or a yellow bus—we catch a bus. The reality is that we must all work together. We must find ways to ensure we serve our community in the best way we can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. I did text him before he came in to ask if it would be okay to make an intervention. When I saw the title of the debate I immediately thought of my constituency of Strangford, which is similar to his constituency of Watford. Speaking as an active representative of the rural constituency of Strangford, I have attempted to fight many battles for those who are the victims of reduced services, often without prior warning. They are often cancelled without any consultation. Does he not agree that the duty of care to isolated communities should demand at least some consultation and that if bus companies are not prepared to do that voluntarily, then this place must be the place to take action legally?

Dean Russell: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. To be fair, he did not need to text me. I was hoping he would join the Adjournment debate—it would be very odd if he did not. I appreciate his comments and agree wholeheartedly. Surely the point of a timetable is to ensure that people know what time buses are coming. If that timetable changes, the people who use the bus should be consulted and asked about how it will impact

[Dean Russell]

them, not just seen as numbers on a spreadsheet. Having spoken to local residents, I was surprised to learn that there is not a Government or local government edict that bus users must be consulted before a change to the timetable, which would seem an obvious thing to do, so I wholeheartedly agree with his comments.

I have been actively engaging, talking and corresponding with organisations, whether Arriva or local government, so none of them will be surprised about the concerns I raise today in the Chamber. This is a constructive opportunity to say that I will not give up on raising these issues, but will work with them to ensure they are resolved in the best way possible for my constituents.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured this debate today. Warrington has recently seen about £42 million investment in its bus services. When I post on social media and talk about these issues, the overwhelming response is that it is all very well investing in the future, but if buses are cancelled and do not run that causes significant problems. Does he agree that there is a fundamental need to ensure local consultation is in place? People make decisions on where they buy their houses based on bus routes and timings for getting into work. If that all falls down, people's lives are significantly impacted by decisions taken in a bus company office somewhere. Is consultation not fundamental when things change?

Dean Russell: I truly thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he allowed me to intervene in his debate about buses in Warrington. I recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you were in the Chair at the time and commented on the clear similarities between Warrington and Watford. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that timetables cannot just be looked at on a spreadsheet or on Google Maps, as they can have a detrimental impact on individuals. Bus routes can also have a really positive impact on opportunities to travel, whether for work or for leisure.

I want to raise three key points. First, there are the timetable challenges, which are the common thread throughout this debate. Secondly, there is poor service—a real challenge—with timetable problems and buses not turning up making things infinitely worse for local residents. Thirdly, there are poor communications.

It is worth noting that buses are used for twice as many journeys as trains, and stop at thousands of places across the country. Often, the transport debate is dominated by trains. My very first Prime Minister's question after being elected was about the trains in Watford. Thankfully, those issues were resolved at the time but, unfortunately, the pandemic hit and the service changed again. The reality is that buses are used more. They have much more of an impact and are very important in rural and urban areas for what might be seen as shorter journeys but are harder when just walking, especially for those who might be infirm.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In my area of south-east London, the buses are a godsend. More than that, the system allows us to check on the internet when buses are coming, with very accurate times at some bus stops. The more that happens, the more effective buses

will be. I thank the local buses in my area because they hardly ever go on strike—I cannot remember a strike of the buses—but the trains do. We rely on the buses when the trains do not work.

Dean Russell: I thank my hon. Friend for his point on communications, which is one that I will raise near the end of my speech. Technology allows us to see where Ubers, taxis or online orders are, but that is not common across the board for buses, which makes it even harder if the timetables change and the service is not running on time.

I have gained an understanding of the challenges with timetables by chatting to local residents. When I asked them how long they had known about the changes, they said no one had got on the bus and told them or left a leaflet. Bus users—the people who get on the bus and rely on the buses every day—are not being directly engaged when timetables are changed, but they should be asked whether the changes will have an impact on them.

At the heart of this issue are people, not just numbers. People have the stresses of their daily lives: finishing a shift at work and needing to travel home; getting up in the morning to go to a hospital appointment; there are knock-on effects on all those things. As I will mention a bit later, I have had constituents almost in tears, telling me, “I can't ask my boss again if I can come in late.” They say, “I'm having to cancel GP or hospital appointments or let them know that I'm going to be late, which might mean that it moves back a week or longer.”

Bus timetables are not just about numbers; we need not just a quantitative review, but a qualitative review that asks people about the potential impact, the challenges and the importance of the route. Even if only a few people use the bus, there might be another way to support them. There are new services such as ArrivaClick that people can order for short journeys, but how can they plan for that if they do not know what sort of journeys they need to take?

For registrations, variations and cancellations of community bus services in England, bus operators are required to give statutory notice of 70 days—28 days' notice to the local authority and 42 days' notice to the traffic commissioner—but there is no legal requirement for bus operators to inform passengers of the changes until the cancellation registration has been processed. That is absurd. How on earth can a service be cancelled without asking people? How can they be told only after the decision is made, even though other organisations in the process will have been told weeks or potentially months earlier? It seems very strange.

I have made a request for the county council to review the cancelled service according to value for money criteria when it looks at bus services; I have asked it to look at how that can be supported through its own funding. However, it is not just about the funding of services, but about communications. I am aware that Hertfordshire has a website called Intalink that people can visit to see changes, but that is available after the services have been changed.

As I understand it, Arriva reorganised its network in Hemel and Watford in April, which has resulted in a number of routes being combined. Again, it did not tell

bus users or my constituents that that was happening. The Abbots Langley to Watford services were changed: they no longer service St Albans Road and now go via Newhouse Crescent on Woodside. That has meant a loss of access to St Albans Road, with longer journey times. From April, Arriva abandoned the northern section of the 8 service from Watford to Mount Vernon Hospital, meaning a loss of service for the Harebreaks and Maude Crescent areas of Watford. It was replaced and funded at a lower frequency by Hertfordshire County Council's contract route 9 from Watford town centre to Leavesden Park. Leavesden Park also lost its daytime services into Watford on the 10 and 20 route, which were replaced by the 9 service. Those were major changes for people in my constituency, and they have been a challenge.

I turn to poor service. A big issue in Watford has been the punctuality and reliability of bus services, which have been disappointing for the past year. The Minister may raise the fact that driver shortages have been a major issue; I will have some questions about that subject later. I believe that in this instance the services are about 20 drivers short. Such a large shortage has led to regular cancellations, with resultant overcrowding on the buses that do run.

In my engagement with Hertfordshire County Council, it has been made aware that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has contacted Arriva about its services and is working with it to improve punctuality and reliability. Following community engagement, I have written to the council and to Arriva about the matter. I understand that Arriva has given several contracted services outside Watford back to Hertfordshire County Council to free up some bus drivers for the west, which will benefit my constituents. I welcome that measure, which I understand should happen in January, helping the reliability of the services: I believe that it will free up 12 drivers.

I appreciate that Arriva recognises the issues that have been caused by unreliable service and has been engaging with Hertfordshire County Council, but we need to ensure that we keep up the pressure on bus companies. We have had many debates in this Chamber about train services that have caused major issues for local residents. Issues with buses may not be as prominent in people's minds, because they are very local, but when we are looking at the bigger picture across the country we have to ensure that they are addressed.

Poor communication, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised, is an issue that needs to be fixed much sooner.

Sadly, as I said earlier, I have seen bus users at community meetings almost in tears because they simply cannot fathom how a service could be so bad—a service on which they rely so much just to get to work, or to get home at night. They may know that their kids, on the way home from school, are stuck at some bus stop in the dark, in poor weather, and may not be sure whether they will get home on time or whether they should try to leave work early and find a way of going to fetch them.

This is an awful experience, and I have to say that it is not alien to me. I grew up not in Watford but in the west midlands, and many years ago I worked at Birmingham airport. I worked all sorts of shifts: 6 am to 2 pm, 2 pm to 10 pm, and, often, the night shift. This probably would not be allowed now, but back in the 1990s I

worked 24-hour shifts. I have stood at bus stops at 9 pm, or 10 pm, or when a shift has finished early, in the dark, waiting for a bus that does not come, not knowing when the next one will arrive, and not knowing what decision to make. Have all the buses been cancelled, or will the bus arrive but drive on past the stop because it is too full to let any more people on?

Anyone who has been a bus user understands that this is not a simple issue. It affects how people feel, it affects their trust in the system and the network, and it leads them to ask themselves, “Should I continue using the bus?” Every time there is an issue, bus use declines, which is why buses are not popular and why routes are not changed. This, as I have said, is not an isolated data-related point; it is about the people who are actually involved.

In the modern era, by means of technology such as apps, websites and indicator screens at bus stops, it is possible to have much better information, via GPS, about where vehicles are. We see it all the time with taxis nowadays: we can physically see where a taxi is after it has been ordered. If we are at a bus stop and we know that there will not be a bus for an hour, at least we can plan around that, but standing for minute after minute wondering whether the bus is going to come and what is going to happen is a massive issue. The bus companies have an excellent opportunity to look at how they use their apps and other technology, and how they can ensure that timetables are better indicated.

Dr Cameron: This reminds me of a point that was raised with me just the other week by representatives of East Kilbride Visually Impaired Bowling Club, which relies on communications on buses as well as indications of when buses will arrive. They described the progress being made on “talking buses”, enabling visually impaired people to know which stop to get off at and where they are in their journey. Does the hon. Gentleman, who is making a fantastic point about communications, agree that progress on these vital issues is extremely important to inclusion in public transport?

Dean Russell: Absolutely, and it is important for accessibility as well. People with disabilities have spoken to me about their own concerns. All the buses are accessible, but if a bus does not turn up or stops in a place that is not itself accessible, the problems are exacerbated.

I am conscious of the time and I want to hear the Minister's response, so I will try to speed up and make sure that we arrive at our destination—the end of the Adjournment debate—before Christmas. I know that the Government are investing a lot in transport, and I am not trying to be political or to do nothing but criticise.

Hertfordshire County Council has been given £29.7 million for the bus service improvement plan as part of the £3 billion bus back better strategy, which is great news. The allocation of funding has been broken up for the next three years across five towns including Watford, and I am very grateful for that. Half of it is capital to invest in the buses themselves, and the other half is revenue to invest in ticketing. I understand that funding can also be used for new services or to enhance current successful services, but I think we should look at the less successful services, and ask why they are less

[Dean Russell]

successful and whether we need to support them further. I realise that funding cannot be used to subsidise services that are non-commercially viable or withdrawn, but, again, if we know the reasons why they are not working, perhaps we can find ways to support them.

We have had some other recent successes. The W19 bus route, which is mostly run commercially by Red Rose Buses, was set to be withdrawn on 26 December, but that was opposed by Carpenders Park's Conservative county councillors Reena Ranger and Chris Alley and district councillors Rue Grewal, Shanti Mara and David Coltman, working with me. After listening to the views of residents, they submitted some great evidence to Hertfordshire County Council, asking it to save the W19 bus. I am pleased to say that they agreed to increase the funding fivefold to save the W19. The revised timetable is to be registered imminently and the details will appear as soon as possible on the Intalink website. For any residents who might be listening, the service will be renumbered as the 346 and 346A to denote the clockwise and anti-clockwise routings. The key point is that when we have engagement, we can have successes, and it is important that people are listened to.

I will start to round up, as I am conscious of giving the Minister time to respond. When organisations change timetables, it has a major impact on bus users. What might be low user numbers on a spreadsheet could mean the loss of important routes for working people, hospital visits being missed, people being late, careers being impacted and people not being able to pick up their kids on time. There are so many impacts.

I have several asks for the Minister. Will he consider implementing a legal requirement for all companies, commercial or public, that provide a public transport service to ensure local engagement before services are changed or cancelled? Will he highlight the importance of communication and reliability of service? Overall, residents would be happy in some instances with a reduced but reliable service rather than regular cancellations and unannounced diversions. Will he consider supporting the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to increase the availability of testing appointments for essential services such as the bus service and ambulance drivers, to address the driver shortages, as we saw with the HGV driver shortages? I know about that because my father was an HGV driver, and it is a noble profession.

I am conscious that this is a debate for all areas, even though there can be local issues. I am grateful to the Minister staying late for this final Adjournment debate before Christmas. As I am the last Back-Bench MP to speak before Christmas, may I also take a moment to say thank you to all the staff, to all Members across the House, to the Speaker's team, to my own team—Victoria, Abigail, Michelle and Jayne—to all the activists who work all year round to help to put us in this place, to my amazing constituents for putting me into this place and finally to my family and friends in what has been a challenging year for many. Hopefully we will have a much more successful new year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would not put money on you being the last Back Bencher to speak, because Jim and Lisa are still here.

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is a pleasure to take the last Adjournment debate before Christmas. In addition to thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), I would like to thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for their contributions today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford on securing another opportunity to speak on the behalf of his constituents in Watford. I know he works relentlessly to champion the issues that matter to them, and local bus services are part of the suite of issues that he regularly brings to the House and to Ministers.

I was fortunate enough to be able to visit Hertfordshire a couple of weeks ago, when I met Councillor Phil Bibby, the executive member for highways and transport, and experienced at first hand some of the great work that is going on within the county to improve bus services. I was delighted to see Arriva's new depot in Stevenage, which will house its new zero-emission bus fleet just up the road, and to learn more about the HertsLynx demand-responsive transport service, providing vital connectivity for rural villages in the north of the county, although those are admittedly not so close to my hon. Friend's constituency. These are things that could make a huge and positive difference in Hertfordshire and elsewhere.

The Government are clear that bus services are vital to ensuring that people can access work and education, as well as crucial services such as healthcare, as my hon. Friend said. We also recognise the fundamental importance of ensuring that people can stay connected to their local communities. I would like to address one of the issues around late cancellations and poor communications from bus companies. I am supportive of the general public being better informed about changes to local bus services, and my Department is working with local authorities and operators to seek improvements in that area. We recognise that the sector is facing challenges at the moment, but we expect operators to provide the services that they have advertised. It is unacceptable when they do not do so, especially when they do not give proper notice of those changes. That is one reason why I am so keen to welcome this debate. Ensuring that passengers who rely solely on local bus services are easily able to provide their views to bus operators and local transport authorities when changes to services are due to be made is a key aspect of the reforms to bus services in England that we set out in the national bus strategy, one of a plethora of measures we are bringing forward.

Crucially, we want local authorities to have greater oversight of bus service provision so that they can work more closely with bus operators to ensure the provision of bus networks that meet the needs of local people. That includes having an element of flexibility in respect of bus service plans. When things change, we need the operators to be able to change with them.

My Department is ready and willing to work with local transport authorities and operators as they work together as part of their bus service improvement plans. I know that Hertfordshire County Council is looking

forward to establishing an enhanced partnership with local operators. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Watford mentioned the £29.7 million that has already been allocated to the council.

The issue of consultation is particularly important. I really do hope that through the enhanced partnership we will see the operators working more closely with the service providers. That will really help provision. I urge my hon. Friend to keep pressing the council and his local operators on that.

In its guidance on enhanced partnerships and BSIPs, the Department has highlighted the importance of councils and operators working with bus-user groups and local groups when they consider how to improve services and make sure that passengers are well informed about changes to local bus routes. There will always be changes and, hopefully, improvements—that is what the plans are there to deliver.

We have provided a capacity support grant to all local transport authorities to develop and deliver their enhanced partnerships. In addition, we are providing capacity funding to those areas that did not receive funding through the BSIP process, to ensure that they have better enhanced partnerships. Whether or not they have received the full large grant or have that working relationship, we are there for them in my hon. Friend's constituency and in the constituencies of other Members. The Department will also provide guidance and training for teams through the planned new bus centre of excellence.

The national bus strategy sets out a requirement for local transport authorities to create a new passenger charter—I think my hon. Friend will be interested in this—as part of developing their BSIPs. The charters are intended to give bus users the rights to receive certain standards of service, including in respect of punctuality, the proportion of services operated, information and, crucially, redress, an issue that many Members from all parties have raised with me since I took over this brief. I hope that other councils, as well as my hon. Friend's, hear the call for better communication.

One of the issues we face is the recovery from covid. In August, we confirmed that we would continue providing funding under the bus services recovery grant to help to protect bus services until the end of March 2023. We have also taken additional steps to prevent significant reductions

to bus services. As a condition of receiving funding, bus operators are required to maintain a minimum service floor of 80% compared with pre-covid service levels. We are also working to get services and, crucially, ridership back up to provide the longer-term stability that people need.

We know that driver shortages have been a major issue and we are working with transport industry bodies such as the Confederation of Passenger Transport. We recently held a summit on the issue that I was delighted to attend. Things like that are important. We must work to really drive home things such as the “Thank You Driver” campaign. We must encourage people to take up really important opportunities. I am really keen to continue to support such work. My hon. Friend mentioned the DVSA; I have already prioritised tests for bus drivers to help to speed up the process and provide us with valuable assistance in tackling some of the serious issues around driver shortages. I continue to ensure that that is prioritised, even as we face difficulties and strike action.

I know that in Hertfordshire more broadly the enhanced partnership process is slightly different. The council has responsibility for the registration of bus services rather than the Office of the Traffic Commissioner. However, the statutory 42-day notice period is particularly important. I hope that those involved can look into more enhanced ways to communicate with local people.

In closing, I congratulate my hon. Friend again. The BSIP is a major step forward, as is the £2 single fare that we are set to introduce throughout the country before the House returns in January. I look forward to that. There are undoubtedly challenges facing the sector, but we are committed to working with it to address them. I look forward to engaging with colleagues from all parties going forward.

Finally, ahead of the Christmas break I thank my team in the Department, my team in Parliament, my team in North West Durham, the House staff, Members from all sides and you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish all Members a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 December 2022

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Family Businesses: Contribution to Local Communities

9.30 am

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Good morning. It is quite warm in here, so if Members wish to remove their jackets, they are free to do so. I remind Members that if they wish to speak they need to stand in order to catch my eye. I call John Stevenson to move the motion.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of family businesses to local communities in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate the importance of family businesses and their contribution to our national economy, our local economy and our communities up and down the country. I appreciate that this might not be the best week for this debate, given that we are approaching Christmas, but this is a really important time of the year for many businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, and an important time of the year for family businesses to succeed.

I want to put on the record my thanks to the Institute for Family Business for its support and the research that it has carried out into the success of family businesses and also the challenges that many of them face. The institute is the secretariat to the all-party parliamentary group for family business, which I chair, and it has been very supportive for all the time that I have been chairing that APPG.

I want to start the debate with a simple question: what exactly is a family business? There are many different definitions and people will have their own interpretations. The Institute for Family Business set out its own definition in its most recent report, but for me it is quite simply the involvement of family in a business. This can be a sole practitioner—an individual who has set up their own business and is effectively a one-man band. It could be a husband and wife team. The wider family and children could be involved. It could involve other members of the family such as cousins, and of course it could involve different generations. But it is also about the level of control.

When we look at a corporation, we look at the shareholding of that company—how many shares are owned by the family and how many are external. We look at who effectively controls that business. A family business might not always be run by members of the family. It might have independent management or a mixture of family members and outsiders. Each can be equally successful. They all have their own challenges, but that does not detract from the fact that they can be just as successful as a purely family-run business, or as a mixture or with outside control.

The real challenges come when there is third or fourth generation involvement in a family business. They all present different concerns. There are intergenerational

matters, and shareholding or ownership of a business can be widely spread among many members of the same family.

What about the sector that the business is involved in? It is estimated that there are around 5 million businesses in the United Kingdom, all of varying sizes. Family businesses make up 85% of that 5 million, so effectively our economy is dominated by such businesses both at the national and local level. I will come specifically to the local level in due course.

The size of the businesses varies enormously. Most are microbusinesses—small one-man bands or small family units. Equally, there are some enormous businesses that have grown from small start-ups. Warburtons is a good example. Historically we could look at Mr Barclay or Sainsbury's as examples of small businesses many years ago that became huge conglomerates and very large and successful businesses.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this extremely important debate, because family businesses are the bedrock of our local economies. In my own constituency, Glencairn Crystal started as a local family business. It won the Queen's Award and went on to develop the iconic Glencairn Crystal whisky glass, which is now internationally renowned. Does he agree that, with the correct package of support, financial innovation, contribution and development from Government, family businesses can become iconic and international successes?

John Stevenson: The hon. Lady is right. It is always lovely to hear Members promoting family businesses and demonstrating their success. She also highlights an issue that I will come to about how we can ensure they get the support that they need to be successful.

I have talked about family businesses being small or large, but we must also remember that there are some huge international businesses, including Mars and McCain. An interesting general observation is that many large, international family businesses are invariably owned from North America. That indicates that family businesses are not just part of our economy but part of international economies across the world.

Family businesses are involved in all sectors. The obvious one is transport, with large transport businesses up and down the country displaying their logos. They are also in retail and manufacturing. One particular area that features a lot of family businesses is the food and drink sector. That is a very popular sector in which to set up and grow a family business. That has a knock-on impact on the hospitality industry, which has a large number of small family businesses.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Last week I went to the opening of a state-of-the-art factory by Equi's Ice Cream in my constituency. That business has been around for a century, with its ice cream sold locally as well as in a number of supermarkets such as Morrisons, Co-op and Asda, and even as far away as Texas. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such family-owned businesses not only contribute to our communities but are great ambassadors for them?

John Stevenson: Absolutely. It is always lovely to hear individual businesses being highlighted by Members of Parliament. That demonstrates that family businesses are not just in one constituency but spread across the whole country. We need to be behind them in our local communities as well as nationally.

From our perspective as Members of Parliament, the importance and contribution of family businesses should not be underestimated. They matter to our national economy. Family businesses employ nearly 14 million people; over 50% of all private sector employment is in family businesses, so the majority of people are employed by a family business. It is estimated that they account for 44% of our GDP. Just think of their contribution to the Treasury, which is vital for our public services.

Family businesses are clearly the backbone of local economies up and down the country as well as nationally. Think of a small family business and the contribution it makes to the Exchequer. If it employs five people, that means five families supported by that business. The contribution goes beyond that, with the payment of national insurance for those five employees, and of corporation tax. It will probably collect VAT for the Exchequer and pay business rates at the local level. It makes a vast contribution, not just to the local but to the national economy. That is replicated up and down the country.

Carlisle is a good example as the home of national and international businesses which employ a lot of people and make headlines locally because of the number they employ and their brand names, such as Nestlé and Pirelli. But drilling down, what matters in many respects is the local family businesses. Story Construction is a first-generation business now moving into the second generation, employing in the region of 500 people. It was set up in the last 30 to 40 years and makes a significant contribution to local construction and to the rail construction industry. Pioneer Foods, a food hospitality business, is into its third generation of making a contribution to Carlisle's economy. Thomas Graham is in its fifth generation of local leadership.

We have those international brands and companies, but I have just highlighted three individual businesses at the heart of our local economy that employ a lot of people making a vital contribution. They are now into their second, third and fifth generations. The individuals who lead those businesses are also vital to our local communities. They provide leadership. They are often respected, and local people will look up to them and may aspire to be similar to them, and to set up their own businesses in due course.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions the contribution of small businesses to the local community. What I often see is something that is almost invisible. Does my hon. Friend agree that business owners often support community events, such as the recent Christmas tree festival in Aldridge?

John Stevenson: My right hon. Friend is getting ahead of me. She is absolutely right, and I will come to the contribution that such businesses make to local communities. There are, of course, similar factors for family businesses at the national and local level: the high employment levels in family businesses, the investment that we want to see, and the tax contribution that they

make both locally and nationally, which I have already highlighted. I have set out what I think is a powerful demonstration of the importance of family businesses; however, some people would ask what the difference is between a family business and other corporations. Are they not in many respects just the same? I accept and recognise that they face many similar issues.

At present, energy costs are obviously affecting many businesses, both those that are family run and those that have other structures. It is a serious issue right now. On taxation rates, what corporation tax is set at matters to both family businesses and others, although dividend tax and capital gains tax can have a particular influence on family businesses, because of the way they structure themselves and the way the families take profits out of the business. Skills matter to any corporation, as does getting the right staff and ensuring that the right training is in place. That also matters to a family business, which needs to recruit in exactly the same way as any other. Regulation affects different sectors in different ways. I have already highlighted the importance of the food and drink sector, on which regulation clearly has a huge impact.

There are, however, a number of issues that in my view are unique to family businesses. The obvious one is succession. Passing the business on to the next generation, or indeed between families, can be a challenge. Who should inherit? Who takes over? Can the older generation let go and allow the next generation to take the reins of the business? If there are cousins, or two or three generations, involved, how is that dealt with? Those are some of the principal challenges for family businesses, and the Institute for Family Business spends quite a bit of time helping to support family businesses with them.

There are additional challenges with financing and growing family businesses. How do we ensure that a family business can grow in exactly the same way as other corporations? In my view, family businesses have a real strength, in that they can draw financial support from members of the family, which can help with that growth. It can also be a weakness, because they need to attract external finance to grow. Family businesses must be willing to accept outside help and allow external influences to support the business in its attempt to grow. Families have to accept the risk that they may be taken over, or that their influence in the business will be diluted by external investment from other parties.

Family businesses also have some key strengths, such as resilience. They often deal with recessions better than most other businesses. They are flexible and more adaptable in terms of hours of work. A person is more likely to want to work longer hours in their family business to ensure that it will cope with any bumps on the road. Family businesses also take the long view. It is not just about the next set of financial figures; it is about the next generation. That can lead to long-term investment, rather than a short-term view about making profits here and now. The stats suggest that often staff are loyal, and remain with such businesses for far longer than they would otherwise. Also, family businesses are invariably very loyal to their staff, who in many cases have worked for them for many years. That creates a real element of stability.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that family businesses showed that loyalty to staff during the pandemic? For example, a number of tourism

businesses in Torbay decided that the family would take no wages to ensure that staff could be paid, which we would not see in many other corporations.

John Stevenson: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We saw that in the pandemic, and we often see it in recessions as well. Family businesses are more resilient and stay loyal to their staff, and that gets them through in a way that many other businesses would not necessarily tolerate. Another interesting aspect of the research from the Institute for Family Business is that there is more female involvement in family businesses than in general in business; we should research more why that is the case.

Family businesses are often the start of something. They start as very small businesses, then continue within the family, or at least owned or controlled by the family, but with external management; or they dilute and float on the market. I do not think that selling out is a negative, as the business—what the family have created—is successful and can continue to thrive but in a different environment and under a different structure. Life does move on.

I am a solicitor, and work in a practice that was set up in 1805. Until 1916, three generations of the family were involved. Since then, there has been no family involvement, but the business is still going strong today and it had that family involvement for those three generations.

Where I think family businesses provide an extra layer of benefit is in terms not of the economy but of the community. Family businesses are often embedded in their community. The children go to local schools. The business employs local people. The families want the local area to succeed because they live in it and socialise in it—they are part of it. They often get involved, as school governors and in charities and other community organisations. If they are brave, they may even get involved in local politics; they may get involved in other things, such as the local enterprise partnership or the chamber of commerce. They are invariably respected leaders in the community—people want to emulate them. That support to their local areas is a real strength of family businesses and the leaders within them; that element does not show up in national statistics, but it is vital to the success of our communities up and down the country.

I am very conscious of the lack of Government recognition for the importance of family businesses. I think everybody here would recognise that they are the backbone of our economy and a source of strength for our communities. Is there more that the Government could do, on the growing of these businesses, and in understanding their nature, the challenges they face and how we can ensure the investment and finance for them so that they will grow, expand and become the big corporations of tomorrow?

There is also the skills agenda. Training opportunities can be difficult, as many of these businesses are small or micro businesses that find it challenging to train staff and to get the skills they need. What can the Government do to support them?

There is also a need for general advice, for not just financial but succession planning. Quite often, family businesses feel they are operating in isolation. That is

why organisations such as the Institute for Family Business are so important, because they help with that sort of advice, but many businesses do not get it. I wonder whether the Government could do more to help.

There is also the issue of profile. Leaders in the community, as I have already said, often come from family businesses. Some, though not many, have a national presence. Sadly, trust in business is at a low ebb right now, but family businesses often have a far better reputation. It may be that the Government should be seeking to exploit that in a positive way. We need businesses to succeed. We should celebrate their successes. I think people often feel more comfortable celebrating the success of a family business than the success of what they perceive as a faceless corporation. Maybe the Government need to associate business more with the family side of things, demonstrating the importance and the vital contribution family businesses make to our society, as well as to our economy.

In society, families really do matter. In business, family businesses are absolutely vital. Let us celebrate their success, but let us help them more than we do to ensure that they continue to be the backbone of our country and central to our communities.

9.49 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

As a Scot myself, let me say that it is a pleasure to hear a canny Scot—the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson)—taking us through this important subject; I always think a gentleman from Aberdeen would have a particularly good grasp on the vital need to make ends meet and run a tight ship.

I ran my family business for eight years, and my brother runs it now. It was a cheesemaking business that grew out of small dairy farm on the shores of the north Firth. For eight years, I had to juggle the profit and loss account and know how to do a VAT return—I had to do all that stuff, and it was invaluable experience. I will not go any further, because I cannot plug a family business too hard, but my brother continues in the same vein and I am very proud of him.

Let me expand on the points made by the hon. Member for Carlisle. The local contribution of family businesses is crucial. They tend to use the local bank: businesses in my constituency deposit large amounts of money in the local branch and help keep it open. They mostly use a local solicitor, and that equates to jobs in the local area. They use a local estate agent if the need arises, and local shops. They rely on their reputation, as the hon. Gentleman hinted at; local businesses do not want to make a mess of things locally, because it is on their own doorstep. Those are the key things they bring to their areas.

No local business will survive if it cannot balance the books and get it to work. That expertise, as the hon. Gentleman said, makes a huge local contribution, in terms of the chamber of commerce, local government and so on. As a passing aside—this is as much about my party as any other party in this place—we could do with more local businessmen in the House of Commons. If we go back 100 years, there was a time when many Members of the House of Commons had made their fortune and knew what they were talking about when it

[*Jamie Stone*]

came to the big issues. That would be no bad thing. But that criticism is not directed at any one party; it includes mine.

John Stevenson: The hon. Gentleman makes a really interesting point about getting people with business experience here. Does he agree that, although traditionally important local businesspeople became members of the council, we do not see that today, and that is a big loss to us all?

Jamie Stone: That is a very apt point. I was elected to Ross and Cromarty District Council in 1986, which was a long time ago, and I have seen the sort of people who become members change dramatically in my lifetime. When it comes to local government finance, to have hard heads on the finance committee does not half help things.

Nurturing local businesses sits within a wider framework, which the hon. Gentleman touched on. He mentioned advice and access to finance as and when needed. Many of us feel that the day of the local bank manager has gone—the man or woman who could talk to the businessman and say, “Okay, that is a good idea. I’m willing to offer the following finance.”

In my part of the UK—my very far north constituency—a local business will do well and thrive if it has the support to which I alluded. We have an organisation called Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which was conceived by the Wilson Government in the 1960s, and did much good work over the years. I am sad to say that it is not what it was all those years ago. It is weaker, through no fault of its own; it is a small organisation and does not have the ability to offer advice and target finance as and when necessary. A lot of other infrastructure is required in our constituencies—in my own case, an airport, rail links and road links. A hardy perennial is the NHS, and I often raise the issue of maternity services. If any one of those vital key support networks is not up to standard, that sadly makes life harder for local businesses, particularly when it comes to recruitment or expansion.

I will close with an example. In Caithness we have an engineering firm called JGC Engineering, which is owned by the Campbell family. It is a third-generation firm that grew out of a blacksmith business, and it makes clever stainless steel stuff for the nuclear industry, Dounreay and others. As right hon. and hon. Members know, I have often talked about the potential of a space launch coming to my constituency—and I think it is just around the corner. A company such as JGC Engineering can use that but, if it does not have the infrastructure links, the back-up and so on, it will be harder for the company when the big day comes and it can go for those contracts. It is a basic point, and I make no apology for emphasising it again and again.

It remains only for me to wish all right hon. and hon. Members the compliments of the season, a very happy Christmas and a prosperous—in the business sense—new year.

9.55 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to follow my good friend, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland

and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and hear his experiences of business. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) on securing the debate, which is a timely chance to highlight the role that family businesses play in Torbay’s economy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle reflected, family businesses make a major contribution to the UK economy overall. Oxford Economics estimated that there were 4.8 million family businesses in the UK in 2020, making up 85.9% of all private sector businesses. Those businesses employed 13.9 million workers, or 51.5% of all private sector employment, and contributed £575 billion to the UK economy. These are big numbers overall, despite most family businesses actually being small firms—something like three quarters of all family businesses in 2020 were sole traders with no employees. A further 21% have between one and nine employees, although I understand that the estimates were based partly on data collected the previous year.

It is interesting to note that those numbers represented a decrease. The number of family businesses decreased in 2020 from 5.2 million in 2019, when they employed 14.2 million people and contributed £637 billion to the economy. If the Treasury was here, it would be interested in the fact that such businesses paid £205 billion in tax receipts. Some of that may reflect the impact of the pandemic, not least given that the typical family business many of us think of is a shop or a guest house, both of which were affected by that period.

Many family businesses are not just sources of economic activity, but mainstays of the local community. A 2021 survey of family businesses conducted by PwC found that the vast majority of UK family businesses also continue to engage in some form of social responsibility activity. Some 74% of family businesses surveyed contributed to their local community, and 47% participated in traditional philanthropy or grant-based giving as a company.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Gentleman is making excellent points. Given that family businesses are such a focal component of our communities, does he agree they have a key role in reducing the disability employment gap, and are often the businesses that promote disability inclusion in our communities?

Kevin Foster: I completely agree. The type of support a family can provide to someone with disabilities—even in their own family, for example, by extending the care and support offered to their loved one and supporting them in the workplace—can be vital. Many families have rightly shifted their expectations of what a family member with disabilities will be able to do. To be honest, past attitudes might have been, “Could this person work?” or “Perhaps they shouldn’t, perhaps they won’t ever work.” Thankfully, there has now been a big change in many businesses. The hon. Member is right that family businesses can help to lead that charge.

The economic and social impact of family businesses can be seen clearly in Torbay, and it is important to reflect on this positive aspect. I will start with Rew Hotels. The Rew Hotel Group was founded in 1970 by Mrs Sylvia Rew, and is still family managed. Positioned right on Torquay’s seafront are the two hotels it runs: Livermead House and Livermead Cliff. The family are not just quiet owners but part of the frontline delivery

of services to customers. It is a good example of a family business where the family has been able to develop two distinct offers while making the business a family in itself, with several senior staff members having started waiting tables or behind the bar, and then been given opportunities to develop their career within the hotel and the business.

Susan's Flower Shop has been trading at the heart of Paignton, Devon for over 50 years; the business itself has become a family, given that it has been trading for such a lengthy period. Brian and Susan, who are the leading figures, are involved in many aspects of local community work and supporting the bay as a whole.

There is also Conroy Couch, which is one of the oldest established businesses in Torquay and one of the oldest jewellers in the UK. It was first opened in 1863 by Mr Conroy Couch, and such was the quality of its initial fitting that the shop front has altered very little since, with the height of the entry doors serving as a reminder of a time when men commonly wore top hats and would be wearing them when they attempted to come through the door. Towards the end of the last century, the shop was taken over by the Rowe family, who are well-known and respected jewellers in Torquay. Today, David and his daughter Michelle still hold the values that the original founder of the business held dear: it is an active part of supporting local Rotary appeals, and works to ensure that Torquay high street has an annual Christmas lights display.

A larger example of a family business is Beverley Holidays, which operates three holiday parks in Torbay. It has been a family-run business for over 60 years, and during that period its owners have seen some dramatic changes in Torbay's tourism sector. A caravan holiday might conjure up images from the past of putting coins in meters and sleeping on a sofa, yet many caravans in those parks offer standards equivalent to executive hotel suites, meaning that as a family business Beverley Holidays can compete with the large national chains on both price and quality.

Family business is not just about retail and tourism—we have heard some examples today. In that context, one company that particularly jumps to my mind is Casting Support Systems, or CSS as it is commonly known. It is a family business that was established by Ted Head, and produces a range of products for the distribution, aerospace and automotive industries. Earlier this year, it won the Queen's award for enterprise for its export achievements and relocated to a brand new, purpose-built factory in Paignton. To give the scale of the impact of that family business, between 2018 and 2021 its exports rose from £267,000 to £1.7 million.

Another sector that can be overlooked is one that is often seen in our local communities, and one to which family businesses are integral: travelling fairs. The name Anderton and Rowlands is synonymous with funfairs and bank holidays in Devon and Cornwall. That business started back in 1854, when Albert Haslam, a variety artist, set up on his own, giving magic exhibitions. His tutor was one Professor Anderson, and upon his death, Albert assumed the name of Anderton. In 1903, the show first travelled under the name of Anderton and Rowlands, the name that has been in existence since. Since the 1950s, the firm has continued to expand, and the name Anderton and Rowlands is now in its fifth generation. It is currently owned by the DeVey family.

George DeVey—who was born in a showman's wagon travelling to a maternity hospital back in 1937—Simon DeVey and Simon DeVey Jr are key parts of it, and it is now the biggest fairground operator travelling in Devon and Cornwall.

Finally, I should mention Bygones in Torquay. Back in the 1980s, Ken Cuming's obsession with railwayana was starting to outgrow his house; I understand that the final straw for his wife Patricia came in 1986, when he purchased a 27-tonne steam railway engine from Falmouth docks. As fortune would have it, the couple spotted that an old cinema had become available in St Marychurch, and bravely took the plunge of turning their hobby into a family business. Over the next year or so, with the help of an excellent mason and carpenter, and many friends, the family recreated a Victorian street scene, and on 23 May 1987 Bygones was opened to the public by the then mayor of Torbay. Sadly, Ken Cuming passed away in June 2017, but his wife Patricia, son Richard and daughter Amanda are still working daily in Bygones, which is a popular attraction that also supports veterans.

I could be here all day listing great family businesses in Torbay, and it has been good to recognise some of them in my speech. I am sure that many Members will be thinking of businesses in their own constituencies; we have already heard about some. However, family businesses are not immune to changes in our economy, especially on the high street. Sadly, it has been a long time since Rossiters department store in Paignton was bustling in the week before Christmas. Rossiters was part of Paignton for 150 years. Father Christmas often arrived there in dramatic style—one year on a turntable ladder, and once in the late 1980s even by parachute jump on to Paignton Green—but changing shopping trends and competition from online and out-of-town retail sadly led to it closing its doors in 2009. Even yesterday, we read that the future of a 106-year-old family business, Shaws the Drapers, which has stores across Devon, including one in Torquay, is under threat. Managers of the family-run company have admitted that it must change to survive, and, sadly, signs outside its shops state that all remaining stock is now on sale.

There are many positives to a strong family business sector, but what might inhibit its future growth? Family businesses are often based in and synonymous with one area. That means that the decisions of local councils can either boost or severely dent their prospects. Take, for example, the recent decisions of the coalition of Lib Dem and independent councillors that runs Torbay Council. Earlier this year, the coalition decided to close Torbay Road in Paignton to traffic as part of a pedestrianisation pilot. Torbay Road is a busy shopping street, and many businesses along that stretch of road and nearby are family owned. They have reported that trade has fallen off dramatically over the last three months. At a meeting last week, Conservative councillors requested that the coalition review the impact, but a review was decided not to be urgent enough. Similarly, the coalition's decision to sign off a request from a developer to close Brixham Road for three months is unlikely to help many family businesses across our bay.

We must return to a familiar subject to me: business rates. Take Susan's Flower Shop, which, as I mentioned earlier, is a family business that has been trading for just over 50 years. There is not a strong incentive to expand or maintain premises where business rates are concerned.

[Kevin Foster]

Its shops are below the £12,000 rateable value, so no rates would be payable if it traded out of only one shop. As soon as a small family business has a second shop, rates become payable on both. That is a disincentive for family-run small businesses such as those in the floristry trade. Many shop owners would like to open a second shop for a family member to run when they are old enough. There is a reason why we see businesses called “Jacksons” or “Fredericksons” in our areas; that is a nod not just to a past surname, but to a time when a father might have set his son up in business after having taught him—Jack’s son—the trade. I am sure that many more empty shops would be filled by family businesses if that tax disincentive were removed.

I hope that the Minister will set out his thoughts on the following. First, how will the Government ensure that local councils pay attention to the needs of local family businesses when making decisions? Secondly, what consideration will be given to the position of family-run businesses in the long-awaited business rates review? Thirdly, not all members of a family have the skillsets required to grow a business, so they may need to recruit from outside the family for the first time; how are the Government supporting them to do so? Finally, what is the vision for family-owned businesses, from the Minister’s perspective? How does he see them being encouraged and nurtured by this Government? Knowing his own background and passion in the area, I expect that he will be particularly keen on that.

Family businesses are not just part of the economic output of our country, but an integral part of the social fabric. Without them, we would all be poorer, not only in the sense of the jobs and economic activity they create, but in the sense of the social responsibility that many show simply by wanting their businesses to be positive parts of the communities they are proud to call home.

10.8 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in the debate because I obviously have a particular interest. I commend the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) for leading the debate so knowledgeably and for setting the scene so well. What a pleasure it is to follow my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). The tag team is back together—I follow him or he follows me—and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Unashamedly, I will tell hon. Members about some of the small businesses in my area—not all of them, because that would take me an hour and a half and, Mr Robertson, you would say, “Sit down.” I will pick out some of the smaller ones that I have known over the years. There are many.

As we approach Christmas, it is important to recognise the important role that local businesses play in our economy, including the family-run businesses that have served our local towns and villages—in some cases, for decades. I do not intend to wax lyrical about how great a place Strangford is—everybody already knows that—but I am more than happy to encourage everyone to make a journey to Strangford at some time in the future, as many in this House have done, including Ministers and other hon. Members, who have enjoyed it. At this time

of year, we must take time to reflect and acknowledge that businesses are the backbone of our constituencies—they certainly are for mine. Some 99% of businesses in my constituency are small and medium-sized enterprises, and the pattern is similar across the whole of Northern Ireland.

There are many benefits that come along with family-run businesses and ultimately contribute to their long line of success, and there are so many success stories that I want to mention. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who will follow this speech, and I have been working together, and she and I were just saying how we will unashamedly tell everyone in this House about our small businesses. I look forward to what she is going to tell us in a few minutes as she namechecks every one of those businesses, and I will probably do the same.

Strong commitment and common values are some of the successes of small businesses. When an enterprise is built on familial lines, people are more likely to put in extra hours and go the extra mile to ensure success, and the stability of the family structure has been pivotal for long-term family professions. One that always sticks in my mind is N.G. Bell & Son. I am probably the only person present who knows about N.G. Bell & Son, but I will share its success story. It is a family-run business specialising in timber, building, electrical and plumbing supplies, and it has become one of Northern Ireland’s leading building merchants. Norman and Elsie Bell came to Ballywalter from west Ulster in 1950 and bought an existing grocery and hardware business. On the untimely death of Norman Bell in 1973, his son Graham took over the running of the business at the early age of 19. He and the family have built the business, making it a complete success, and their business park in Greyabbey Road is at the centre of that.

The story of N.G. Bell & Son in Ballywalter resonates with me, because my own parents ran a shop in the same village from ’59 to ’79, and many of the relationships I built through the shop as a child remain strong to this day. I am minded that Margaret Thatcher, who was the daughter of a shopkeeper, said we were a nation of shopkeepers. I am pleased to be the son of a shopkeeper, and I am also proud of my roots. I understand at first hand how central the local shop can be to community life. My mum and dad owned a shop in Clady, south of Strabane. They also owned one in Ardstraw, and then they moved to Ballywalter in 1959. They owned the first V G Store, which was part of a chain of shops that are now run by the SPAR group and owned by the Henderson Group in Northern Ireland. It is an example of how a local business has grown—again, it is good news.

I am sure that I have mentioned before the importance of family businesses to our high streets. Newtownards is one of the main towns in the Strangford constituency and has many great businesses, most notably Wardens of Newtownards, which has been a presence in the town’s high street since 1910. In 2002, Wardens celebrated its 125th anniversary. As part of the celebrations, the store ran a competition to find the oldest receipt from the shop. A local farmer came forward with a receipt dating back to 1890s—not the 1690s, Mr Robertson, but the 1890s—which is just astonishing. There are still family members who work there today, and hopefully they will do so for many generations to come. For anyone who is curious—many are—Wardens has also had videos go viral on TikTok. I am told that the store

has an account—I do not know how to use one—that has gained over 180,000 followers and millions of views. Again, it gives an indication of what a small, family-run store in Newtownards can do when it comes to promoting itself.

H & J Carnduff butchers in the square in Newtownards employs 55 people and is a local business that has done extremely well. It farms its butchery business out to other shops across the whole district.

Margaret Ferrier: Cafés are important businesses for local communities. To name a few in my constituency, we have the Tea Bay, Stacks, Niu Cafe, Vin 18 and Café Gelato, and they provide a place for people to meet, chat and come in out of the cold. Does the hon. Member agree that small, family-run cafés are often the highlight of local towns in providing that atmosphere?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. Again, the hon. Lady says many things in her interventions that I absolutely subscribe to, and I thank her for that. The Regency is such an example of where people come together. I have a fry there every Saturday morning—it is my wee treat for the week as a diabetic as I try to be careful about my eating. Corries meats in Newtownards town is a family business that has grown to own a chain of half a dozen shops, and Knotts Bakery is another family business in the town.

The people of Strangford love a bargain—who doesn't? My mother is a 91-year-old who loves going shopping and always wants to tell me about the bargains she has got. One place where bargains are guaranteed is Cotters, which is a family-run business that has been in the town for 20 years. My two youngest staff members have what they call their monthly "Cotters haul" where they get new cleaning supplies, bits and bobs for the office and, most importantly for two young girls, crisps because they are always a special price in Cotters—that is probably the attraction.

Loyalty and stability are two qualities of successful family businesses. That success allows for "beanstalk" family businesses where often four generations of a family have been involved. The hon. Member for Torbay referred to such a company in his constituency. The director of SME business at Ulster University has indicated that 74% of Northern Ireland companies are classed as family-run, which is amazing in being unique and serving the Northern Ireland economy in a different way.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) referred to bank managers. I have a story about a bank manager, although I am not sure I have the time to tell it as I am conscious that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) is following me. When I visited my bank manager for a loan when I was much younger, the discussion we had was not the same that people would have with their bank manager today. I told him I would pay the loan back as quickly as I could, and I paid it back in one year. That probably meant a lot of scrimping and saving, but I did it. Those were things that would not be done with a bank manager today because of the rules.

When I think of Warren Patton of Patton's Bakery in Newtownards, which is a family-run business that I have known for nearly all its days, his sense of community spirit is so evident in his charitable donations and

discounts for fundraising community events, and that deserves recognition. He employs some 76 people in his business. It is often much easier to get a donation for the local fair from the local bakery than the large supermarkets, and that is another reason why local businesses are a vital cog in the community machine. Warren Patton is fully immersed in everything in Newtownards. He is community-minded. He is the chair of the Ards football club. We are all keen to see them get their new ground, which is at an advanced stage. The land has been identified, the agreement has been done and now we are pushing for some grants to make it all happen. He is also in the Loyal Orders—the Orange Order and the Royal Black Preceptory, which I am in in Newtownards. Those organisations are part of the culture and history of our town. I say that because Warren Patton is one of those local success stories. That business started from nothing and he has it today.

The support provided by the public to keep these enterprises open is incredibly important, and we do our best to help and support all the businesses that make our economy what it is today. The former Minister—the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst)—came to visit the high street in Newtownards. She enjoyed her time there, but more importantly she was able to engage with local businesses in a constructive and helpful way. Newtownards has won the best town centre in the whole of Northern Ireland in the past and was featured heavily last time as well. I say this without fear of being quoted wrong: Newtownards truly is the best trading town for businesses, opportunity, variety and family-owned businesses. Looking at the special nature of family-run businesses and their contributions to my constituency, I can only say to people: if you have any time before Christmas, come shopping in Newtownards in Strangford.

10.20 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) for bringing forward this debate. As he recognised in his opening speech, this debate is very timely. It is not often that we have debates on family business, and to do so at this time of year is a reminder of just how critical this time is for so many of those businesses.

I start by referring to my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As many in this room will know, I have a background in family business. Prior to coming into this place—too many years ago to remember—my husband and I started a business with the enterprise allowance, when that was around, at £40 a week. Two things were critical in starting that business: one was the allowance, which, although it did not seem like a lot of money, meant a lot because we felt the Government were prepared to back us and the idea my husband had; the other, touching on the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), was the importance of our relationship with the local bank. The relationship we had with our bank manager was absolutely 100%. If she had not been there, there were some days we would probably have struggled. She helped us to get through and see the light at the end of the tunnel. Although we often discuss banking and the role of banks in the community in this place, it is a reminder that the role of banks to businesses and the presence of a high-street branch and a named person that can be contacted really does make a difference.

[Wendy Morton]

Being back on the Back Benches, as the hon. Member for Strangford alluded to, I see an opportunity to make several points, but also to highlight some of the amazing family businesses across my constituency. Don't worry, Mr Robertson; I am keeping an eye on the clock, and I will not take all of the time and will leave plenty of time for Front-Bench speakers. I want to mention some of those businesses because I want to further demonstrate the variety of small, family businesses not only in my constituency, but right across the country, and the way that they form the backbone of so many local economies. They make a massive contribution to the Exchequer, but also to our local communities.

Six years ago, I visited a business called Jennifer Ashe Funeral Directors that had just opened on Brownhills High Street. When I went back there this summer for a visit and tour, it was incredible to see how that business had grown over those six years. It is no longer just in Brownhills, but has many other locations. We talk about generations, and the next generation of the family is now involved as well.

We also talk a lot about high streets in this place. We talk about Small Business Saturday at the beginning of December, which is an opportunity for many of us to go out on to the high street and highlight local businesses and how important they are. I am reminded of another occasion, which is called Family Business Week; I see the Minister is nodding. Perhaps that is something we need to make more of and highlight in the same way to embrace what we have in our communities.

Our high streets have faced a difficult and challenging time, which started before covid. High-street businesses were hit throughout the pandemic as well, but many of them are now finding their feet again. In Aldridge, we have a fantastic florist—another family business—called Herbarium, which is run by Mike and Sue Soles. I walked past and popped my head round the door just last week. Christmas is a busy time for them, and it really matters that we go out and support our local businesses. I was equally pleased to see a florist called the Bloom Room open just a couple of weeks ago on Pelsall High Street. It is also run by a local lady who wants to invest in the local community and sees that the time is right to do that. I wish her all the best in her endeavours.

The hospitality industry is another key part of this. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), seaside resorts have lots of hospitality. However, hospitality is a sector with many examples of family-run businesses. The Fairlawns hotel, run by the Pette family—now on their second generation—was actually rated one of the top 25 family-run hotels in the country. I am also told that it was one of only six outside of London to make the Tripadvisor list. Again, that is another example of a fantastic family-run business.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay started talking about fairgrounds, I thought it would be rather remiss of me not to almost go into competition with him by highlighting the breadth of family businesses across my constituency. Pat Collins Funfairs is a fascinating story because Pat Collins was a Liberal Member of Parliament and mayor of Walsall, but he is actually recognised and remembered more for Pat Collins Funfairs, which was founded in 1899.

The family business was established remarkably quickly and, within a decade, Pat Collins was a leading showman in the midlands, owning several steam-driven fairground rides. He also went on to be one of a group of showmen who met in Manchester to create the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain. To this day, the business is still owned within the same family; it is owned by Anthony Harris and his family. Anthony is a Conservative local councillor on Walsall Council, and his father married one of Pat Collins' granddaughters.

We can see how family businesses go down the generations. One reason for that is probably the way in which such businesses can focus on flexibility and resilience. They often do not need much support from Government or local councils, but they do need the space and the flexibility to grow and invest, and the right economic landscape for that.

I know from my own experience that someone with a small family business often does go that extra mile—not just them but their staff as well. People go that extra mile and put in that extra hour, because it is not just about thriving but sometimes just surviving to get through the difficult times and challenges and finding the opportunities and keeping on looking and moving forward.

My final namecheck for this morning must go to a local family-run business in High Heath. Harjit and Jodie Singh, known locally as H & Jodie, run what many would call a corner store, but it is much more than that. It is the Nisa Local, but they have set up a community hub there and have community days. Many of us will remember that this last summer was incredibly hot. It does not feel like it now—although perhaps it is in Westminster Hall—but if someone needed anything, the best place to go was often H & Jodie's. If you could not find an electric fan anywhere in the locality, Mr Robertson, you could go to H & Jodie's, where they would be stacked on the shelves. I give that example because it shows the flexibility and dynamism of small family businesses and how they really do go that extra mile by just getting on with the job.

I am a firm believer that a strong family-business base can really strengthen our communities. That builds up the local economy and then feeds into the national economy. Let us invest more in them. We talk a lot in this place about research and development, and about innovation. I completely get that. I also get the importance of Silicon Valley. We have manufacturers across Aldridge-Brownhills, including apprentice-supporting companies such as In-Comm, which invest in apprenticeships and developing skills for the future. However, we also need the small businesses. Not everybody will be a scientist or a researcher. We need manufacturers and family businesses. Let us recognise their importance, because as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle set out, there are 14 million people employed across the sector, and it produces 44% of GDP. We do not talk about it enough; we do not give it 44% of the airtime when we are talking about businesses.

I would like to see us talk up our family businesses, because they really can play a key part in growing the economy. If we grow the economy, we can invest in our public services; if we grow our family businesses, they can invest in their business and their skills base, and that is what creates the jobs of the future.

10.30 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) on securing this debate, which is a really excellent one to have on the last day before we break for Christmas. It is clear from the contributions that everybody has a story to tell about family businesses—either their own family business, or those in their constituency. Very strong feelings have come through about the contribution that family businesses make to our local economies and our national economy.

So many points were raised, which I will draw on, but I also support and thank, as other hon. Members have, the Institute for Family Business, which has made such an important contribution to raising awareness of family businesses over the last couple of years, particularly through Family Business Week.

The hon. Member for Carlisle was also right to highlight hospitality businesses, so many of which are family-run and family-owned, and so many of which play that very important role of being a home from home—a local place that people can pop out to in order to be with friends and neighbours, and indeed their own family. Family businesses give that “home from home” feeling that really touches our communities in special ways.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned showmen, and I was going to mention showmen from my constituency. Feltham has a long tradition of showmen living in the area, and I have continued to support their place in the community and their role in a unique industry that gives a tremendous amount of pleasure, and even joy, to families across the country. I will also mention a couple of businesses in my constituency. Flowers by Eva’s is one. It has been in Hanworth since 1955, and has given the joy of great flowers and bouquets for weddings, as well as providing flowers for funerals and other special occasions. It gives that extra personal touch, because when we go to such businesses, we get to know the people in them.

I will also highlight businesses run by members from immigrant communities, for whom it has sometimes been hard to find a conventional way into employment. They have started businesses that have allowed them to make a big contribution to the community, and that have grown. One example is the Sanger family, which owns Heston Hyde hotel, Bentley hotel, Washington hotel and now the Courthouse hotel. The business is still run by the family—indeed, multiple generations of the family. That family started with nothing in this country, but they now contribute so much to our prosperity.

I again pay tribute to the Institute for Family Business for the way that it conducted, ran and brought to Westminster, Family Business Week, which was supported by NatWest Group. I was delighted to speak at the reception in November, having made a virtual contribution to Family Business Week last year. Family Business Week celebrates local family businesses, encouraging them through social media. The family business in my area that I popped into at the weekend was Priyas Tandoori in Cranford, a very homely place to get a takeaway or to eat in with family members.

I, too, grew up in a family business, above our small shop in Osterley, so I know about the contribution that family businesses make, and about the attitude that my

parents had. They saw what they did as almost a public service. We sold school uniforms, jewellery imported from India, clothes—all sorts of useful items that people never knew they needed until they popped into Ramson of Osterley. I find it fascinating that people who went to the shop in the late ’70s and ’80s still remember it. They remember what my parents did and even remember me aged five, six and seven learning how to serve customers and the fun that we had with that.

Research from the Institute for Family Business has revealed that family businesses are key drivers of regional growth and prosperity, spreading economic prosperity to all corners of the UK. We have heard in the debate what defines a family business, and about some of the more technical points around voting rights, control and ownership, and levels of involvement in administration. We have also heard how family business issues reflect the issues that other businesses face, such as the rising cost of doing business, energy costs and so on.

I want to emphasise the point that was made about the part that women play in family businesses. It is a subtle point, but although we have heard about one-man bands, there are quite a few one-woman bands. It is important to make sure that we use language that reflects the work of women such as Anita Roddick, who set up the Body Shop, and so many other women entrepreneurs who run a family business.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and others mentioned the 13.9 million people in such businesses, and the proportion of private sector employment that comes from family business employers. We know from the research and the debate that there are many ways that family businesses contribute to their local community. They often have a long-term relationship with a place. It can be where the owners’ kids go to school, as was the case in my family. There can be loyalty, local staff, and the creation of local services. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was absolutely right to talk about local services—the lawyers, banks and insurance companies. All of those make a difference to a community’s fabric. When we think about support for family businesses, those are important things to emphasise and encourage; we should think about how we actively nurture the family business leaders of tomorrow.

We have heard many examples of household names, but I might add Cadbury. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is a member of the Cadbury family. We can see the social contribution made by family businesses that recognise the needs of their workforce and the community around them.

Although family businesses had a higher decrease in turnover than other businesses during the pandemic, they were less likely to see a decrease in staff. That speaks to the story and the contribution of family businesses, the loyalty of staff to the organisation and its culture, and the loyalty of the owners to their staff. However, family businesses are absolutely up against it. They have raised concerns about business rates, supply chain costs, access to schools, and the need for a stable tax environment.

A good Government should create an environment for business success. It is a concern to me that this Government and previous Conservative Governments have failed to do that. We have a supply chain crisis, petrol crisis, heavy goods vehicles crisis, CO₂ crisis, energy crisis, cost of living crisis, cost of doing business crisis, and an industrial disputes crisis.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member mentions the covid pandemic. It is interesting: during the pandemic, some businesses were really inventive and innovative. For instance, many food outlets offered a delivery service. I am sure my experience was exactly the same as that of many other hon. Members. It might be profitable for civil servants one day to take a look at some of those examples, and have a case study portfolio. We would be foolish to think that British inventiveness is dead.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member makes a powerful point. Indeed, what he says comes through in the data about how family businesses got through the pandemic. However, a recent survey has suggested that 80% of members of the Institute for Family Business were less confident going into this winter than they were last year, during the pandemic. Rising inflation is a threat, and there are concerns about the cost of living and consumer confidence. Clearly much, more support for businesses is needed. I am concerned that last week the Government slipped out in a written ministerial statement that they will be closing the “Help to Grow: Digital” programme, which was to give businesses support in adopting new technologies. They had all the warnings about the design and the roll-out, but they failed to listen to those important voices. That has cost businesses a year, and the possibility of moving forward in digital.

What needs to happen if we are to support family businesses at this time? First, we need to deliver macroeconomic stability, and respect our institutions, such as the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Bank of England. A key reason for the failure and devastating impact of the mini-Budget was the sidelining of our economic institutions. We need to make sure that we work with businesses to tackle the crises facing our country. Small Business Saturday has been mentioned; we all celebrated its 10th year this year, and I celebrate it every year.

We need to make importing and exporting easier; Brexit is not working as the Government promised. We need to address the inheritance challenges for family businesses, which have been mentioned—for instance, there should be clarity around rules, and support when there might be difficulties with succession planning. We should also have a proper industrial strategy, backed by ambitious investment, that makes decisions for the long term. It should be secured by an industrial strategy council that has a statutory footing.

Family businesses are not just our local small businesses; they are also key in manufacturing and other big sectors across the country. We need a proper plan for skills, which is an area where our growth and skills levy will bring the flexibility that is needed. We also need a plan for reform of business rates, because so many businesses are concerned about the unfairness of business rates. They should be reformed and changed, to level the playing field between bricks and mortar and online businesses.

This has been a fantastic debate. Labour has a long-term plan for growth, which would bring stability for businesses across the country and give our incredible family businesses the support that they need to grow and prosper. I look forward to the Minister’s response to this important debate, and to his saying how we can work together, across this House, to support our family businesses and the employment and prosperity that they bring.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) for bringing forward this important and beautifully timed debate. If Christmas is about anything, it is family. Moreover, business is important in this place; it is absolutely right to have a debate on family businesses on our last day of term. I thank hon. Members for sharing their fine examples of businesses in their constituencies; we are all very proud of those businesses. It is hugely important that we support them.

There were many fantastic points made in this debate. Most of all, hon. Members stressed the importance of family businesses to their communities. Their contribution is fundamental. It is not just about employing local people; they can contribute to local charities, sponsor local football teams, or indeed sit on councils. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle made that important point. Easingwold is still part of my constituency, though it will not be after the boundary changes, which is quite annoying. There used to be the old Easingwold Rural District Council. Around the walls of the council chamber were black-and-white photographs of all the former council leaders. They were all local business people that I knew really well. They were important, and so proud of the town and their contribution to it. Now that our model for local authorities has changed, maybe that connection between businesses and their communities is not as strong as it was; that was a point made by my hon. Friend.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said that local businesses’ contribution to their communities cannot be overestimated. I am very proud to be somebody who might be described as having a family business. We started our business back in 1992; I was in partnership not with a family member, but with a very good friend, John Waterhouse, but over the years, we gathered family into our business. It did not start off as a family business, but it became one. The point about the proportion of women contributing to family businesses being greater than the proportion of women in business in general is interesting; my sister took over as chief executive of our business in 2015, just before we listed it, and I have to say that she did a far better job of running it than I did. It very much became a family business.

I am very proud to have this role. I am from business and for business, and am proud to have an opportunity to play an important part shaping how we look after all businesses in future, not least family businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made a point about support for staff. In the pandemic crisis, lots of business people cut their wages to make sure that they did not have to cut staff from their businesses. We did the same. I always used to say to people when they were starting a business, “You work twice the hours for half the money, if you run a business. That is what you have to be prepared for. You do that for a lot of years.” The commitment cannot be overestimated.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made another point that really resonated with me, about local reputation, which is fundamental. A family business operates and does the

right thing because its reputation is on the line every single day, whether that is through the service provided to the customers or the way employees are treated. Those elements are vital to local reputation and are hugely important.

Of course, the family business community is very disparate, and its representation here is really important. I also commend the Institute for Family Business—I think we have some representation in the Public Gallery today—for its work. It is so important to highlight the benefits of family businesses and their contribution. I was proud to speak at the Family Business Week event, as did the shadow Minister. It was a fantastic event. There were so many people there, and a huge range of businesses, from construction to hospitality. It highlighted that 88% of UK businesses are family businesses, which employ 14 million people; and that 50% of mid-size businesses are family businesses, which shows both their contribution and the opportunity ahead.

I want to touch on what we are doing to support all businesses through a difficult period—there is no doubt that we will go through a difficult period—and I will come to some things we can do better in the future, to improve the prospects for family businesses. Clearly, it has been a difficult time for business generally, with the EU transition, the covid pandemic and now a supply-chain crisis and an energy crisis. It is important to recognise that these are global issues that we are trying to mitigate—they are not principally domestic—but they are clearly leading to recession, due to the need to put up interest rates to try to control inflation. It is therefore absolutely right that the Government should step in to try to mitigate some of the pressures, with measures such as the energy bill relief scheme, which is hugely important for businesses and is saving them a significant amount of money. That is a very expensive package; about £25 billion of taxpayers' money is going into the scheme to try to mitigate the effects of the extra cost of energy for businesses.

The EBRS 2—the extension to that scheme—will be announced shortly. We are keen to make sure that we get all these good, viable businesses through this tricky time, until energy prices become more moderate. The one positive thing I can say about the difficult time ahead is that our business went through three recessions, and we came out stronger on the other side each time. Good businesses get through it and come out stronger, and the best years come after difficult years. Hopefully there is some optimism for the future, as well as a recognition of the challenges we face.

The Government announced a cut to fuel duty, and employment allowance has increased, reducing national insurance by up to £5,000 for small and medium-sized enterprises. There is also the £13.6 billion of business rate relief for businesses. I do not want to argue with the shadow Minister, as it is nearly Christmas, but I keep hearing that the Opposition are going to scrap or reform business rates—I am not sure which it is. To talk about getting rid of £22 billion without talking about what they will replace it with is not right and will create more uncertainty for businesses. It would be better to set out exactly how that money will be replaced. Perhaps we can deal with that issue in the new term next year.

The Government obviously reversed the decision to increase national insurance, which was helpful for most businesses and saved them about £4,200 a year. Importantly, at the Budget we announced the incentives to invest—the

annual investment allowance. That is £1 million annually of full expensing against a business's profitability. That is an important investment concession, and the Government are absolutely right to give that long-term certainty to businesses. That is an important new step, and that £1 million is permanent. That gives businesses the confidence that they can invest, knowing that it will be tax efficient.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle and the shadow Minister talked about succession—passing on businesses to the next generation. Business property relief is a really important part of that. Not everybody understands exactly what it does, but it is an important tax concession that means that families can pass on their business to the next generation without paying inheritance tax. That hugely important tax incentive keeps family businesses together, and it is being done for exactly the right reasons.

The Government have exempted more businesses from regulations. Various business regulations have increased from a threshold of 50 or 250 employees to 500, which should lower regulations on many family businesses. We are trying to help family businesses, as well as many other businesses, transition to net zero. We have zero-rated energy on energy-saving products, which is really important. The Help to Grow: Management scheme improves management skills for SMEs. The Government are subsidising 90% of the cost of that scheme, which is hugely important in improving our management skills. Of course, the £4.8 billion levelling up fund and the £2.6 billion shared prosperity fund try to improve the communities that family businesses make such a huge contribution towards.

To improve the prospects of family businesses, and all small and medium-sized businesses, the most important thing that we can do is support them by spending our hard-earned money there and use them rather than their larger competitors. Like others, I was delighted to attend small business Saturday. From early morning to late evening, I visited fantastic small businesses across my constituency. I just want to name-check Taylor's of Pickering. Pickering is a small town in a beautiful part of North Yorkshire, and Les and Joan Taylor started the business in 1969. It is a greengrocer and fishmonger, and it is in its third generation now. Peter Taylor, who now runs it, gets up at 2 o'clock every morning to deliver his groceries—he is a wholesaler too—and smoke his fish. It is a fantastic business. Those kinds of business are the backbone of our communities. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we are a nation of shopkeepers, and it is important that we go and shop in those businesses. I know that he does that on his high streets in Strangford.

We are doing a lot on finance, which a number of Members talked about. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills talked about the demise of the local bank manager. In my community, Ron Taylor was our local bank manager and a very well-known figure. I think that has disappeared.

We are doing things to improve access to finance for SMEs and family businesses. The British Business Bank has given £12.2 billion through various different mechanisms to 96,000 businesses, and when it comes to new family businesses, over £1 billion is now being lent in start-up loans to about 100,000 businesses. However, there is an argument that we need to once again put in place

[Kevin Hollinrake]

patient capital for intergenerational businesses—some other countries do that better than we do. Certainly, in lots of the G7 nations, particularly Germany, regional mutual banks provide long-term finance for family businesses; that, I think, is why we see many more big intergenerational businesses in places such as Germany. That is something we need to look at and learn from, and in my role I am keen to explore the potential of that.

The UK has a very good story to tell in terms of business. We are first in the OECD for the numbers of start-ups per capita, but we are 13th in terms of scale-up, so we do not get as many businesses growing quickly in those early years. Again, that is something I very much want to focus on in my role. It is a huge opportunity, because we know that if we can solve that particular equation—that first and 13th equation—we can solve the productivity puzzle.

We are looking at many other things, including through our review of payment and cash flow, which is another source of finance. We are very keen to scrutinise current practices and develop best practice in that area, to make sure we have good advice and mentoring services. There are 38 growth hubs around the country. We are keen to improve people's growth hubs, and to hear stories from hon. Members across the House about the quality of their local growth hubs, to make sure that they are as good as they can be. We invest heavily in them. They are there to provide advice on access to finance and mentoring, and we want to make sure that they are delivering good outcomes for our local SMEs. We also want to improve procurement by bringing more SMEs and family businesses into public sector procurement. The Procurement Bill is going through Parliament at the moment, but there are lots of other lessons we can learn.

I will conclude now, to give my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle a couple of minutes in which to sum up. As I say, it is a great privilege for me to be able

to speak in this debate. All hon. Members across the House come to this place to make a difference, and this debate has been a great opportunity for me to be able to give something back to my community—the business community that has been transformational for my life. Thank you for that opportunity, Mr Robertson, and I conclude by wishing all hon. Members a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

10.57 am

John Stevenson: I thank the Minister for his contribution. He is a very unusual Minister in Government terms, in that he is a round peg in a round hole.

I also thank all colleagues for their contributions. It has been very interesting to hear about the significant contribution that family businesses make not only to local economies but—and this is equally important—to local communities up and down the country. Some 85% of all businesses are family businesses, and if I were to give one challenge to the Government on growing the economy, it would be to recognise that it is absolutely vital that those family businesses grow, expand and become much bigger, such that they contribute not just locally but nationally. That is how we will grow our economy. There needs to be greater recognition of the importance of family businesses, and we need to ensure that they grow, expand and receive support.

Finally, I follow the Minister in wishing everybody a merry Christmas and a happy new year. I hope that 2023 will not be as exciting as 2022.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I also wish everyone a happy Christmas and a very peaceful new year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of family businesses to local communities in the UK.

Future of Rail Services

11 am

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the future of rail services.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I want to thank Mr Speaker for giving me the opportunity to host this debate. I have always believed that rail is critical to the success of our country. It connects our cities, towns and communities; it drives economic regeneration and growth; it is the employer of the present but also of the future, as new technological skills will be required; and it is the key to achieving many of our decarbonisation ambitions.

It is clear that the pandemic has caused many industries catastrophic problems, and the rail industry is no different. When covid hit, ridership fell to about 4%, which was a record low. Train operating companies that had been providing the Treasury with £100 million every four weeks were requiring a subsidy of something like £600 million. The franchise system—which had been broadly successful from 1992 to 2016, when it experienced a number of problems—collapsed and the Government became the operator of last resort.

It is not the case that all the problems of the industry came merely from the pandemic. The franchising system had worked well until 2016, but the more prescriptive franchising system set out in that round saw too much prescription and too little room for initiative. A distinguished predecessor of my hon. Friend the Minister recounts a story of how he was required to set the time of the last train from Southampton to Bournemouth. It should never be the role of Ministers to set timetables. There was too much interference.

Network Rail was the cause of 80% of the delays, which is what caused most passenger dissatisfaction. The new timetable that was introduced in 2018 collapsed in September that year, which triggered the response from the Department to have the Williams review. It is true that the Williams review took some time, but it has now come forward and highlighted some problems. There are some very good elements of the Williams review. I have already mentioned the incentives to decarbonisation and the suggestion that no one disagrees that the industry needs a guiding mind.

Equally, however, the review has embedded a number of problems. The concept of the guiding mind, the acceptance that the railways can drive social mobility and a cleaner, greener transport system, and that technology must be at the heart of future investment, are all absolutely key. However, I want to concentrate on two flaws of the Williams plan. First, the creation of Great British Railways as the guiding mind, the system operator, maintainer, enhancer and controller of operations, with the setting of passenger service contracts, safety and ticketing—I could go on—is to all extents and purposes the renationalisation of the railway system. Some in this room might think that is a good idea. Those of us old enough to have experienced British Rail will realise that no one in future would want to wear such rose-tinted glasses.

There is also concern that there is too little emphasis in the plan on the benefits that the private sector has brought to the railway. It gives no incentive for operators to offer an enhanced service, and suggests little punitive

action if it is a poor service. The passenger service operating contracts may well be a short-term palliative, but if adopted in the long run they would drive the private sector from the industry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. The key thing for me is the customer, and I know that that is the key thing for him as well. Does he agree that connectivity is essential to rural communities? The ability to jump on the tube or a train is missing in too many communities. We must look at not simply holding on to what we have, but at expanding the network so that we can tackle rural isolation. That is what the customer wants.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. If he listens to my speech later on, he will hear me say that the passenger must be at the heart of the new railway system. The new system needs not to go back to what it was previously but to evolve. In a few moments' time, he will hear me make that point.

I have always been in favour of privatised railways, although I accept that there are some legitimate criticisms. However, the creation of a not just fat but staggeringly obese controller at the centre and heart of a hybrid railway system is likely to be the worst of all worlds. I can only echo the view of so many senior rail experts who believe that, as the Government are soon to finalise their plans, now is the time and opportune moment to consider not just the best of the Williams-Shapps proposals but radical change.

The first test of this iteration of the Government's plans has come with the recently announced SoFA—statement of funds available—for control period 7, which is £44 billion. That is a huge sum of money, but it is £4 billion less than the amount given for control period 6. That partly reflects the fact that, while Network Rail has excellent leadership at the top, all too often there are layers of permafrost that stifle initiative, do not give clear prioritisation to investment plans and do not get them delivered. In some cases, they have prioritised engineering over the customer. I reiterate that if this money is to be used sensibly, as I will say in a few minutes' time, it is absolutely clear that the future plans for this industry must have well-defined, accountable plans for investment.

I have also looked at the HLOS—the high-level output specification—which was even more revealing, probably for what it did not say as much as what it did say. I saw no reference in the HLOS to either the rail review or Great British Railways. Although I accept that I may well be overinterpreting the HLOS, the optimist in me thinks that that means that the Government are actually signalling that they intend to revise their proposals.

Disappointingly, there was no reference to encouraging the participation of the private sector in the development of projects nor in the financing or funding of specific projects, despite that being one of the core suggestions that the transition team works on as it moves from the old system to the new. In response to the point about connectivity made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I accept that paragraph 24 of the HLOS refers to engaging with regional transport authorities, but I believe that local, regional and national schemes are all equally important. I hope the Minister will confirm that that was an error of omission rather than intent.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Is the hon. Member aware of the very good example of rural connectivity with the recent reopening of Okehampton railway station in Devon? Is he also aware of the potential for rural connectivity at Cullompton railway station, which is also in Devon?

Stephen Hammond: Interestingly enough, in my first life in this place I was the Opposition spokesperson on railways for four years, and for two years I was the Minister for rail, so I know all about Okehampton station and what it might bring forward. That refers back to the point I made a moment ago that, with clear prioritisation of investment and the right incentives to operators, there is absolutely no reason why regional and local investment should not be seen to be just as important as national investment. Indeed, the point I made at the beginning, about rail being the key to regeneration and economic growth in a number of communities, underlines the point that the hon. Gentleman was making

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I wish to make that very point about economic growth and investment in an area. As the Minister knows, I have been campaigning for the restoration of the three trains between Cleethorpes and King's Cross for many years and they now appear in the London and North Eastern Railway draft timetable for next May. When the Minister sums up, will he comment on whether those services are likely to happen? As my hon. Friend said, economic growth and investment are crucial to the regeneration and levelling up of many of our more deprived areas.

Stephen Hammond: It is 20 December, but already many hon. Members wish my hon. Friend the Minister to become Father Christmas in his summing up. As it is Christmas, and given he is a great friend of mine and an acknowledged expert in this field, may I offer him a few Christmas cracker thoughts about how I would like to see him use this opportune moment by accepting the best from the Williams-Shapps plans but also looking at what could be done to make our rail system even better?

A moment ago I referred to "the staggeringly obese controller". One of the first things that could happen is that the Fat Controller could go on a new year diet. Everybody agrees that a guiding mind is needed for this industry. It would be right for Great British Railways to be turned into that guiding mind, with the clear objectives of setting timetables in conjunction with the infrastructure provider and operating companies, and being the body to set safety standards, let current contracts, see an evolution of the system and potentially oversee slot auctions.

If that is what Great British Railways is to become, then it is implicit that the infrastructure operator and maintainer should be separate from the guiding mind. If both functions were under that one body, it would make that body partial to the interests of network engineers rather more than to ensuring the satisfaction of passengers, freight operators and ticket operators. It does not matter what that separate entity is called—we could call it national rail, network rail or whatever we like—but I suggest to the Minister that setting Great British Railways up as the guiding mind and distinctly separating the role of infrastructure operator would be an excellent way forward.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I want to back up his suggestion for a much more slimline future system operator for two reasons. First, if I understand his point correctly, that would put customers and passengers right at the front rather than system and network engineers, which is the right way round and the right order of priority. Secondly, that addresses the fundamental point that my hon. Friend raised at the start that the difficulties from 2016 onwards were of an overly centralised, overly controlled agglomeration of power. He suggests a dispersal and relaxation of that power, and a transfer of it out from the centre, which is essential if we are going to have the flexible system we need to adjust to the changes that the pandemic has brought.

Stephen Hammond: I am tempted to say that great minds think alike, because my next point is to suggest to the Minister that the Government should look at passenger service contracts. We all accept that the post-2016 franchising system and the pandemic have meant there is a need for change, but passenger service contracts are a journey rather than an end in themselves and the Government should look at what the end might be, so I suggest two things. I suggest that we should look at evolving mechanisms, so that there is a spectrum of possibilities for either new contracts or revised franchises that look at revenue risk, how it is shared, a range of revenue incentives, and a range of arrangements that in some cases would allow slot auctions as well as new franchises and that potentially ensure passenger service contracts in some areas. To that end, a commitment to review what is now in place after two years would allow that to happen. As I say, it would also provide for greater competition by introducing slot and route auctions—initially, I suggest, for a limited number of some of the long-distance routes. It would drive passenger satisfaction, encourage initiative and secure a future for open access, which had been one of the drivers for change, and for a range of competitions.

Some really exciting recommendations in the Williams-Shapps review should be kept. They include a steady programme of electrification alongside the utilisation of enhanced battery and hydrogen technology; new procurement processes based on whole-life value, with consideration of opex and social value, not just old-style cost-benefit analysis; and the provision of open data being more accessible and available to all industry participants. Those are some of the sensible, well-thought-through suggestions, as is the need for a guiding mind, but I hope the Minister will also accept that now is the right time, as I understand that the Government are looking to bring forward new plans or even a Bill in the new year. I hope he will accept the points I have made about separating the guiding mind from the infrastructure provider, giving a commitment to revise the spectrum of possibilities for train operating companies, and giving a commitment to see the private sector work alongside the public sector to deliver a clear, identified and accountable investment programme, so that all the money that is available for investment is spent in control period 7.

I am optimistic about the future of the railways, and I am particularly optimistic about their being in my hon. Friend the Minister's hands, so I hope that he will accept that what I am trying to do—in a very thumbnail and headline way—is to set out some ideas that I think will make the future of the railways even more secure. I

hope he will accept them as positive, constructive and implementable ideas, so that we have a railway that is fit for the 21st century.

11.17 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. It is also a great pleasure to be part of this debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). He said at the very end of his speech that he hoped the debate would be taken as positive and constructive, with ideas to feed into the mix. That is something that I always do with my hon. Friend, who has great expertise both as a brilliant railway constituency representative and as a former Transport Minister. In that regard, I thank him and all the other former Transport Ministers who have fed their ideas into the mix. I hope that I can cover the points made by my hon. Friend in the round, but I will try to address some of them specifically.

The Government remain absolutely committed to reforming our railways and ensuring there are high-quality railway services across the whole country. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the Government commissioned Keith Williams to conduct the first root-and-branch review of the rail industry in a generation, which led to the publication of the plan for rail White Paper in 2021. Before that, more than 750 representations were made to the review, which met over 200 groups across the country. Although my hon. Friend pointed out that the review was completed some time ago—back at the end of 2019—it was extended to allow more time to test the conclusions and ensure that they were appropriate, given the impact of the pandemic on rail.

There have been various changes of personnel, as my hon. Friend is well aware. The Secretary of State and I have been in post only since the end of October. We are reviewing the options for reform, and we expect to be able to provide concrete proposals as to what the reform will look like very shortly. We believe that the case for reform is stronger than when the plan for rail was first published. The lasting consequences of covid-19, along with industrial relations, sustained poor performance and financial challenges, increase the need for modernisation and efficiency. I will come on to the role of the private sector. If we want to regrow the railways back to the passenger numbers that we have previously seen, the best way to do that is to wrap in the private sector, which doubled those numbers post privatisation. I am very much with my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon on those optics.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for speaking so eloquently about his vision for the future of rail services. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I often hear from people right across the United Kingdom about difficulties in accessing rail services, ticketing offices and disabled toilet facilities. Will the Minister consider those important inclusion issues in his future vision?

Huw Merriman: Yes, we certainly will. We are looking at an interesting and challenging set of reforms. Ticket offices are largely unchanged from how they were 30 years back, but only 12% to 14% of tickets are purchased from ticket offices. The key is to find a way to get those

personnel outside—on the platform and in the station—to help those with disabilities and mobility issues. Getting them on the platform and on the trains may mean change, but I hope that that will be a positive change for the passenger and the workforce. It will be a more interesting and exciting role with passengers.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister touched on his current focus on industrial relations and the need to grow the number of passengers coming back to the railways. Is he aware of the situation with South Western Railway, which serves all of south-west London, Surrey, Wiltshire and the south-west? Until the new year, there will be no services at all on non-strike days at 40 stations across the network, including Whitton, St Margarets and Strawberry Hill in my constituency, and numerous stations in Surrey. Nurses who are not striking cannot get to work, police officers cannot get to work and children cannot get to the schools that are open. What is the Minister doing to work with South Western Railway to ensure that services are available on non-strike days? We will never get people back on to the railways and improve industrial relations if passengers cannot get where they need to.

Huw Merriman: I agree with the hon. Lady, and I am aware that she applied for an urgent question on the matter. I will write to her.

I call for all hon. and right hon. Members to come together as one on this issue. We cannot focus on good passenger experience and a future for the railways if there is industrial action that involves the workforce not working on rest days when it has previously done so. I have never encouraged that pattern or seen a future for it, because it means that we are reliant on goodwill. When goodwill is withdrawn at short notice, we end up with what the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) described. We need to move away from rest-day working, which does not work. Equally, I urge all those who are involved on the union side of matters to consider that it is Christmas. If we want a future for our railways, we must work positively and constructively, rather than withdrawing labour. I will write to the hon. Lady, as I mentioned.

John Penrose: Will the Minister give way?

Huw Merriman: I should make some progress, because time will push me towards the end. I shall try to take a further intervention if I can.

I want to talk about other parts of the reform: fares and ticketing. As part of the plan, we will invest £360 million to radically reform and improve the passenger experience. We will also look to deliver our manifesto commitment by introducing tap-in and tap-out at additional stations in regional and urban areas, and contactless pay-as-you-go ticketing at over 200 stations in the south-east. We will also introduce simpler, modern ways of paying for travel and a straightforward compensation process.

Let me touch on the proposals for reform. In addition to our significant investment in the passenger experience, one reform that we are considering is the creation of a new guiding mind to bring the fragmented railways under a single point of accountability. That would not be nationalisation; rather, it would be simplification. A simple, more agile structure will be needed to change

[Huw Merriman]

travel and working patterns, introduce new technologies and enhance business models. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon talked about the role of the private sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon talked about the role of the private sector. Rail reform must have at its core greater private sector involvement. I want any new model to take the very best of the private sector: innovation, an unrelenting focus on quality and the type of models that drive reform, a better experience for the passenger and better return for taxpayer value. I am happy to discuss the private sector contribution, and to meet my hon. Friend to reassure him about that. He knows that I have always had a real passion for what the private sector has brought for rail. I agree that, although the franchise model may have run its course, it was not made easy for the private sector to navigate, because it became a very complex, documented process that put off new entrants to the market. Any rail reform has to be simple and nimble enough to bring in new innovators, not just the largest.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wimbledon and for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) have championed open access. Rail reform must see an important role for open-access operators. We want to make the best use of the network and grow new markets for rail. The Department recently supported Go-Op's innovative proposal to operate open-access services from Taunton to Swindon and Weston-super-Mare, providing new direct services and improved connectivity for communities.

I have challenged my Department on open access. It seems to be the case that we are not putting open access on equal footing, which means that there is some sort of charge and enablement. The response is always, "It just takes away from the other contracted operators." We need to charge open access more to allow it not to take away but to compete. In my view, open access definitely has a place, but we perhaps need to reform the entrance requirements so it is not constantly turned down. I am very excited about those possibilities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon asked when legislation would be forthcoming. We will not be taking forward legislation on rail reform in this parliamentary Session, as he is aware, but we will introduce it when the parliamentary timetable allows, and I am very keen that we do so. In the interim, rather than do nothing because legislation is not immediately forthcoming, many areas can be progressed outside legislation. They include making significant investment in ticketing and retail, and the formation of the reform proposals that we will focus on. I assure my hon. Friend that we will bring those forward in parallel with legislation.

My hon. Friend mentioned the control period 7 settlement. That process is vital for securing value for money for the taxpayer and providing certainty to investors. The Government published a strong funding settlement of more than £44 billion for England and Wales for the next control period, which begins in April 2024. My hon. Friend touched on that. That demonstrates our long-term commitment to securing a safe, reliable and efficient railway. The industry—public and private—now needs to work together to establish stretching yet realistic targets for improvements and reliability, supported by Government investment.

On the lack of reference to rail reform or GBR, the HLOS, which my hon. Friend mentioned, is more of a statement of principle. He should not read anything into that. We have not landed on one particular model, so it would not have been appropriate to insert one in there. I got my pen out and made sure there was reference to innovation and private sector involvement—I do not believe anyone took those words out. I was particularly keen to ensure that, with innovation, we included small and medium-sized enterprises so that we are focusing not just on larger private sector involvement but on the small innovators that can really drive change. They need to be in the room too.

On industrial action, passengers rightly expect a regular, reliable service, seven days a week. Current shift patterns and voluntary weekend working for railway staff make that vision nearly impossible. The only solution is for everyone to come together and agree a new way forward. I have met the unions and employers, and the Secretary of State has met the unions too. I hope that will send a message to this House that we want to facilitate an end to industrial action. I again ask all right hon. and hon. Members to come together and push not just the train operators and the Government but those who are responsible for the strikes—the trade unions. It is time for all to be called out where they can deliver more.

The Government are wholly committed to improving journeys for passengers and creating a better, more modern rail industry. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I assure him that the private sector will be right at the heart of any reform proposals. The Secretary of State and I are committed to an improved railway with the private sector at its heart, and I hope that my hon. Friend will keep me to that mantra.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a very peaceful new year.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): There are a number of Members who wish to speak. We have plenty of time, but if people could restrict themselves to around six minutes, we should all be doing grand.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone.

I am pleased to have secured this debate on one of the biggest issues affecting my constituency right now. It affects not just Dartford, but areas right across London and the neighbouring counties. It is, of course, Sadiq Khan's extension of the ultra low emission zone. The decision by the Labour Mayor of London to extend that scheme to cover the whole of London will be catastrophic for my constituency, which neighbours London. The border is not neat; it straddles roads such as Maiden Lane and sits at the end of roads such as The Coppice, Bowmans Road and Stonehill Woods Park. Although their residents are in Kent, they have to enter London just to get out of their road—just to live. They have no choice but to enter London.

Currently, the border with London is fairly frictionless. Thousands of times a day, people drive across that border, often without even knowing it. That is good for London, and good for Kent and other counties bordering London, but now Sadiq Khan is building a financial wall between London and the rest of the country. A small business, particularly in outer London, that relies on customers travelling to it will be crucified by this form of taxation. The line that has been used by those desperately trying to defend the Mayor is that the scheme will not affect many people, but one in seven cars is already affected. Given that the Mayor ignored his own consultation on this scheme and did not include the expansion in his manifesto, as sure as night follows day, he will increase the number of vehicles that will have to pay—all to sort out the financial mess he has got his administration into.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The Mayor's own consultation shows that 28,000 vehicles will be affected in the London Borough of Sutton alone. As my hon. Friend rightly says, it is small business people—those who can least afford to replace their car—who will be affected.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. I think I am right in saying that almost two thirds of the respondents to that consultation, and an even higher proportion of those who responded from outer London and the home counties, opposed the expansion. That consultation, frankly, was a sham; the Mayor's decision does not reflect what people have told him.

As I say, this is all about trying to sort out Sadiq Khan's financial mess. Well, Dartfordians should not have to pick up the bill for his financial incompetence. Everyone will be impacted by the expansion of ULEZ,

whether directly as a motorist or business, or indirectly by the damaging impact that scheme will have on the local economy.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this important debate to the House. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I have been contacted by a number of people who have mobility cars who do not have to pay, but also by those who do have to pay. They are extremely concerned about the financial impact of this decision, given the cost of living crisis. Does he agree that there should be some kind of overall exemption for people who have disabilities, and who require mobility cars to access the public services that we all should be able to access?

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important and good point. Of course, people rely on their motor vehicles; some have no choice whatsoever. If public transport does not go the way that they are going, they have to use their motor vehicle, and she is absolutely right to highlight the impact that this decision will have on disabled people.

As far as exemptions are concerned, I would argue that everybody should be exempt. I do not think anybody should have to pay this charge, because of its nature and the impact it will have on so many people—on everybody around London. It is not just those who own vehicles that breach the ULEZ guidelines who will be affected; it is everybody.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. I have also had representations, and heard my constituents' concerns, about costs and the transition to green vehicles, but there is another side to this. I am sure he will agree that this is also about air quality, which we need to tackle in London. Has he read that the Mayor has decided to introduce two new temporary exemptions, from January 2023 to October 2027? Those grace periods will apply for those on disabled benefits and with wheelchair-accessible vehicles. Any way we move forward must be inclusive. There are still questions to be answered, including from my constituents.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the impact on disabled people. I would reiterate what I said to the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron).

I believe that the constituency of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) covers Heathrow airport. This will have a big impact on her constituency; it will stop people accessing that airport and make them go to other airports instead, so I would argue that the expansion has a big impact, and has unintended consequences for many people and businesses.

The Mayor is relying on not just the £12.50 per day charge, but the penalty charges for non-compliance, which make him even more money. The RAC believes that in the first eight months after the expansion of the ULEZ to the south circular, 1.6 million penalty notices were issued. This expansion will be to the whole of London; I shudder to think how many penalty notices will be issued.

[Gareth Johnson]

We can see why the expansion is so financially and politically attractive to the Mayor of London. Those who must pay his seven-days-a-week charge to enter London cannot and do not vote for him. We are not Londoners in Kent; this is quite literally taxation without representation or accountability. The two areas hit hardest by the expansion are the counties bordering London, which cannot vote for the Mayor, and outer London, which the Mayor does not care about because it is not where the bulk of his votes come from.

The Mayor says that he will bring in a scrappage scheme for the poorest people, so that they can change their car. He is not doing that for those living in Dartford or anywhere else outside London, so the poorest will be hit the hardest. They will be unable to change their car or enter London to go to work, shop or pick up the kids from school. How will key workers get to London to support the health service, the police or other emergency workers there? Many of those key workers own cars that will be charged if they enter London, yet they keep vital services in London going. The supermarket ASDA has contacted me because it is concerned about the impact that the extension would have on its depot workers. It estimates that over half of those workers have vehicles that would be subject to the charge.

The scheme currently goes out to the south circular. We already see people parking just outside the ULEZ before continuing their journey using another form of transport. That is an understandable way of avoiding the charge, yet this practice could turn large parts of west Dartford and Joyden's Wood—and areas all around London—into a car park. What justification does the Mayor give for his decision? He says that it is to reduce pollution. If he really wanted to reduce pollution in London he would ban the vehicles, but he does not want to ban them; he wants to make money out of them.

The expansion of the ULEZ has nothing to do with pollution. The worst pollution in London is in central London, not outer London. Of course, the expansion could not take place without the Mayor changing his transport strategy. He has changed it—with the votes of the Labour and Liberal Democrat Assembly members, and with only the Conservatives opposing. He held a consultation, which we have spoken about, on the ULEZ expansion and more than 60% of respondents opposed the idea, so what did he do? He just ignored them. What was the point of that consultation exercise?

His Majesty's Government have stated on numerous occasions that they do not have the power to stop this expansion. Can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm, when he responds to this debate, whether that is the case? What advice has he sought on it? It seems that outer London boroughs can refuse to allow their land to be used for the camera infrastructure needed. Can he give his view on whether councils can refuse to allow their land to be used in that way, as it seems to me that that may be possible?

The ULEZ expansion will have a significant impact on the poorest in society. It will price people out of going to work, going shopping or otherwise going about their daily life. It will place a financial wall around London and take away people's freedom of movement. It is aimed at those who cannot vote the Mayor out of office and those who do not vote for him.

It is the most debilitating, unfair, undemocratic form of taxation this country has ever seen, and it is a window on the soul of the Mayor of London.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that if they wish to speak, they need to bob to catch my eye—but that reminder seems slightly superfluous.

2.41 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on air pollution—I am of course the Member of Parliament for Swansea West, but I was formerly the leader of Croydon Council and an MP for Croydon—to support the ultra low emission zone. I am horrified to see so many outer London Conservatives gambling with people's lives for their own political survival. We are 70 years on from the great London smog, yet 4,000 people in London are dying prematurely, 11 every day, from air pollution. As leader of Croydon Council, I introduced the Tramlink, 26 km of light rail. When I was in Croydon, I had to regularly take my oldest daughter to Mayday Hospital with asthma attacks because of air pollution. Now, in Swansea, my children have not had to go to hospital.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman familiar with the report produced by Jacobs entitled "ULEZ Scheme Integrated Impact Assessment"? If he is, how does he square his comments about Conservative Members from outer London not caring about people dying of air pollution with statements in that report such as this?

"The Proposed Scheme is estimated to have a minor (NO₂) to negligible (PM_{2.5}) beneficial impact on exposure to air pollution and achieving WHO Interim Targets across Greater London."

Geraint Davies: I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentioned that, because the expectation is that the expansion of the ULEZ will reduce PM_{2.5} in outer London by 16%. He should know, but I am sure he does not, that studies at Harvard University and a Max Planck Institute found that covid deaths increased by between 8% and 12% when there was a marginal increase in air pollution from PM_{2.5}—an increase much less significant than the fall that I mentioned. That is particularly relevant to poorer, more polluted areas and more diverse communities. We are talking here about life and death.

We know from studies done that there will be a massive reduction in PM_{2.5} and Nox as a result of the expansion. Indeed, there will be a major contribution towards mitigating climate change. The scheme already reduces carbon dioxide emissions by 12,300 tonnes; an expanded one will reduce it by 27,000 tonnes. We will be saving lives and saving the planet. The truth is that if we do not act, we will end up with 550,000 more people unnecessarily getting pollution-related diseases in the next 30 years, at an estimated cost of £10.4 billion. We should move forward on this. People who are neutral, such as the chief medical officer Chris Whitty, who has just released a report on air pollution, very much commend what Sadiq Khan is doing to save lives, as does the United Nations.

As a result of the ULEZ, there are 21,000 fewer vehicles in inner London and 67,000 fewer non-compliant ones—the latter figure is three times the former—so there are fewer vehicles overall. The scheme affects only

15% of vehicles—the most polluting—and £110 million has been set aside for scrappage schemes to enable conversion. The other thing to bear in mind is that the Government a year ago passed the Environment Act 2021. I wanted them to use COP26 to enforce World Health Organisation air quality standards, but instead, a year on, the Government are saying, “Why do we not try to get PM_{2.5} at 10 micrograms per cubic metre by 2040?”, as opposed to 2030, which was the previous deadline. The limit prescribed by the World Health Organisation is 5 micrograms, which Europe will achieve by 2030. We could achieve that here—this is a condition of doing so—with ultra low emission zones. Instead, the Conservative position is, “No, we will not bother with that. We will play politics with this, and continue to have 3,600 children every year in London going into hospital with asthma”, as my daughter did. That is unnecessary—and despicable, because it is avoidable.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman talks about playing politics, but it is the Mayor who has gone against his consultation. He says that Londoners are in favour of the ULEZ because they talk about air quality. Every Londoner would be concerned about air quality, but this is about the consultation that he refused to accept. The hon. Gentleman talked about trams in Croydon. It would be far better to pay for the tram extension in Sutton; that would be cheaper than what the Mayor is doing, and it would improve air quality by ensuring that people made fewer car journeys—and he would be taking residents with him.

Geraint Davies: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman supports trams. I very much agree that we should move forward with trams across London and elsewhere. As an aside, the tram system cost us £200 million at the time. It was a public-private scheme with £100 million of private money and £100 million of public. We could get 1,000 of those schemes and integrated transport across Britain for the cost of HS2, but that is controversial and off the point.

We should certainly take people with us; the YouGov poll shows that people support the extension of the ULEZ by a ratio of 2:1. It is very easy to go round knocking on people's doors and saying, “Do you agree with Sadiq Khan's attempt to tax you more in this despicable way?”, but if we do a neutral, objective study through YouGov, we find that people support it by 2:1.

Gareth Bacon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: Yes, I will. The hon. Gentleman can carry on with more of his science.

Gareth Bacon: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the figures quoted by Conservative Members come from the Mayor's own consultation, in which 66% of people said, “No, don't do this”? That was despite being asked a load of leading questions about air quality. Despite that, it delivered a two-thirds opposition. That was not people knocking on doors; that was the Mayor's own consultation.

Geraint Davies: So that we are clear about how these consultations work, the Mayor, a devolved Administration or whatever puts out a consultation that says, “Tell us what you think”, and then groups of people campaign

around it. They put in their submission and await the outcome. YouGov takes a representative sample; it found that people are in favour by 2:1. That is the answer. The hon. Gentleman should read up on how these things work, rather than spouting off about how they do not.

In a nutshell, we are talking about ensuring better public health, and ensuring that we reach World Health Organisation standards in time. This is a critical part of moving forward, because London is a sort of death spot in terms of pollution. If we do not get London right, we cannot move together as a nation. We will end up with these ridiculously unambitious targets of 10 micrograms by 2040, instead of 5 micrograms by 2030. I very much agree with what the Mayor has done; best of luck to him.

2.49 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this important debate. Conservative Members have been campaigning assiduously on this issue, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who has been leading on it for some time. The ULEZ will have a profoundly negative impact on many of our constituents. Hon. Members should be under no illusion: the ULEZ is about revenue generation on the back of poor financial management. This is a London tax, put forward by the Labour Mayor of London, and it hits the poorest, who cannot afford to update their vehicles. In Runnymede and Weybridge, families and businesses will suffer the most.

I put out a local petition, and there was an overwhelming response against the ULEZ. That is interesting in itself, but what perhaps gives more power to the arguments against it is the individual comments that people made in response to the petition. People explained that they cannot afford to update their car, because they do not have enough money. Public sector workers, who need to go into London to work, said that the ULEZ will have a serious impact on their ability to continue to do that sort of job. Businesses felt that it would make them go under. People living with disabilities need to use their cars to travel around, and that is a particularly substantial issue at the moment because, yet again, the lift at Weybridge station is broken—sadly, I have had to campaign too often to get it repaired. People are therefore forced into using cars to get to and from London.

Sadiq Khan says that the ULEZ is about air quality. If it really was about air quality, why does he use such a blunt tool to deal with the issue, as opposed to focusing on the areas with the most acute air quality problems, which are along trunk roads? Why the blanket approach rather than a targeted approach? If he really wants to improve air quality, why does he not push even faster car scrappage? Why does he not invest more in the bus fleet conversion to electricity and hydrogen vehicles? Why does he not listen to industry?

Earlier this year, I was at an event hosted by Octopus Electric Vehicles in Weybridge, which was looking at the transition to electric vehicles. There were lots of representatives from all sorts of businesses and innovators, and they said that the key policy to drive forward the uptake of electric vehicles is the zero emission vehicle mandate. They welcomed the Government's incredible

[Dr Ben Spencer]

position in terms of bringing it forward, but they said that if we want to really push things, we need a more ambitious ZEV mandate. Why is Sadiq Khan not talking about practical, proper solutions to air quality, rather than pressing his attack on, in essence, the poorest?

I will finish with this: the ULEZ is a London tax to prop up a failing administration. My constituents should not have to pay the price for Sadiq Khan's failings.

2.53 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie, and to speak in this debate secured by the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson).

I very much welcome the debate, because air quality is one of the biggest issues faced by my residents in Putney. They hope that the extended ULEZ policy will have a significant impact on children's lives and on small businesses, which complain to me about pollution on Putney High Street—one of the most polluted high streets in the country. However, that pollution is coming down as a result of the Mayor's policies.

I thank the Putney Society, Putney Pollution Busters, Mums for Lungs, the London Sustainability Exchange, King's College London and Clean Air in London for all their campaigning and for speaking up for residents in Putney, in Dartford, and across and outside London, who know that air quality is a silent killer. The hon. Member for Dartford, too, called it a silent killer, with air blowing pollution from London to his constituency, so I am surprised he does not welcome the Mayor's actions to reduce that pollution and to instead have cleaner air for us all, especially our children.

Yesterday, the Government finally brought out their air quality targets under the Environment Act 2021. I have been calling for those targets for years, but they are not good enough. First, they just aim not to have toxic air by 2040, which is a whole 18 years away. Someone born now will potentially not see the results until they become an adult. Secondly, we cannot start to meet the Government's targets without the ULEZ. It is needed, so I hope to hear support from the Minister for actions that will meet the Government's air quality targets.

Outer London is disproportionately affected by this issue, because there are more older people, who are particularly affected by the damaging effects of air pollution. The UK has the worst death rate for lung conditions, and that simply cannot be ignored—we cannot hope that it will all go away in any other way than by us taking action. Recent analysis by Asthma + Lung UK has shown that the UK has the worst death rate for lung conditions—higher than anywhere else in western Europe. In total, around 600,000 people have a lung condition in Greater London, and 60% of them live in outer London and do not currently live inside the ULEZ. I hear again and again of people who say that they or their children did not used to have asthma but that they do now. We can see the effects. If we could see the air pollution on our streets, we would know it for the killer that it is.

Toxic air is shortening the lives of our constituents. Every year, up to 36,000 people in the UK die prematurely as a result of toxic air, and 4,000 of those deaths occur

in London alone. In Dartford, the equivalent of 66 deaths per year are attributable to long-term exposure to particulate air pollution. But it is not only about deaths; it is also about people who are hospitalised or who live with debilitating conditions.

Gareth Johnson: If the hon. Lady feels that the Mayor of London is expanding the ULEZ to tackle pollution across the south-east, does she think it is simply a coincidence that he is due to make hundreds of millions of pounds out of it, or does she think it is actually motivated by money?

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Member for his question. What is the Mayor spending the money on? He is spending it on local transport. Every single penny raised by the ULEZ is being spent on local transport, which is exactly what we need. That is the way we are going to overcome the toxic air that is killing our constituents.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Could the hon. Lady outline where the new public transport infrastructure is? What exactly are the improvements that the Mayor is apparently giving us?

Fleur Anderson: I am not here to talk about local infrastructure, but we have to invest in the local public transport infrastructure so that we can overcome this problem. I had to give up my car—it was a diesel car—when the first ULEZ came in, and I do not have a car now. I rely entirely on public transport, but it has to be improved. How will we get the money to do that? The expansion of the ULEZ is one way to get that money. I hope to hear from the Government how they will fund public transport in London, if that is the key factor that we need.

Nearly 10 years after Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah became the first person to have air pollution recorded as a cause of death, people in Dartford and London are still breathing toxic air. Poor communities and black, Asian and minority ethnic communities—those who are least likely to have a car—are the worst affected by air pollution. We have to take action.

In Wandsworth, the borough where my constituents live, 129 deaths a year are attributable to the effects of toxic air. That is such a shocking figure. Knowing that I was taking my children to school and exposing them to toxic air every day really worries me, and it worries all my constituents too. Currently the ULEZ goes through Putney, but it is not a wall—the world has not ended, life has carried on and travel has continued. It is not the hard-and-fast border it is being portrayed as.

Expanding the ULEZ will reduce NOx emissions by 10%, and PM_{2.5} exhaust emissions by nearly 16%, and prevent 27,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions from being released. It will lead to a nearly 10% reduction in NOx emissions from cars in outer London, on top of the 30% reduction in road transport NOx emissions that is already expected from the current ULEZ and the tighter low-emission zone standards. It works, and it should continue. We need to have this action.

I welcome the news from the Mayor of London that, as part of the ULEZ expansion, he is introducing a scrappage scheme to support residents on lower incomes, as well as businesses and charities. It is the biggest

scrappage scheme yet, at £110 million, and it will help those in Putney and every other area who are on low incomes and who need support to replace or retrofit their cars. I am pleased that the Mayor has also introduced new grace periods for disabled people, allowing them more time to adapt to change.

Dr Cameron: Will the hon. Member give way?

Fleur Anderson: I do not have enough time to give way—sorry.

I understand the concerns raised about the impact on small and microbusinesses. I met the Federation of Small Businesses this week to discuss its concerns about the ULEZ. It welcomes the move towards greening businesses and a more sustainable future, because it makes clear business sense. We cannot simply do nothing. However, the FSB is concerned about the impact of the ULEZ on microbusinesses—those businesses with under 10 employees. I have two brothers-in-law who are plumbers, so I have heard their concerns as well. *[Interruption.]* They are very useful.

I know that this is a tough time for small businesses, so I join the FSB in urging the Government to support the ULEZ and to provide additional funding, on top of the Mayor's £110 million scrappage scheme, so that it can support microbusinesses to change their vans, instead of stopping them coming into London. I also join the FSB in calling for small businesses to be given extra time to comply—up to September 2024—and for us to consider a way for small businesses to pay their charge into a special fund that they can put towards purchasing a ULEZ-compliant vehicle.

This announcement will ensure that the most vulnerable in our communities are looked after and give them the support they need as the ULEZ expands. So I will end by asking whether the Minister supports the Government's air quality targets, the ULEZ itself and small businesses. If so, will he support them further by topping up the Mayor's scrappage scheme? Also, does he support a new clean air Act, because the time has surely come for one. Are there plans to introduce one?

In conclusion, I welcome the ULEZ and this action to clean up our air for our planet, our health and especially our children's health.

3.1 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hosie. I join colleagues in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this debate.

Like most Conservative Members of Parliament in Westminster Hall today, my surgery has been inundated with constituents who tell a very consistent story: that they are dependent on their vehicles, mainly due to ill health or the need to support disabled family members in accessing medical care. They have older vehicles, which have often been extremely well maintained, and which they have had for many years, but the prohibitive cost of change now means that face a really serious negative impact on their quality of life and that of their dependants. As my constituency has the highest per capita vehicle ownership in London, we might expect to see many people like that coming forward.

Around 70% of Londoners do not own a car so, understandably, the Mayor of London has seen the ULEZ expansion as something that will not negatively impact on a great many constituents of his in central London. However, for those of us in the suburbs—my constituency essentially consists of eight villages, one of which has no access to a tube or train station and only very limited access to buses—dependency on cars and other private vehicles is much higher.

When we look at a map of London, and particularly at the north-west, we see routes such as Hill End Road in Harefield, which is barely the width of a car, but which is one of the routes that takes people out of our capital and into the surrounding counties, as well as Park Lane, Dene Road and Eastbury Road in Northwood, and the A4008 in Hatch End. All of these roads change from being in Greater London to being outside Greater London partway along, so people who depend on a car—particularly if they are disabled or in ill health—to come and shop in their local high street, access their GP practice or get to their local public transport network will have to pay £12.50 every time they do any of those things, simply to go about their daily lives. What is iniquitous about this is that they do not have a choice.

My wife lived in Westminster when I first knew her, so I completely understand that, in many parts of central London, there is a very high density of access to the bus network and other kinds of public transport, such as trains and tubes, but out in the suburbs that is simply not the case.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Member for speaking about the most vulnerable people. Does he agree that it is particularly difficult for people with disabilities because not all rates of disability living allowance, child disability payment or personal independence payment are exempt from the scheme? Many people will still be adversely impacted, even from 2023. They are contacting me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, and asking that more be done to support their particular needs.

David Simmonds: That is an incredibly important point, which my constituents have made to me. There are those who may have a blue badge because they have a serious health condition that requires them to attend regular medical treatment, but who are not registered disabled or covered by the exemptions that the scheme envisages.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I will mention this in my speech, so I hope you will forgive the duplication, Mr Hosie, but I was contacted by a charity that transports emergency blood, breast milk for premature babies, and urgent medical samples. It contacted the Mayor of London about whether it would be able to get an exemption, or even a discount, and it was told no. Does my hon. Friend agree that that seems morally wrong?

David Simmonds: That is characteristic of the Mayor's response to the representations he has received: he simply does not want to take them into account.

Some constituents may be temporarily resident in my constituency—for example, because they are awaiting heart and lung transplants at Harefield Hospital. They are required to attend the hospital at short notice when

[David Simmonds]

a donor's heart and lungs, or one or the other of those things, becomes available. That also has a significant impact. Again, the Mayor of London seems to have very little interest in that.

Those of us who have been interested in air quality for a long time recognise that, particularly in outer west London, the big source of pollution is Heathrow airport. This measure does nothing whatever to address the single biggest source of air pollution. It is very much a case of a Mayor pursuing the thing that makes money for the mayoral budget, rather than the thing that would actually improve air quality. There are no measures to improve local authority powers to tackle engine idling. There is nothing that addresses the impact of pollution coming from the M25 or from Heathrow airport, which are the things causing the significant air pollution that affects my constituents.

As this policy makes progress, we need to recognise that local authority powers under the Environment Act 1995, through which the Mayor is seeking to introduce this measure, should require there to be consent from local authorities. In that way, we can ensure that the people who are legally responsible—the local authorities—have a say on whether such measures will tackle the actual sources of air pollution in their area, as opposed to simply talking about them and raising money for an inner London zone 1 Mayor who clearly does not pay attention to the needs of his suburban constituents.

3.7 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Runcymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), who was right that I have taken a deep interest in the ultra low emission zone expansion for some time, and that is because there are a number of big problems with the policy.

The first problem is that Sadiq Khan does not have a mandate for this policy. He claims that ULEZ expansion is essential to tackle air pollution, and we heard his briefing being faithfully read out by the hon. Members for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson). Given that the Mayor was re-elected to City Hall only last year, we would imagine that this policy featured prominently in his manifesto, but it did not. He went to the polls on a 100-page manifesto, and one paragraph on page 55 mentioned the ultra low emission zone, but it pertained specifically to the extension to the north and south circular in October 2021, which he had already announced. There was no mention whatever of expanding the boundary to the outer part of Greater London.

When the Mayor decided in May this year to push ahead with that expansion, the *Evening Standard* article that covered the announcement said:

“On Friday morning, Sadiq Khan insisted that he would not press ahead with the plans if the public overwhelmingly rejected them during the public consultation.

He said: ‘It’s a genuine consultation—as were the previous two consultations in relation to the central London Ultra-Low Emission Zone and the expansion. I hope Londoners who care about the health of their families will respond.’”

They did, in large numbers, but the Mayor initially refused to release the results of that consultation. Eventually, after public pressure, the results were released on 25 November. They revealed that 60% of respondents opposed Sadiq Khan's ULEZ expansion to outer London. That figure increases to 68% when we include the organised responses that the hon. Member for Swansea West mentioned; 70% of outer London residents oppose the expansion and 80% of those who work in outer London were also opposed.

This policy has no mandate and no public support. It turns out that it is not about air quality, either, contrary to the propaganda read out by Opposition Members, which comes directly from the briefing sent by the Mayor of London. The document I quoted earlier is not a hatchet job, but the Mayor's own integrated impact assessment. I gave one example, but there are many, of where it uses phrases like “negligible to minor” in terms of the impact that the expansion would have on air quality.

There is no mandate, there is no public support and it is not really about air quality, because the impact is negligible. So why is the Mayor of London so interested in ULEZ expansion, and why is he rushing it? The answer is as old as time: it is about money. This is a cash grab, pure and simple. According to Transport for London's own figures, it expects the £12.50 charge to hit 160,000 cars and 42,000 vans per day. In monetary terms, that is about £2.5 million per day—a big cash injection into the Mayor's coffers.

There is a question about timing. When the inner and outer ULEZs were introduced, people had years to prepare. In this case, we have nine months. The average family cannot save up to buy a car that quickly, especially when household bills are rising, and we know that they are. Small businesses and charities may be forced to replace one vehicle or even a fleet that they had banked on being able to use for many years to come.

Who will be hit? The Mayor of London does not seem to understand who will pick up the bill for his policies. It is not wealthy Londoners—it is ordinary working people, on the poorer end of the socioeconomic spectrum, who are less likely to be able to upgrade their car, and more likely to own an older vehicle. There is a myth that Mayor Khan attempts to spread around that low-income Londoners do not own cars, or drive in Greater London. That is categorically false. What is more, he knows it. The “Travel in London” report produced by TfL in 2019 shows that, by its own analysis, 50% of outer London households earning as little as £10,000 own a car. Car ownership rockets to in excess of 70% for those earning upwards of £20,000. According to TfL's impact assessment, low-income Londoners are more likely to own non-compliant vehicles. The ULEZ expansion is not a tax on wealthy drivers, but on poorer people who simply cannot afford to buy a new vehicle.

In my constituency, we do not have tubes or trams. We have trains that go into central London and we have private vehicles. Some 83% of Orpington households own a car, meaning that a great number of my constituents could be liable to pay the charge. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), many of my constituents use their car every day to go to work, to the shops and to visit family and friends. Under the Mayor's plan, they face a potentially disastrous annual bill of £4,500.

Other Members have spoken about the impact on public services. More than half of Greater London's police officers and firefighters and around a fifth of the workers in my local NHS trust come into Greater London from outside. Those who work in outer London and those who work in shift work are especially reliant on their cars. Someone on a night shift faces a double whammy of a £12.50 charge driving to work, and a £12.50 charge after midnight when they drive home. It could cost them £25 per shift to go and do their work.

The ULEZ expansion will also impact on businesses in outer London. Many people drive in from Kent to shop in Petts Wood in my constituency. TfL estimates that 8% have non-compliant vehicles. Rather than paying £12.50 a time, many will simply choose to shop and visit elsewhere, depriving London's high streets of customers.

Many drivers, both in London and those who travel from outside to work, shop or visit outer boroughs, are unaware that they may face an even higher bill. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford about the increase in the level of fines—up to £180. The Mayor has just hiked the fine from £130 to £160, and will go further from January next year, raising it to £180. If a driver crosses into Greater London, perhaps unaware of the boundary or unaware of the existence of the charge or that their vehicle is not compliant, they will unknowingly rack up a crippling high bill. Potentially as many as 12,000 cars and vans a day may be hit by a fine.

The RAC estimates that Transport for London could raise £260 million a year by imposing those penalties. To put that into context, Churchill Insurance estimated that the total parking fines raised by every council in the country combined would come to £250 million—£10 million lower than Transport for London would make with those penalties in the first year. TfL could in fact earn significantly more than that, because if not all drivers pay within 14 days—reducing the penalty from £180 to £90—that could raise £390 million every year.

The Mayor of London has not been a success in office. The Metropolitan police and the London Fire Brigade are both in special measures. Violent crime has reached record highs, and it has not abated. He is not on target to deliver enough affordable homes, despite what he boasted about as being the largest settlement from central Government on record. Crossrail was years late and billions of pounds over budget, with billions more lost in fares that were never raised.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is about to get back on to low emission zones.

Gareth Bacon: Indeed I am. The point I am trying to make is that Sadiq Khan is looking for something he can point to and claim as his. Leaving aside the fact that the ultra low emission zone was not even his idea—it was conceived and the preparatory work was done under my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—the Mayor has adopted it as his big idea. The expansion of the ultra low emission zone to outer London has no mandate or popular support. It will do almost nothing for air quality, it will be economically damaging and it will hit the poorest hardest—damaging not just those who live in outer London but millions who live outside Greater London. It is an appalling and unjust policy and it should be scrapped.

3.16 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who is also my constituency neighbour, for securing the debate.

It has been said:

“As Sadiq Khan shows in London, Labour in power delivers.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the Leader of the Opposition from April this year. They feel very appropriate, given today's debate on ULEZ—and because it is pantomime season, after all. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) just pointed out some highlights from the Mayor's time in power; he mentioned Crossrail, and the Mayor's record on the Metropolitan police and the London Fire Brigade.

I will stick to the subject of ULEZ, Mr Hosie, as you have asked. It is the last outrageous tax raid on drivers in outer London. We have had the Mayor's share of council tax increase by 43% since he entered office, and it is expected to rise to above £400 next year. The ULEZ rise—a tax rise—on drivers in outer London and the neighbouring counties will hammer families, small businesses and emergency service workers with bills of around £4,500 a year to drive. I am not sure that even the champagne socialists of north London could afford that bill. If that shows what Labour in power delivers, then this really is the nightmare before Christmas for the British public.

As we have heard from hon. Members already, the ULEZ expansion was overwhelmingly opposed by the public, despite the consultation clearly being skewed to try to give TfL and the Mayor the answers they were looking for. It has also raised a number of serious issues and questions, including the process and powers being used by the Mayor to push it through, which I hope the Minister will look closely at. First, there are questions about whether the Mayor has the mandate to do this, given that it was not in his manifesto, and the impact of the expansion will also be felt outside the Greater London boundaries. That is alongside the fact that local authorities have a statutory duty over air quality, and several boroughs are opposed to the policy. Secondly, as highlighted already, the proposals were overwhelmingly rejected in the consultation by around 70% to 80% of people in outer London.

It is clear to see why people are so furious about the decision, especially with the current cost of living challenges. In Bexley alone, the area I am proud to serve, around 30,000 vehicles will be directly impacted, hammering businesses, families and key workers with the bill of £12.50 a day, or £4,500 a year. By introducing the charge in August, it gives people hardly any time to switch vehicles. Barely a day goes by without a constituent stopping me in the street and highlighting how ULEZ will impact them. They include pensioners who rarely drive, but need their car to go shopping or to hospital appointments, families who need to drop off their kids to different schools each morning before going to work, tradesman who need their vans for their tools and to get to jobs, and shops on the boundary, which fear that customers will stop coming into Greater London from the likes of Dartford because of the ULEZ charge.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman support the investment in the extra 1 million km of bus network in outer London and the investment of £110 million in scrappage to get rid of 15% of more polluting cars, or not?

Mr French: I will happily answer the hon. Member's question, because our buses in outer London have actually been cut—if he checks Bexley's record, he will see that our bus routes have been cut. I will come on to the scrappage scheme later, to cover the exact point that the hon. Member is trying to make.

Alongside the clearly negative impact of the ULEZ expansion on businesses and hard-working families in my area, it is also important to highlight that over 50% of blue light workers in London live outside the capital, and 90% of care workers nationally use their own cars for work. That expansion will create many knock-on issues for the emergency services in the likes of Bexley, including—as we have heard—the doubling of charges for those working nights, an issue that was also highlighted in *The Daily Telegraph* a few weeks ago. It will also negatively impact patients, with my local hospital, Queen Mary's Hospital Sidcup, sharing a number of services and nurses with the likes of Dartford. These are all issues that I do not believe have been properly thought through, as the Mayor desperately seeks to fill the black hole in TfL's finances that he has created.

Bexley does not have the underground, and like many other London boroughs it does not have the same transport options and connectivity as central London, so it is extremely unfair that the Mayor of London is proposing plans for ULEZ expansion. In recent years, as I have said, we have also seen our bus and other services cut by the Mayor of London, and there is nothing in his so-called reinvestment plans that will help areas such as Bexley and in the south-east. The scrappage scheme announced by the Mayor does not even come close to matching demand, or addressing the costs and practical issues associated with buying a new vehicle, and the fact that he is forecast to spend double that amount—roughly £250 million of taxpayers' money—to install cameras to fine people again highlights how this policy is designed to raise money, rather than improve air quality.

That point is supported by the fact that the Mayor's own independent impact report on the policy highlighted a negligible impact on improving air quality in outer London areas such as mine, which are very different from central London and have already seen an improvement in air quality. For example, in its consultation response to the Mayor, Bexley council highlighted that air quality has been improving already, and that Bexley was one of 11 boroughs that recorded no population exceeding air quality thresholds. The Government have also brought forward their plans and investment to improve air quality, with £880 million of support for local authorities to take immediate steps to reduce nitrogen dioxide, and £2 billion of investment in cycling and walking over the course of this Parliament—the largest ever boost for active travel.

If the Mayor of London wants to help tackle air pollution rather than raise money, further investment should be made to support people with the transition to electric vehicles, including the installation of more electric

vehicle charging points and leading by example with TfL's own bus fleet. With traffic having been highlighted as one of the main causes of air pollution, there also needs to be a review of the impact of the Mayor's road closures on increasing traffic and, potentially, emissions across London, closures that have again—by coincidence, I am sure—raised millions in fines for Labour councils in the capital. Dare I even mention the Silvertown tunnel, which will likely encourage more vehicles to drive through south-east and east London, and appears to be completely inconsistent with the Mayor's so-called championing of air quality?

I again urge the Minister to do everything in his and the Government's power to stop this disastrous ULEZ policy, which will hammer families, businesses and the emergency services in Bexley, Greater London and neighbouring counties. As I and other colleagues have highlighted today, the impact of ULEZ will go much further than the boundaries of London, and—once the cameras are installed—will likely lead to further taxes on drivers that I believe will be inconsistent with national transport policy. As such, I ask the Minister and the Government to please review the situation urgently, and if the Mayor of London is listening, I call on him to stop the virtue signalling and worrying about his book sales and to put hard-working Londoners first by U-turning on this tax raid on drivers in Greater London. If he does not, it is clearly time for this failing son of a bus driver to get off at the next stop, before calls for the Mayor to get scrapped get even louder.

3.24 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing the debate, because much of what he and other colleagues have said so far about the impact that this scheme is going to have on their constituents certainly rings true for Carshalton and Wallington.

I note that not a single Liberal Democrat has turned up to the debate. Given that the Lib Dems voted for this policy in the Greater London Assembly, actually lamented that it took Labour so long to implement its policy and two Lib Dem boroughs have passed motions to support it, including Sutton, I am surprised that none of them could be bothered to come and defend it, but there we go.

I do not want to repeat what has been said about the ULEZ so far, but I want to highlight the severe impact this change will have on people in Carshalton and Wallington. As the Minister for London, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who is no longer in his place, pointed out, 30% or 30,000 vehicles in the London Borough of Sutton are non-compliant, according to TfL's own data. That is 30,000 people whose livelihoods will be impacted by this change in a matter of months, as the Mayor has given people next to no time to prepare for it.

As has been said already, this change will hit the poorest Londoners hardest. What many will not be aware of, and will be shocked to hear, is that there are no exemptions in this ULEZ expansion to support small businesses, charities, keyworkers or the elderly, and there is very little in place to support disabled people. These are people who rely on their cars.

Sutton has a public transport accessibility level of just 2, because we have no tram, no tube network, no London Overground and no Crossrail. We have a few National Rail services to central London, which are currently being reduced due to Govia Thameslink Railway's timetable changes, and a limited bus network. We have also seen this Mayor of London cut the Tramlink extension from Croydon to Sutton, despite the money already being in place when he took office, and we have had no investment or improvement in our bus network.

The question a lot of my constituents are asking is: "What can I do?" They cannot afford £12.50 a day. They cannot afford an annual fee of £4,500, or even the £3,000 that is the more conservative estimate for those who do not use their car every day. My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) has already outlined that the scrappage scheme lauded as the apparent solution does not, in reality, even touch the sides. Back in May, even Sadiq Khan himself said that the scrappage scheme would need something like £180 million to cover everyone who would be affected, and even that was probably an underestimate. Furthermore, the scheme is open to those who were rejected last time, and two thirds of people were rejected last time. It is a system that will only breed more disappointment and discontent, with more people missing out.

The scrappage scheme is not the answer, but what is the Mayor's answer, and what is Labour's answer? I can tell hon. Members, because they were asked in the London Assembly. My London Assembly Member, Neil Garrett, asked the Mayor of London, "What should I tell my constituents if they can't afford this charge?" The answer, not from the Mayor, but from a Labour Assembly Member was, almost word for word, "Well, a new car that is compliant is only about £3,000. Just go and buy one." That is the political equivalent of Paris Hilton wearing a t-shirt saying "Stop being poor".

That is the answer people are getting from the Labour party, backed up by the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, who are all saying the same thing: "If you can't afford it, tough. You are going to have to live with it, or give up your car, give up your job and move out of London. You are not welcome here."

I commend the work that is being done by Conservative-run boroughs in outer London, including Bromley, Bexley, Croydon, Harrow and Hillingdon, to do everything they possibly can, but I would like the Minister to feel the anger from our constituents and the huge impact that this change will have, not just on individuals, but on businesses and charities, and on the most vulnerable who live in outer London, and outside London.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford set out very eloquently, this is taxation without representation for many people living on the outskirts of London. I represent a constituency that borders Surrey. The border between my constituency and Surrey is a small country lane, which leads from the lavender fields into Woodmansterne—this is not somewhere with huge trunk roads and traffic coming in and out of London. Yet the people who live on the other half of Carshalton Road have no say in who the Mayor is and cannot do anything about this policy.

I strongly urge the Minister to take this away. I would be grateful to hear what advice he has received about the Government's powers in this respect, and I ask him to join us in urging the Mayor of London to scrap this

policy. It will hit the poorest Londoners and our constituents the hardest, and it will do little to nothing to tackle air quality; as we heard so eloquently from my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), the Mayor's own impact assessment says that it has nothing to do with air quality. The policy has no public support and he does not have a mandate for it in his manifesto.

In reality, if this is not about air quality what is it about? We have already heard that it is about money, but it is about much more than that. TfL has already employed people to work on a road user charging scheme. Once these cameras are in place, be in no doubt that the Mayor of London is keen to expand the ultra low emission zone to be a road user charging scheme instead; he will expand the eligibility of the number of cars that are captured by it.

The ultimate goal for this Mayor—he has been quite open about this in his own consultation documents—is to have a policy whereby every single Londoner is charged every single time they use their car, regardless of how new or old it is. That is what he wants, and the camera network for ULEZ is the first step towards that. We need to stop it and he needs to rethink; otherwise, we will see a massive amount of problems coming from our constituents who cannot pay this unaffordable charge.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Dean Russell, with a maximum of seven minutes.

3.31 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Unlike the buses, I will be on time. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for calling this really important debate.

I hope that the Mayor has been watching the debate to hear the forensic take-down of the reasons behind the policy. It has been quite powerful hearing colleagues speak about the actual facts behind this, because it is a really important debate that will affect constituents who cannot vote for the Mayor. This is about fairness and democracy. It is unfair that situations such as this will hit my constituents in the pocket and perhaps stop them from going to work, shopping or picking up their kids from school; charging them when they have no ability to stop that happening feels utterly wrong.

I recommend that anyone who wants to know the facts behind this should watch the forensic take-down that my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) presented earlier. I do not think that I will be able to match the detail that he gave, but some of his key points related to the fact that even the Mayor's consultation said that this should not go ahead. Some of the feedback from respondents that I have read includes the point that the scheme penalises workers—correct. It comes at a time of increased cost of living; that is the case, sadly, as we are living in difficult times. This is about the affordability of daily charges, and it would be to the detriment of the local economy in London and to those who want to travel near London to places such as Watford in my constituency.

One of the key elements here is voting. Liberal Democrat and Labour Greater London Authority members voted for this, and my constituents did not have a say; again, that is completely wrong. This is ultimately putting an invisible wall around London. Some of my constituents

[Dean Russell]

probably will not even realise that they have gone through that invisible wall, and will be charged and impacted by something that they may not have known was coming in. As was stated earlier, this is happening in a very short period of time; it is a matter of months. There is no long consultation or period of time when people can prepare for this or buy a new car. Hon. Members have made the point that it is not easy to just go out and buy a car; the people who think that that is one of the solutions are really speaking nonsense, because the people on the lowest incomes are those who will probably be hit the hardest.

There are some legacy issues in Watford. For a long time there has been an argument about a Metropolitan line extension to Watford, and I understand that it was TfL and Sadiq Khan who stopped that from happening. If he really cares about people using public transport he would have helped to put in the additional funding, which was already being organised by Hertfordshire County Council and other organisations, to ensure that the line would be extended, but that did not happen. The argument is now that we should not use our cars, and that seems utterly wrong.

As I said earlier, my constituents have commented on this issue. In my intervention, I mentioned a charity that transports emergency blood and breastmilk to premature babies, and urgent medical samples—24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Its volunteers use their own cars and time, without compensation. Many of those vehicles may not be compliant, and the charity wrote to me to share its response to the proposed ULEZ expansion. It wrote to TfL, which said that it would not discount or exempt the emergency medical transport charity, citing the importance of air quality. I am sorry, but that does not seem fair or right. I get that there might be legacy situations across the country with similar schemes, but this is a new scheme. It seems utterly wrong that TfL cannot build an exemption into a brand new scheme.

I want to talk about the new technologies coming through. I met representatives of a business in my constituency that does carbon cleaning for engines, and they showed that they can massively reduce the amount of carbon coming out of cars and reduce emissions quite extensively. I have seen nothing in the consultation and the plans for expanding the ULEZ that will allow people to use new technology and new systems, or even to start looking at ways to get exemptions so that they could keep their cars but automatically reduce the emissions.

I join Conservative colleagues in saying that this is not a political point; this is about hard-working people who just want to live their lives. Extending the ULEZ, which will affect places outside London—I am not a London MP—seems wrong. Measures need to be taken to stop it happening, but we have no way to do that. I would like the Minister to tell us whether there are ways for us to take this issue to the Government in order to say, “Can we say to the Mayor that this is wrong?”. We need a longer period of time to bring in the expanded ULEZ, but ultimately we need to try to stop it, because it is not going to deliver the supposedly clean air that will be used as the platform for this. Actually, it is just going to cost hard-working people more money at a time of difficulty.

3.37 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing the debate.

I am going to scrap my speech for a second. One of the great honours of living in London for part of the week is understanding how absolutely fantastic the public transport system is. If you try to get back to Manchester today on an Avanti train, Godspeed to you all. If you have tried to get across the Pennines over the last few months, Godspeed to you all. I have had the great honour in my nearly nine years as an MP to spend one day a month walking in London. I have done the London loop, so unfortunately I have walked through most of the places represented by the hon. Members present, including Orpington, Petts Wood, Ruislip, Wallington and Watford. What a beautiful place London is. I am still astonished by the quality of the public transport system, which is second to none on this planet and the envy of everybody outside this great conurbation.

Every year, 4,000 Londoners die prematurely due to poisonous air, and the greatest number of deaths are in outer London boroughs, with 11 Londoners dying prematurely every day. Air pollution is quite simply a matter of life and death; it makes our communities sick. Despite the Government’s promise that there would be no weakening of environmental targets post Brexit, it seems that they are refusing to match the EU standards, setting a weaker target while sentencing our children and communities to an unnecessary 10 years of toxic air.

The challenge is threefold: we must tackle toxic air pollution, we must deal with the climate emergency, and we must deal with traffic congestion. I was at the Sutton Ecology Centre at the weekend, and I saw just how congested the A232 is and the problems there.

Elliot Colburn: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the A232 is only congested because the Mayor of London has scrapped the A232 review that he promised to do?

Mike Kane: The A232 is actually congested because there are too many vehicles on it—that is what congestion is. London is a beautiful town, so I do not know why we allow it to happen. It is incredible to me.

The Government’s own watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, says that the Government have failed to announce new targets, as they should have done under the Environment Act 2021, and that the new Government air quality targets are too weak and will condemn another generation to poor air.

We know that around 85% of vehicles driving in outer London already meet the pollution standards. Mayor Khan has introduced the biggest scrappage scheme yet: £110 million in support for Londoners on low incomes, disabled Londoners, micro-businesses and charities to scrap or retrofit their non-compliant vehicles. He has extended the exemption period for them and for community transport. As the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) said, the scheme was devised under the last Mayor of London, but it has taken Mayor Khan to implement it.

As was already pointed out, the Mayor also announced plans to add an extra 1 million kilometres to the bus network—much of that in outer London. Again, that requires leadership and support from central Government. The Government's clean air fund excludes applications from London boroughs and the Greater London Authority. London's share would amount to around £42 million, which would have gone a long way to expanding or supporting the Mayor's £110 million scrappage fund.

I am a Greater Manchester MP. We have had problems. There are nitrogen dioxide sewers—controlled by Highways England—going through my constituency. If those roads were factories, they would have been shut down. They are simply not acceptable in this day and age. Local authorities were given a legal direction to clean up the air by 2024, and like Birmingham, Bradford and Portsmouth, they had to act, but Ministers have comprehensively failed to provide the necessary funding. Ministers need to help families and small businesses switch to electric vehicles, and they must take action to expand charging infrastructure. Plumbers who use their vans for work are being priced out of this revolution. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for having two brothers who are plumbers—wouldn't we all want that?

This week, we learned that instead of charging ahead, the Government are slipping back on the charging infrastructure strategy. Rapid charging fund trials have been delayed, changes to planning rules have been kicked into the long grass, and take-up of the on-street charging scheme is anaemic. Labour's plan for green growth will drive jobs, tackle the cost of living and help to clean up toxic air. There will be help for families with the cost of switching to electric vehicles, and we will provide the action we need to tackle toxic air. Britain is the only country in the developed world where private bus operators set routes and fares with no say from the public. That is not the case in London, but it is for bus services outside London. I was delighted to see the work that Andy Burnham has done as Mayor of Greater Manchester in setting the £2 fares, which the Government are now copying.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Putney, who spoke eloquently about the problems of Putney High Street, which is one of the most polluted places in the country. As somebody who rides a bike to Richmond Park occasionally, I have to go and experience it. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies); he is in charge of his facts, and gave powerful personal testimony about asthma and his children.

Let me say this to Conservative Members, genuinely and from the bottom of my heart: where there are low-traffic neighbourhoods, and where cars are tackled, electoral popularity rises. Tackling air pollution is electorally popular. I look at the percentage chances of Conservative Members winning their seats in the next election. In Dartford, they have a 64% chance of losing. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) has a 57% chance of losing. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) has a 64% chance of losing. No wonder the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) is going on about the Lib Dems—they have a 52% chance of winning that seat.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. That is jolly interesting, but the topic is the ultra low emission zone.

Mike Kane: I can hear the Risographs of activists in London churning out leaflets about their Members of Parliament who do not want to support clean air. That is a clear divide, and I urge Members to get on the right side of it.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing the debate. On ultra low emissions, we heard quite a few emissions from the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), but I am not sure that any of them were really relevant to the broader debate. He seemed to praise the Mayor of Greater Manchester for what he is up to. The Mayor stopped his ULEZ. I am not sure that the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East are on the same page regarding the Mayor of Greater Manchester, given the Leader of the Opposition's recent jokes at the Mayor's expense.

The need to tackle air pollution is something on which I hope that Members on both sides of the House—and indeed the Government and the Mayor of London—agree, to answer the question from the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). Air pollution is a big environmental risk to human health, and the Government are determined to tackle it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) said, that is why we have invested more than £800 million to tackle air pollution in 64 local council areas. Much more can be done, although we can be proud that air pollution has reduced significantly since 2010, with emissions of particulate matter down by 18% and nitrogen oxides down by 44%, to their lowest level since records began.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) made very clear in a tour de force speech, ULEZ will have only a minor or negligible impact, as the Jacobs report has said. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) put forward various sensible solutions. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) also reflected some of the issues, particularly around accessibility of public transport. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, the expansion to the London boundary was not in the Mayor's manifesto—a point reflected by my hon. Friends the Members for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for Orpington, and for Watford (Dean Russell). It was against the Mayor's manifesto and against his own consultation. Those are not political points, as some Opposition Members would like to suggest; they are facts, eloquently put forward by hon. Members.

David Simmonds: I commend the Minister on the work that he has been doing on buses. Does he agree that the fact that the Labour group in Hillingdon Council supports the Conservatives' campaign against ULEZ is evidence that this is not a matter of party politics but one of people putting their constituents and residents first?

Mr Holden: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. It was interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who is not in the Chamber at the moment. She seemed to be on a slightly different page from some of the other Labour Whips' remarks from the other hon. Members present.

Many hon. Members have spoken clearly and eloquently about the anger that their constituents feel about what is going on. I hope that the Mayor, the Labour party in London, the Lib Dems and the Greens hear that too. The Mayor of London, however, needs no agreement from the Government to pursue his proposed expansion of ULEZ. He is doing so using powers granted to him under section 295 and schedule 23 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to implement any road schemes that charge users within greater London. He has previously used those powers to introduce the congestion charge, the low emission zone, and the current ultra low emission zone. While he has notified my Department of his intention, he is not obliged to consult us. As hon. Members will also be aware, the Department for Transport will not provide any of the £250 million that the scheme needs in order to be set up.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), my right hon. Friends the Members for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) and for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and other hon. Members from across the south-east of England who have also made representations to me on this matter, and who met with me recently. Sadly, the Government do not have the power to veto the Mayor's decision. There has been some suggestion that the Secretary of State has powers under section 143 of the GLA Act to block the measure.

Geraint Davies: The Minister will know that it is the 10-year anniversary of the death of Ella Kissi-Debrah, who was the first person to have air pollution listed as the cause of death on her death certificate. Will he support the Clean Air (Human Rights) Bill that went through the Lords completely, with the support of Conservatives, and its ambition to introduce World Health Organisation air quality standards, ideally by 2030?

Mr Holden: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman, we have already made substantial progress in that area. On the specifics of any legislation, I will write to him.

I have been advised by my officials in the strongest terms that section 143 of the GLA Act is focused on correcting inconsistencies between national policy and the Mayor's transport strategy. It is not intended to be used to block specific measures that the Mayor would like to introduce under the devolution settlement.

Hon. Members raised two specific issues about councils and their land and about council consent and the environment. I will write to Members on those issues, as well as the other issues that they raised with me recently. In fact, I will write to Members across the House in the coming days.

I understand the concerns of hon. Members. Estimates show that approximately 160,000 cars and 42,000 vans that use London's roads would be liable for the £12.50 ULEZ charge on an average day—approximately 8% of cars and 18% of journeys. But it is not just about the

charge of around £1 million a day, as hon. Members have said. It is also about the fines, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said.

In spite of the hundreds of millions of pounds that it is proposed will be raised annually, the Mayor has announced a new £110 million pound scrappage scheme to help certain Londoners prepare for expansion. The scheme will launch at the end of next month, but it will be open only to certain residents and to Londoners, not those from outside London who are affected and travel in every day, including 50% of people who work in blue light services. They will not be touched by that scheme at all. Moreover, it will only be for those on specific benefits, including universal credit. There will be no help at all for the majority of Londoners affected, with many small and medium-sized businesses, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam said, left to bear that heavy burden alone.

As the hon. Member for Putney quoted from the FSB report, I will cite it as well. For businesses that do not currently comply with the zone, 25% said that they will immediately pass any increase on to customers directly, creating further inflationary pressure, and 18% of firms—almost one in five—said that they would close their business. That is from a Federation of Small Businesses press release today.

Fleur Anderson: The Federation of Small Businesses has asked the Government to deal with this by topping up the scrappage scheme. Will the Minister consider topping up the scrappage scheme to help more people, as he has outlined?

Mr Holden: It is interesting that the Labour party would like the Government to fund that out of general taxation. I suggest that the Mayor of London should look at that. If it is his policy, he should seek to fund it.

Mike Kane: No leadership!

Mr Holden: There is certainly no leadership from the Mayor of London, as we can see from all the hon. Members here, and there is certainly no leadership from the Lib Dems, who were too scared to turn up to this debate. I think the hon. Gentleman and I can agree on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington made a really important point about grace periods, because the exemptions are very limited. Points were also made by the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who spoke passionately about charities. Grace periods will be extended for disabled and disabled passenger vehicles as well as wheelchair-accessible private hire vehicles. Those categories will be exempt only until October 2027. Minibuses used for community transport, the charities my hon. Friend spoke about, will be exempt only until October 2025. Some of those charities are in outer London and many work across the south-east—they will not even be able to apply for the scrappage scheme.

In addition, NHS patients may be eligible to claim back under the Mayor's plans, but only if they are clinically assessed as too ill to travel to an appointment on public transport. It is not about whether the transport

is available, but about whether they are too ill to travel on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner made the really good point that it is not available at all in many parts of outer London. As he said, the choice just is not there for many of his constituents, and it is not there for many other Members' constituents, either.

Currently, emergency vehicles are exempt from ULEZ and LEZ charges. However, the sunset period lasts only until October 2023, which is months away. Has an assessment been made of the impact on London services, including the ambulance service, the Metropolitan Police Service and the fire service? It will be interesting to see that, if there is one. There will also be an impact on the council tax bills of Londoners.

Several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, asked questions about the Mayor's authority. Specifically, they are concerned that the Mayor may apply ULEZ charges to motor vehicles that are current under the scheme today, such as compliant petrol, diesel and hybrid vehicles.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Holden: I am sorry, but I will make further progress.

I reassure Members that if that were to occur, the Government would explore what more could be done and consider whether the Mayor was using his authority properly and fairly, without detriment to even more people. It is clear that the Mayor is prepared to go well beyond any pledges or manifesto he was elected on in order to pursue his own objectives.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East made an interesting point about there being no Government support for TfL or transport. He needs to look at the amount of support that the Government provide to the Labour Mayor of London. We understand that the pressure on Transport for London has been huge. Before covid, 70% of TfL's revenue came from passenger fares, but passenger journeys reduced by as much as 95%. Fare income has recovered, but it is still less than nine tenths of what it was previously.

The TfL long-term funding settlement of 30 August provided TfL with £1.2 billion until the end of March 2024. That takes total Government funding of TfL to more than £6 billion since the beginning of the pandemic, or £650 for every Londoner. What has the Mayor done with the money? The £1.2 billion matches the Mayor's own pre-pandemic spending. It will ensure that London's transport network remains protected against potential lost revenue and the uncertainty of post-pandemic demand. Furthermore, it will enable the delivery of a number of projects set to revolutionise travel across London, including supporting £3.6 billion-worth of critical infrastructure projects, which will benefit not just London but the wider economy.

The Government have supported and helped passengers to benefit from major upgrades to our world-class transport network, including the Elizabeth line, which opened recently. The settlement also requires the Mayor and TfL to control their operating costs and to continue to progress initiatives to modernise, reform and become more efficient. We have been clear that the Mayor needs to put TfL on to a financially sustainable footing. In no way, however, does that require ULEZ expansion. That is clear. Taxpayers across the UK have had to support TfL continually. It is imperative that they get a fair deal.

The purpose of devolution is that decisions are taken by elected local politicians, not in this House or in Whitehall. Labour, the Lib Dems and the Greens need to know that political decisions have political consequences, and that there are political solutions to them. Were I the Mayor of London, I would not be going down the path he has chosen—but I am not. If Londoners do not like the decisions that he has taken, they will have the opportunity to have their say in 2024. In their local elections, I am sure that hon. Members will make it clear about the Mayor of London's policies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartmouth for bringing this matter to the attention of the Government. I thank hon. Members from all across the south-east for their ongoing work, and I will continue to use my role in Government to work with them. As I said, in the coming days I will write to all hon. Members across London and the south-east on the important questions asked not only in the debate, but in other recent meetings and by Members who have approached me. I also assure Members that, across Government, we will continue to ensure that the Mayor of London is held accountable for his decisions in our capital city.

3.58 pm

Gareth Johnson: Briefly, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to what has been a productive and constructive debate. I am grateful to the Minister for his efforts in challenging this whole policy of the London Mayor. No one disputes the fact that we need clean air. In Dartford, we have very poor air. Frankly, however, that is a mask used by the Mayor of London to increase taxation. It is about raising money. It just so happens that it raises hundreds of millions of pounds for him. And it just so happens that he has a black hole in his finances and wants to bring in a broader charge, taxing every motor vehicle. This is about money and not about pollution.

I feel sick to my stomach that people who cannot vote out the Mayor of London—such as Dartfordians—cannot do a thing about this. That is not right or fair. The whole thing should be stopped, but I hear what the Minister says about his inability to do so. It is the most unfair situation that I can recall ever being put into.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Entrepreneurs from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

4 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for entrepreneurs from ethnic minority backgrounds.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate, and I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place.

I represent in Parliament the eastern half of the London Borough of Newham, which is probably the most ethnically diverse community on the planet. Last year's census showed that just 45% of residents were born in the UK, and that 52% identify as Asian, compared with 9% nationally, and another 14% identify as black. Some 25% identify as white, compared with 82% nationally, so ethnic minority entrepreneurship is very important for the prosperity of the community that I represent. I regret the closure of the Department for Work and Pensions support programme for self-employment, with no sign of a replacement as yet. That programme gave helpful support to a significant number of my constituents to start up in business for themselves.

Minority-led businesses have made a lot of progress. Minority Supplier Development UK, a not-for-profit membership group that champions diversity and inclusion in public and private sector supply chains, highlighted in a report last year called "Minority Businesses Matter" that of the UK's 23 unicorns—start-ups valued at \$1 billion or more—eight had ethnic minority founders, including Deliveroo. That gives a sense of the huge potential in this area, which we need to realise much more. In May, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry published the report "Ethnic Diversity in Business". I commend the work of Esenam Agubretu and her colleagues. That report identifies the barriers that minority-led businesses face.

In 2021, about 14% of the UK population was from an ethnic minority background, but ethnic minority-led businesses constituted just 5% of small and medium-sized enterprises in 2020, and those businesses also tend to be in lower-paying sectors. We need to be doing much better than that. The economic contribution of ethnic minority-led businesses is large, but the potential is larger still. Baroness McGregor-Smith's 2017 review, "Race in the workplace", concluded that

"If BME talent is fully utilised, the economy could receive a £24 billion boost."

We need to realise that opportunity. The Social Market Foundation has found that ethnic minority-led businesses are often more innovative, with a lot to contribute to levelling up the economy, and that the economy is weaker because those businesses lack support.

I want to highlight two main points arising from the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry report: the need to address the barriers that ethnic minority businesses face in accessing finance, and the need for better data on how those businesses are getting on. The key barrier, and the focus of that report, is problems accessing finance. Black entrepreneurs in particular report bad experiences with banks, and Asian entrepreneurs struggle to access funding outside their own communities.

Those who do apply for funding are far less likely to receive it. The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry quotes Ismail Oshodi describing his experience:

"we had different people dealing with us and I had to repeat myself on several occasions, even with all of that, we were unable to get the amount we needed. We weren't given a clear reason why, we was just told we did not meet their criteria."

The LCCI says that 44% of black African business owners and 39% of black Caribbean business owners fear prejudice from financial providers, compared with just 4% of white owners. Let us be frank: racism is part of the problem. It is not that the banks do not recognise the problem; they do, and they are trying to do something about it. UK Finance published a report in July, "Supporting Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship in the UK", which profiled numerous initiatives. HSBC sponsored last year's Black Business Week and Black Business Show. Santander works with a network of women of colour in business and supports a black inclusion programme. NatWest has a racial equality taskforce and an ethnicity advisory council. Barclays has a black founders accelerator.

The initiatives that I have seen most of are those supported by Lloyds bank. It has a black business advisory committee, chaired by Claudine Reid MBE, whom I first met when I was a Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry 20 years ago. I had embarked on a tour of social enterprises and found myself at PJ's in Croydon, set up and run by Claudine and her husband. I also know the work Lloyds does with the Black Business Network, founded and chaired by Shari Leigh, which was highlighted to me by my former constituent Shi Dolor, whom I knew when she was a teenager and whose Noir Squared branding business has worked with the network.

In September, the network published the second of three annual reports called "Black. British. In Business ...and Proud!" As a Lloyds executive recognises in her foreword, it makes for "uncomfortable reading". The report refers to a

"breakdown in trust of formal institutions",

and reports that 67% of black business owners have been negatively discriminated against in their past entrepreneurial efforts, that 84% of business owners see racism and society's attitude to black entrepreneurs as a barrier to their business, and that black business owners turn to their friends, black business community groups or social media groups rather than banks for advice and support.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this vital debate to the House. Does he agree that where there is intersectionality between ethnic minority groups and disability or gender, the barriers faced by people can be multiplied, and that banks and the Government should also take that into account?

Sir Stephen Timms: I very much agree with the hon. Member. That point is made in the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry report, and she is right to highlight it.

Over half of black business owners say that they have seen banks taking action to deal with the problem, but only 12% think that that action taken is significant. Minority-led businesses also account for very little venture

capital investment, less than 2% of which went to all-ethnic founder teams in 2019, according to the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Black African firms are four times more likely than white firms to be refused a loan, according to the British Business Bank. Mainstream services do not seem to be working for ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority groups have less wealth than their white counterparts, and there is a strong correlation between that and business success. They have fewer savings, so they are more reliant on external financial support.

Given that, it is no surprise that minority-led businesses do less well. According to London Chamber of Commerce and Industry research, 38% of Asian and other minority business owners and 28% of black business owners reported making no profit, compared with 16% of white business owners. Thirty-nine per cent. of black entrepreneurs and nearly half of Asian and other ethnic minority entrepreneurs stopped working on their business idea because of “difficulties getting finance”, compared with a much smaller proportion—just a quarter—of white entrepreneurs.

We need to be doing better than this, for the sake of not just business owners but the wider prosperity of our society. I welcome the Labour party review of start-up funding, led by Lord O'Neill, who was a Treasury Minister in the coalition Government. The review will consider how to ensure that ethnic minority entrepreneurs can access the finance, support and networks they need. Newham-based Shpresa is a community organisation supporting self-help among London's Albanian community. It was founded and led by the remarkable Luljeta Nuzi, a social entrepreneur I first met when she came to the UK seeking asylum from Kosovo. She went on to graduate from the School for Social Entrepreneurs, and when today's debate was announced, she drew my attention to the school's match trading initiative, which provides enterprise grant finance, supported by Lloyds bank; the aim is that racially minoritised social enterprises should be early adopters.

When the Minister responds, can she give us the Government's assessment of the lending practices of financial institutions to ethnic minority businesses, and say whether she sees real progress being made? It is welcome that between 2012 and 2018, over 11,000 ethnic minority entrepreneurs received Government-backed start-up loans. The additional action that is needed is largely for the financial services industry, but there is one area where Government action is particularly needed: public procurement. A big section of the report by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry is devoted to this area, and it calls for a Government taskforce to work on increasing public procurement from ethnic minority businesses.

The LCCI wants the Government to move beyond merely “best endeavours” to introducing, for example, minimum target percentages for procurement from minority-owned businesses, in order to simplify procurement procedures and increase public purchasing from micro-businesses. It also wants tenders to be scored, in bid assessments, on supply chain diversity, and the Government to establish prestigious awards to highlight the achievements of minority-owned businesses.

In the LCCI's report, a quote caught my eye from Demi Ariyo, founder of a funding platform:

“It became clear to me that there was a problem to be solved upon witnessing my church's experience and hearing the first-hand experience of other minority ethnic entrepreneurs who had tried to seek funding.”

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on faith and society, I would like there to be greater support for entrepreneurship among people who are coming together in faith groups. Britain's history is replete with great businesses that have their roots in religious faith. Let us have more of them, and newer ones.

My second point is about the lack of reliable data on ethnic diversity in business, which the report describes as “a recurring theme”. Here again, we need action by Government and by business. Companies House does not record the ethnicity of company directors. There is no legal requirement for businesses to publish their ethnicity pay gap, although they are rightly obliged to publish their gender pay gap. In 2017, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), promised to ask large employers to publish their ethnicity pay gap data. It has not happened yet. Can the Minister tell us whether that 2017 commitment still stands, and if so, when it will be implemented?

The paucity of data means that there is a lot that we just do not know. Without detailed and reliable data on ethnic minority entrepreneurship, we cannot fully understand the barriers that exist, as we must if we are to remove them. In this recession, the gap between ethnic minorities and others in business may well get worse. We need to grip this issue now, so that trends can be monitored and support appropriately targeted. We cannot meet the needs of minority-led businesses without having adequate information about their characteristics and their performance.

In the LCCI report, Dr Tony Matharu, chair of the LCCI's Asian Business Association, and Lord Michael Hastings, chair of its Black Business Association, call for financial institutions to collect data about their support for ethnic minority businesses, as they do for women-led businesses under the Investing in Women code.

The two issues that I have highlighted are part of a much bigger set of challenges. When the Minister responds, can she assure us that the Government recognise the need, spelled out by the LCCI, for strategic engagement between the business community, Government and ethnic minority entrepreneurs?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I support the right hon. Gentleman's efforts on faith and society. As one of the officers of the all-party parliamentary group on black and minority ethnic business owners, I am supported by Diana Chrouh. I direct hon. Members' attention to an article in *The Sunday Times* of 14 February 2021, by Oliver Shah, talking to Wol Kolade, who has the initiative 10,000 Black Interns. He talks about unkinking the pipeline of black talent. It seems to me that letting people get through and do what they are capable of is what we should be aiming for.

Sir Stephen Timms: I completely agree with the Father of the House. I had not seen that article, but it sounds to me as though it makes exactly the case that needs to be made.

I wonder whether the Minister will commit to better engagement between the groups I mentioned, in order to boost diversity in business. Bridging this large and

[*Sir Stephen Timms*]

persistent ethnic diversity gap is not straightforward. Realising the potential to which the Father of House has rightly drawn our attention is a long-term challenge. We need to be determined to end racial and ethnic inequality across UK society, including when it comes to start-up support, and to closing gaps that have persisted for far too long.

I hope that the Minister can reassure us that the Government recognise the importance of the issue, and will set out plans to make sure that we can all benefit from the skills and contributions of all those who want to set up in business but are too often excluded by unfair and unnecessary barriers.

4.16 pm

The Minister for Industry and Investment Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. First, I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) on securing the debate, and on raising this important issue. I do not want anyone to think I am consumed by Christmas spirit, but I very much respect him, as does everyone in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We take every point that he raises very seriously.

The right hon. Member talked about his constituents, the fact that the majority of them were not born in the UK, and the challenges they face. That is me and my community. I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is responsible for enterprise, markets and small business, because I want to make sure that we take all the issues raised incredibly seriously.

To continue with the Christmas spirit, we can certainly agree on the importance of ethnic minority entrepreneurs and their valuable contribution to our vibrant business landscape. I will not disagree with the right hon. Member on the challenges that have been mentioned. It is testament to the dynamism and resilience of ethnic minority entrepreneurs that they continue to adapt, and that they overcome so much, especially during covid. From small retail stalls to tech unicorns, the value of ethnic minority founders must not be understated. I am pleased to have an opportunity to shine a light on this community and what they do for the broader community.

On all of the issues raised, there are no challenges from this side of the House, but let me focus on some of the barriers that were mentioned, and talk about what the Government are doing to support ethnic minority businesses and to encourage an inclusive entrepreneurship environment for all. As has been said, if we get this right, and fundamentally get finance right as well, we could make that environment incredibly dynamic, which would be a boost to all our local economies.

The economic impact of ethnic minority entrepreneurs is far-reaching, with some estimating the contribution to the UK economy to be worth up to £25 billion. However, the crucial role of these businesses is much more than just economic. Their impact reaches much further than across the business ecosystem. As was mentioned, these businesses are most likely to invest in innovation, which

is critical in helping us to achieve our ambitions around research and development investment and making the UK a science superpower. With more innovation comes improvement in productivity, so building on the potential of these businesses will be crucial to improving our productivity record.

What really matters to me is that these businesses operate in every region of the UK, including the most deprived parts. I doubt that East Ham is different from where I was brought up, Small Heath—an area often overlooked and underestimated. The efforts of black and Asian businesses are invaluable to ensuring that we level up across the country. Even more excitingly, these businesses are most likely to export, which puts them at the forefront of our efforts to harness global opportunities, which include our changing how we do business and diversifying our business models, especially now that we have left the EU.

Let me respond to some of the questions raised, starting with those about opportunities to access finance. Despite the impact of ethnic minority businesses, there is evidence to suggest that there are still barriers preventing them from reaching their full potential. Access to finance is regularly raised as one of the most significant issues holding those businesses back; there are reports of ethnic minority entrepreneurs keeping reservations about accessing financial assistance from traditional lenders.

As noted in the latest “Black. British. In Business & Proud” report from the Black Business Network and Lloyds Bank, 67% of black business people state that they have experienced some form of discrimination in their past entrepreneurial efforts, with only 40% trusting banks to have their best interests in mind. That has to change. The report’s recommendations rightly focus on improving the link between financial institutions, Government and the ethnic minority community as the best way forward. I will come back to some of the points raised to show how we are supporting ethnic minority entrepreneurs in accessing finance.

The issue of data was raised. In addition to the difficulties in accessing finance, the ongoing lack of data collection continues to inhibit funding opportunities for ethnic minority business leaders. Greater information sharing is crucial for bolstering our understanding of lending patterns, and this Government are committed to securing this transparency.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful for the case the Minister is making, and I agree with what she has said. On the point about Companies House, would it not be a welcome step if it recorded the ethnic origin of company directors, so that we had some sense of the scale of what is happening?

Ms Ghani: That is a very important point. As I am not the Minister responsible for that portfolio, I do not have an exact answer. Let me get through this speech; if the right hon. Gentleman is not satisfied, I will ensure that he is written to with that information.

Turning back to action 55, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working with the Investing in Women code signatories and with trade associations to pilot data collection on the ethnicity of entrepreneurs applying for finance.

Trust in institutions is low in many ethnic minority communities, who often struggle to get the experience or even the exposure required, or the support that they need to run a business effectively. One way that we are trying to help is by improving the communication flow between Government and the ethnic minority business community, engaging with businesses and the organisations that represent them directly to understand their specific needs. In terms of business support, black, Asian and ethnic minority business leaders value mentors more than any other ethnic group; they are more likely to want a mentor and more likely to value the impact of having one. It is reassuring to see organisations such as Be the Business championing the role of mentoring. Furthermore, our Help to Grow Management programme, with its delegated mentorship component, offers businesses a subsidised training course designed to improve leadership and management skills and address firm-level productivity challenges.

While we should celebrate the success and impressive contributions of these businesses, we must acknowledge our role in helping to tackle the remaining barriers to growth and prosperity, which were mentioned. Off the back of the British Business Bank's "Alone together" report, which emphasises the difficulties faced by ethnic minority entrepreneurs in accessing funding, we are working with stakeholders to understand what further interventions we can take.

Since its launch in 2012, the Government-backed start-up loans programme has issued around 20% of its loans to black, Asian and ethnic minority businesses. The future fund has also approved 1,190 convertible loans, totalling more than £1.1 billion. More than half—61.6%, to the value of £683.5 million—of the convertible loan agreements approved have been for companies with management teams consisting solely of ethnic minority team members and those with both ethnic minority and white team members. This is promising progress, but, of course, there is no denying that we have much further to go.

As previously mentioned, we are also delivering actions 55 and 56, set out in the inclusive written report, which aim to support and encourage those from less-advantaged backgrounds to thrive—this is where I am thinking of those from my community of Small Heath and the community represented by the right hon. Member for East Ham. Through these specific actions, we will support ethnic minority entrepreneurs in accessing finance more effectively and becoming more productive.

The Procurement Bill includes a new duty on contracting authorities to have regard to the barriers facing small and medium-sized enterprises. Among other things, they must consider whether there is a diverse representation of businesses in the pre-market engagements. We are always looking to engage with ethnic minority business leaders and networks to better understand the issues facing them. There was a recent opportunity to do so: the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, was asked to speak at the third anniversary reception for the all-party parliamentary group for black, Asian and minority ethnic business owners. The Department is dedicated to continued

engagement with ethnic minority entrepreneurs through valuable events, including those hosted by the APPG, as well as through the ethnic minority business group, a forum that convenes bimonthly to discuss priority issues affecting entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds to see how we can work together to find practical solutions.

Ethnic minority leaders want to see themselves represented in the business landscape. That could be through their mentors, or through wider representation in senior leadership positions. The value of visibility and its longer-term impact on entrepreneurs cannot be overstated. Through the Parker review, we acknowledged that building a fairer economy means ensuring that the UK's organisations reflect the nation's diversity. The latest figures show that the number of FTSE 100 companies with an ethnic minority director on their board has increased to 89, with 42 companies having exceeded the target. The progress made so far is encouraging, but I argue that we have much further to go. We look forward to those figures increasing further, to reflect the real diversity of talent in the UK.

A question was raised by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on dealing with disability and other issues—I would expect that question from her, as she is the chair of the APPG for disability. Of course, that is another issue that we need to explore. The Father of the House talked about unkinking the pipeline of black talent, and I do not doubt that the Department will now be looking very closely at the report that he mentioned.

The right hon. Member for East Ham raised the Government's update on the ethnicity pay gap data. As the Government have set out, ethnicity pay gap reporting continues to be voluntary. We will not be legislating for mandatory ethnicity pay reporting at this stage, but good firms, obviously, will want to make sure that their data is on record.

Again, I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham for introducing this important debate. Separately, I congratulate him, in his role as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, on today's publication of the "Universal Credit and childcare costs" report. Affordable, accessible childcare is key to enabling parents to work and to increase their working hours; that is linked to today's debate on entrepreneurial activity.

I conclude by reiterating the importance and the wealth of ethnic minority talent across the UK, which we are committed to nurturing and celebrating. On the one point that the right hon. Gentleman raised that I could not respond to, I will ensure that he is written to by the appropriate Minister with a formal response. I reiterate that we want to work closely with parliamentarians across the House, and with business and financial institutions to ensure that access is equitable. We want to improve our understanding of the issues faced, and to identify practical solutions that we can offer. I remind all colleagues from across the House that we are committed to bolstering the potential of ethnic minority entrepreneurs who, in turn, will help the UK economy to thrive.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham for raising this issue and, if I may be so bold, I wish you a happy Christmas, Mr Hosie.

Question put and agreed to.

Childcare: Affordability and Availability

4.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the affordability and availability of childcare.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am eternally grateful to have secured—to have been granted—this debate so that we can address the important issue of childcare affordability and availability, because the simple reality is that this Government are seriously failing children, parents and businesses through the chronic lack of affordable and high-quality childcare in our country. My Slough constituents are far from impressed. Indeed, the reason why I put in for the debate was to express their anger and to try to express to the Chamber just how frustrated many individuals, not just in my constituency but across our country, are. As far as I can tell, Ministers have little interest in doing something substantial and radical to rectify this. However, the Government's usual lack of effort and ambition, as frustrating as it is, does not mean that we should not at least try to persuade them that they need to up their game.

We know that the first 1,001 days of a child's life are integral to their development, and evidence shows that improvements in children's outcomes in both the long and the short term are strongly associated with the quality of their early childhood education and care. The Local Government Association has told me that by the time disadvantaged young people, in particular, sit their GCSEs at the age of 16, they are about 18 months behind their peers, and about 40% of that gap has emerged by the age of five. It is therefore crucial that we provide the best possible environment in which to bring up children.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the case that my hon. Friend is making, and congratulate him on securing the debate. Has he seen the report published today by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions on support for childcare costs in universal credit? It highlights two big problems. One is that people claiming universal credit have to pay the up-front costs of the first month's childcare; they have to pay the first month's childcare costs themselves and are reimbursed later. For some people, finding such a large sum of money is simply not possible. Secondly, the cap on monthly childcare support is the same as it was in 2005; it has not been updated, so it nowhere near covers the costs of full-time childcare support.

Mr Dhesi: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee, not only for that impressive intervention but for his tireless, persistent work in this area to try to shine a light on the injustices. I sincerely hope that the Minister and the Government will look closely at the findings in the Select Committee report and take action accordingly.

Since this Government came to power in 2010, parents of children under the age of two have had to deal with a 60% increase in the cost of a part-time nursery place.

Average earnings have grown at only half that rate over the same period, putting ever greater pressure on already squeezed family budgets. As one Mumsnet user wrote:

"When we started using nursery 9 years ago it was £45 a day. Now the same nursery we use for our...3 year old is £90. He gets 30 hours free in January but they...will also be putting fees up then. Honestly when he goes to school we will have £1,000 extra" to pay

"a month. It's more than our mortgage."

That is not an isolated case. A joint survey by Mumsnet and Pregnant Then Screwed found that close to two thirds of parents are spending on childcare as much as, or even more than they spend on their rent or mortgage. Shockingly, one in four parents is cutting down on food, heating or clothing in order to afford sky-high childcare costs.

What are parents doing in response? Increasingly, they are being forced to take themselves out of the labour market. Under this Conservative Government, a day's pay is not worthwhile for a parent needing childcare.

Sadly, women are often hit hardest by the Government's failed childcare system. Only three in 10 mothers with a child aged one work full time, and three in 10 mothers with a child under 14 say they have reduced their working hours for childcare reasons. The Office for National Statistics found that the number of women who are not in work in order to look after family has risen by 3% in the past year alone. That is the first sustained increase in at least 30 years, reversing decades of reduction. Women who are reducing their hours, forgoing promotions or even leaving work altogether due to unaffordable childcare suffer lasting financial consequences, and that widens the gender pay and pensions gaps.

This is also a huge issue for business. At a time when so many vacancies are going unfilled, this motherhood penalty equates to 43,000 women dropping out of the workforce in the last year alone. It is no wonder that even the Confederation of British Industry is calling for reform, highlighting that childcare costs in the UK are now some of the highest in the OECD and that our economy is suffering from losing £28 billion of economic output every year, because women are being forced to choose between their careers and their children. We could add a whopping £57 billion to our GDP simply by increasing female participation in the workforce—something that greater childcare provision would help achieve.

On this Government's watch, the childcare system is failing families, women, businesses and our economy. I would therefore think that addressing it was a priority, especially given how formative these early years are for our children, so why are the Government not taking decisive action to fix this mess? They tried to convince us that they were by announcing the 15 and 30-hour free childcare entitlement, alongside their commitment to the tax-free childcare scheme. As with so many other Conservative policies over the past 12 years, even this small stepping stone towards improving the accessibility of childcare has failed to deliver the bare minimum. As I pointed out last month in the Chamber, the Government, not satisfied with hammering parents, women, businesses and the economy, have set their sights on making it too expensive for childcare providers to operate by consistently underfunding the 15 and 30-hour entitlement by more than £2 an hour, thus forcing providers to use their own resources to plug the gap and further driving up the cost

of childcare. Meanwhile, Ministers have spent a whopping £2.37 billion less than they allocated for their flagship tax-free childcare scheme in the past four years alone.

Rather than ensuring we have even more childcare providers to meet the significant demand for childcare across our country, the Government have created an environment in which 4,000 childcare providers closed between March 2021 and 2022—that is 4,000 providers in just one year. We have childcare costs rising twice as fast as wages and businesses struggling to fill vacancies while women who want to work cannot because of childcare. Despite the demand, thousands of childcare providers are closing while the Government underfund the sector. That is this Government's record.

As a country, we can and must do much better. The Government must recognise that families need support from the end of parental leave right through to the end of primary school. While more investment is needed, surely as a minimum the Government should stick to their original commitments. I ask the Minister to commit to investing in the childcare system the more than £2 billion her party has pledged. During this cost of living crisis, families are already struggling, so when will the Minister step in to ensure that parents are not forced to sacrifice a meal or a night of heating over the winter months to pay for their child's care? Maybe the Government would be in a better position if they had developed a long-term plan. With five Education Secretaries this year alone, the Minister is probably just happy to get through the year without any more chaos. However, families across our country should not be made to suffer because of the Government's continued incompetence.

Parents need the introduction of universal primary breakfast clubs for every primary-aged child in England, which I look forward to hearing more about, I hope, from the shadow Minister. That would help disadvantaged pupils, in particular, to access additional support from staff and friends, allowing them to catch up on learning. Where is the Government's commitment to that? Instead of cutting hundreds of Sure Start centres, the Government should be investing in local children's centres and helping parents with young families in some of the most disadvantaged areas in our country to get them the best possible start in life. Why aren't they?

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. This is a vital debate to have in the Chamber at this time. Does he agree that for very young children, nursery might be the first place where teachers can pick up on special needs and then help to refer them for autism diagnoses? People often wait far too long to receive that diagnosis. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register, but I was shocked to hear that training placements for educational psychologists may be being funded to a lesser degree in the future, and that some educational psychologists are actually having to fund their own placements. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that the Government address some of those concerns on the part of the profession, and that they also ensure that children with autism and special needs have the support that they need at the earliest stage in their childcare?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Member. She has made some excellent points, no doubt based on her experience. Indeed, we know that those early years are incredibly

important for the child, but also for teachers, or those in authority, to pick up on certain issues, whether it is a child being on the spectrum, or other special educational needs. That issue comes up again and again in my constituency, so I am incredibly grateful to her for that intervention.

Given that so many childcare providers have been forced to close on this Government's watch, is it too much for my constituents, and parents across the country, to expect that there will be childcare places locally? I do not think so. What are the Government doing to not just halt but reverse the decline in the availability of childcare?

As we can see, the current picture of childcare in England is far from ideal, and it does not seem as if this Conservative Government are willing to take any meaningful steps to change that. Instead, in the face of all those issues, they are happy to sit on the billions of pounds that they have pledged to the sector, while hoping that no one notices. Well, hard-working families across our country are noticing the impact and deserve better. If the Government really want to build a better future for Britain, they must start by looking after those very people who are Britain's future.

4.43 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure, once again this afternoon, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. It is also a pleasure to debate issues around childcare for the second time in fairly quick succession in Westminster Hall. I think that is helpful because it shows that, across the Chamber, as well as from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), there is a great deal of interest in how we improve the care of our youngest citizens.

I thank the Minister for the personal interest that I know she has taken in this issue. It was a pleasure to welcome her to Harefield Infant School in my constituency, and to hear from a headteacher who is also very much engaged with the local children's centre about the way in which parents interact with it—the journey that they go on from the moment their child goes through the door of the children's centre, how they access childcare in the local area, and how the child develops to be, hopefully, school-ready. The headteacher also described how such settings, by working together in partnership, can address the kind of emerging issues that we have heard about. That may include special educational needs and disabilities, and safeguarding issues, which often first come to light when the child is in a formal setting.

It is perhaps worth my framing my contribution to the debate by saying that I have had the privilege of being a lead member for children's services in a local authority, both under the previous Labour Government and in the years since 2010, with the election of the coalition and then a Conservative Government. I have had the opportunity to see how childcare policy in the UK has developed over those years. I think it is fair to say that in the Labour years, when attention to childcare was a relatively new thing from Government, the key focus was very much on the availability of the cheapest possible childcare in order to encourage women to rejoin the workforce.

Since the coalition was elected in 2010, there has been a much greater focus on not just availability to encourage people to go to work, but the quality of what happens

[David Simmonds]

in those settings. Examples of that include the development of the childcare workforce and a focus on qualifications, on the quality of the physical environment in particular settings, and on the way in which Ofsted regulates those settings to ensure that every childcare placement is not just safe, but an environment in which children can thrive. As the parent of two very young children—I am sure the hon. Member for Slough would acknowledge this—I can say that children are expensive, and delivering quality for them is even more expensive.

It is helpful to reflect on a number of the policies that the Government have introduced in the past few years that have gone to the heart of extending both the availability and the affordability of childcare. Both from a policy perspective and as somebody who has been through this as a parent of young children, I welcome the fact that the Government have focused on direct support for families and, particularly, working families through the advent of the tax-free childcare policy. Although it is right that the Government are now focusing on a programme to raise awareness of that policy among working parents and to increase its take-up, it has been enormously helpful in making access to childcare much more affordable for working parents.

There are some technical issues that could be addressed. The decision to use National Savings and Investments as the payment processing organisation for tax-free childcare accounts generally means that it takes a long time for a parent's contribution to make its way to the childcare provider. That makes the process more difficult than a faster payments processing provider would when changes of arrangements need to be made at short notice—for example, when there are school holidays and changing work patterns. None the less, treating childcare in the same way as we incentivise people's personal pensions or their saving to buy their first home, for example, by giving them tax relief is an important, valuable step. It is also reflected in the direct support that families receive through universal credit, although the points that the hon. Member for Slough made are important to bear in mind. The way in which that system works is worth considering.

Let me turn to the broader context of availability. For many years, local authorities have had a duty to secure both the availability and the supply of childcare in their local area, and to play a role in developing that market. It is important to be clear that local authorities are not the providers, but if we look at the London Boroughs of Hillingdon and of Harrow, which serve my constituency, both authorities have a families information service that parents can contact to find out where they can access a childminder or a nursery placement in their local area, and also access information about other issues to do with childcare. For example, if a child has special educational needs or disabilities, their parents might need to access a specialist organisation to guide that child on their journey, and the families information service can point them in the correct direction.

Many families will be able to access a proportion of free hours that increase as the child gets older. That does not just provide an effective subsidy to the hours that would otherwise be paid for by working parents, enabling them to top up from their tax-free childcare account, but means that a greater proportion of children

in the lowest-income households can access that free childcare early. Those of us who are parents will have seen from the recent communications from our children's schools that as we go into the Christmas holiday period, we are being made aware of what the local authority and other organisations are doing. Families that are eligible for the holidays activities and food programme are being alerted to it, and we are being alerted to what local authorities are doing about safeguarding through our schools, so that we know what to do should we have those urgent needs, or should our neighbours, friends and acquaintances require that support as the holidays get under way.

Moving towards a conclusion, although it is easy to criticise, we need to recognise that the focus on how we spend the money and how we ensure the highest possible quality in our nurseries and among our childminders has been a big benefit to childcare in the UK. The Government's announcement of a substantial investment in the early years workforce is an important step in the right direction. The focus on Ofsted as the regulator of quality is significant, as is the developing evidence base from organisations such as the What Works centres funded by the Department for Education, which look at the best means of intervening to help children in the earliest years of their lives.

With respect to the ability to secure new infrastructure where a lack of buildings or physical capacity is a challenge—we aired that during the debate on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill last week—capital contributions by developers under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 can be used to create new early years and childcare facilities where that is a priority for a local area. Although that guidance is owned by the Department for Education and not the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, it remains in place so that new infrastructure measures envisaged in the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill will include the ability to use that money in the same way local authorities might use it to support police and law and order organisations in their local area.

It is clear that a number of different resources and steps are available on the capital side to help with the physical creation of new capacity. It is also possible to invest in the workforce to improve the quality of what is available, and introduce a broader set of policies with direct support to ensure that working families and parents have childcare available to them.

I will finish with a plea, once again, to recognise that, although research overwhelmingly shows that the money we spend in the earliest years has the biggest impact on outcomes in children, the way in which we distribute education funding still favours much older children. There needs to be a national debate about the fact that although everybody pays attention to GCSE results, it is the money spent on nought to five-year-olds that gives children the best possible chance when they are 16 and 18 and as they go into adulthood. We need to look at rebalancing the way we spend that money over time, so that we spend it where it has the greatest positive impact.

4.52 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough

(Mr Dhesi) on securing this important debate. The availability and affordability of childcare is a pressing issue for families right across our country, and it is right that we debate it in the House.

I am grateful to all the hon. Members who have attended this debate, especially the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who has spoken from his extensive experience as a former Cabinet member for children's services. I am confident that had this not been the final Westminster Hall debate on the last sitting day before Christmas, more colleagues would have joined us. I know that this issue is presenting itself in Members' inboxes and surgeries in many parts of the country.

Childcare is vital social infrastructure. It helps parents to work, it delivers early education to the youngest children and it underpins the growth of our economy. However, under this Government we have seen the cost of childcare rise, increasing numbers of providers closing their doors and an increasingly complex funding system for parents to navigate, resulting in low take-up of both subsidised two-year-old places and tax-free childcare.

The costs are eye watering. The latest release from Coram reports that the average cost of 25 hours a week in a nursery in England for a child under two is over £140. The same amount of time with a childminder is over £124. The cost for a child of two and over is more than £135 at a nursery, and £122 with a childminder. Those costs are averages so they can be significantly higher, particularly in London. Analysis by the TUC estimates that the cost of childcare for a child under the age of two has increased by £2,000 a year on average since 2010.

A survey by Pregnant then Screwed of 27,000 parents found that 62% reported that their childcare costs are now the same or more than their domestic costs, rising to 73% for lone parents. More than four in 10 mums reported that childcare costs had made them consider leaving their job, and 40% said that they had to work fewer hours than they would have liked because of the costs of childcare. Another survey found that almost a third of new parents said that the cost of childcare was preventing them from having any more children.

The Women's Budget Group estimates that 1.7 million women are being held back from taking on more hours at work due to the cost of childcare, and recent data from the Office for National Statistics has shown that for the first time in decades, the number of women leaving the workforce to look after family is increasing—it is up by 12.6% in the last year. The unaffordability of childcare is also placing strain on grandparents, many more of whom are now giving up work or reducing their hours—not simply to spend time enjoying their grandchildren but to step in effectively to provide formalised childcare.

The Government's funding model is undoubtedly part of the problem. Parents can access help with childcare costs from a wide range of sources, depending on their circumstances and the age of their children. The subsidy for two-year-olds is means-tested, but some of the subsidy for three and four-year-olds is applicable only to working households. Some funding is provided through the benefits system, and some through the tax system. There is significant unclaimed funding for childcare because the system is so complicated and confusing for parents to navigate, and the Work and Pensions Committee

report published today highlights serious flaws with the universal credit childcare costs element, which really is not working for the families who need it. The amount of funding claimed through tax-free childcare is far lower than was previously spent through childcare vouchers, and there is similarly low take-up through the benefits system.

The system does not work for the providers of childcare either. The Government have admitted that they do not pay providers what it costs them to provide the so-called free two-year-old and three and four-year-old places, so they have effectively created a cross-subsidy model for childcare. This drives up the cost for parents of under-twos and leaves childcare providers in areas of deprivation, where parents of very young children simply cannot afford to pay higher rates, really struggling. It also forces nurseries to charge parents for additional costs, such as for particular activities and for lunches, which really should not be the case when parents are already paying so much for the core costs of that provision. Providers are facing rising energy costs, wage bills and food costs, and many are finding it hard to recruit the staff they need, which has led to a tsunami of nursery closures this year. During the summer term, from April to July 2022, 65% more nurseries closed than in the same months in 2021.

I pay tribute to everyone who works in childcare and early years education. They are highly skilled professionals to whom we entrust our most precious little ones, yet they are under-recognised for the work they do. The best settings, such as the Early Years Community Research Centre in Shirecliffe, Sheffield, which I had the great pleasure of visiting recently, are a partnership with parents to support and care for young children, providing support to the whole family. Working with very young children should be a rewarding vocation and a lifelong career. It should offer the opportunity to develop expertise and specialisms, and to progress accordingly, yet all too often there is no opportunity for development or progression, and nurseries report that they end up competing with better-paid roles in retail or distribution.

After 12 years of Conservative government, our childcare system is failing families, failing children, failing providers and failing our economy. It is holding back parents from succeeding and progressing at work, and what is the Government's response to this situation of such central importance to our economy and family life? The response is silence. There was not a single mention in the Chancellor's Budget statement last month of the affordability and availability of childcare, which is holding back our economic growth. The main measure that the Government have mooted is the relaxation of childcare ratios to allow the same number of staff to look after more children. There is no evidence that this would have any impact on the costs to parents, but there are concerns that it reduce quality and compromise safety. That is not what parents or providers want, and it is not what is best for children.

Labour recognises the fundamental importance of childcare to parents, children and our economy. We also recognise that childcare costs do not stop when a child starts school, which is why we have announced our plan to introduce fully-funded breakfast clubs for every primary school in the country, supporting parents to work and helping to address food poverty. We will make sure that every child, wherever they are in the country, starts

[Helen Hayes]

school ready to learn. Our children's recovery plan proposes to increase the pupil premium for the early years to the same level as for reception, quadrupling the funding and ensuring that additional support is available in nursery settings for children who have suffered the impacts of the pandemic in their early development. We will address disadvantage and prevent it from becoming embedded for a lifetime.

Breakfast clubs are just the first step on the road. We are committed to building a childcare system that supports children and families from the end of parental leave until the end of primary school, as part of the vital infrastructure that underpins our economy. It is vital that the Government get a grip on this issue and show the vision and leadership that has been so badly lacking.

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank everybody for coming to this end-of-term debate, and for their continued presence in all of the debates we have had on this important subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate today.

I know how crucial early years are for children's development and for their parents to get into work. I also recognise that this is a critical time for the sector and I put on the record my thanks for the dedication of the staff in settings across the country, who are working tirelessly to give our children the best start in life.

I have been privileged to go on so many fantastic visits in my time in this role. Just this week, I went to see a childminder in action and was reminded of the brilliant developmental work that they do. Last week, I was with my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) at Harefield Infant School, speaking to the headteachers there about the way they work with the local children's centre. It was excellent to see that provision in place. I also recognise the quality of their work. Some 97% of our early years settings are good or outstanding, something of which we can be very proud. That comes down to the dedication of all the workers in those settings.

To give our children the best start in life, we have invested more than £3.5 billion in each of the last three years on our early education entitlements for two to four-year-old children and more and wider offers. We know that the sector is facing economic challenges, similar to the challenges that people are facing up and down the country. We have already announced additional funding of £160 million in 2022-23, £180 million in 2023-24 and £170 million in 2024-25, compared with the 2021-22 financial year. I assure everyone that improving the cost, choice and availability of childcare for working parents is very important to this Government and very important to me.

As well as providing support for families, the sector is facing difficult challenges. That is why we want to give providers help to continue what they do best—educating and developing young children. One of the things we are doing is making sure that we are investing in the workforce.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for the various facts and figures on the amounts that the Government are pledging. Will she commit to reinvesting the £2 billion that her party has already pledged into the childcare system?

Claire Coutinho: I am not entirely familiar with that figure. Perhaps we can discuss it after the debate and I can come back to him with a fuller answer. As I have said, over the last five years, we have spent £20 billion on early years. Not only are we supporting the sector with the money that I have set out today but we are also supporting it with energy support. I know from talking to lots of people in the industry that one of the things they are worried about is energy bills. We have set out significant relief over the winter to help with that issue.

Funding increases are taking place across England. In the constituency of the hon. Member for Slough, I am glad to say that the hourly funding rate for two-year-olds will increase by 62p to £6.87 an hour, and the rate for three and four-year-olds will increase by 6p to £6.27. We have also already announced an additional £10 million for maintained nursery schools supplementary funding from 2023-24. We are introducing a minimum and maximum hourly rate that a local authority can receive for their maintained nursery schools supplementary funding, to create a fairer distribution of that funding. The minimum rate will be set at £3.80 in 2023-24. Slough is one of the local authorities that will benefit from this new minimum hourly rate.

As well as increasing our support to providers, we also want families to benefit from the childcare support they are entitled to, saving them money and helping to give their children the best start in life. We know that childcare is a key concern for parents and recognise that cost of living pressures are impacting families across the country, which is why we are committed to improving and refining the offers that we have in place. We have also put many direct cost of living measures in place, from furlough to energy support relief, and direct family household support this year as well.

One of our key areas of support is the 30 hours free childcare entitlement, a Conservative commitment introduced in 2017, which has helped hundreds of thousands of working parents get back into the labour market, with nearly 350,000 children registered for a place this year. The entitlement saves those families up to £6,000 per child per year. That offer of 30 hours of free childcare is making a real difference to the lives of eligible working families. In our 2021 childcare and early years survey of parents we found that 73% of parents reported having more money to spend since they used their 30 hours and 38% thought that without the 30 hours they would be working fewer hours.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I acknowledge the huge benefit that has for parents, especially those getting back into work, but we have a real issue with providers, because the gap between the funding and the cost to providers is around £2 per hour for those voucher places. Nurseries in Leeds have closed because of that funding gap and others are under severe pressure. What will the Minister do to ensure that those nurseries can survive and thrive, not just at a price to the provider because the vouchers are in place?

Claire Coutinho: As of last year, we had set out half a billion pounds of extra funding to go into the sector. We have also set up energy support, as I mentioned, which will help with the increased costs, which we know lots of providers are facing this winter. Of course I will continue to look at everything that I can do in this area and I am committed to ensuring we can make this work.

David Simmonds: The last year for which we have figures available shows that a total of £62 million in unspent funds was ringfenced within the dedicated schools grant for early years. That is money that the Government have made available that cannot be spent because the funding formula means that a council, for example, cannot reallocate it to increase the funding rate to its local settings and it can be spent only in accordance with the constraints of the national funding formula. While that would not go all the way towards bridging the gap, will the Minister consider looking again at the funding formula regulations, so that local discretion could allow funds that are already allocated to be redistributed in a way that might help address some of the policy issues that she has outlined?

Claire Coutinho: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a detailed and interesting point that I will take away. I will look at the underspend and see what can be done, and I will come back to him as soon as I can.

In addition to the 30 hours, we remain committed to continuing the universal 15 hours of free early education, which this year helped over 1 million children get a positive start to their education.

Government support for childcare is not limited to three and four-year-olds. In 2013, the Conservative-led coalition Government introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. Some 72% of disadvantaged two-year-olds were registered for a free early education place in January 2022, and over 1.2 million children have benefited since its introduction.

Following a consultation in May 2022, we extended eligibility for this entitlement to children in no recourse to public fund households; that was first implemented in September this year. I urge all hon. Members to encourage families from lower income backgrounds to take up that generous offer. Children who take it up do better at school and it gives them vital skills that set them up for life.

I recognise that childcare must be accessible to parents as well as affordable. That is why the Government continue to monitor the sufficiency of childcare to ensure that childcare places are easily available. The key measure of sufficiency is whether the supply of available places is sufficient to meet the requirements of parents and children. Ofsted data shows that the number of places offered by providers in the early years register has remained broadly stable since 2015.

Under section 6 of the Childcare Act 2006, local authorities are responsible for ensuring

“that the provision of childcare...is sufficient to meet the requirements of parents in their area”.

The Department has regular contact with each local authority in England, and if a local authority raises concerns about sufficiency issues we will, of course, support it with any specific requirements. We are currently

seeking to procure a contract that will provide reactive and proactive support to local authorities in fulfilling their childcare sufficiency duties.

The majority of early years childcare places—68% in England—are provided by private, voluntary and independent group-based providers who continue to provide high quality childcare for families. The number of places, as I said, has remained broadly stable, and 96% of those early years childcare providers are rated good or outstanding. That is testimony to the many people who work in that brilliant sector.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Slough for securing the debate. The early years sector is an integral part of our economy and education, so my Department treats any changes to the system carefully. Our childcare offer is co-ordinated with other Departments to allow parents a range of options, depending on whether they want their children to receive childcare in a formal, nursery-style setting or from a childminder in a home.

Finally, I reassure the hon. Gentleman, and all hon. Members present, that my Department continues to evaluate what more can be done to help parents access a childcare place that not only suits their working arrangements or family circumstances but gives their child a positive start to their education. I look forward to working with him in future to hear his further thoughts on making our childcare system the best it can be.

5.9 pm

Mr Dhesi: Thank you, Mr Hosie, for your expert chairing of today's debate. I thank all the Members who have participated for their excellent interventions. I particularly want to thank the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), especially given his knowledge and expertise of the area as a former elected councillor and cabinet member for children's services and, like me, as a parent. He highlighted the various technical issues that need to be addressed.

I thank the Minister for her promises to parents, and also the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for the first-class work that she is doing to hold the Government to account and for highlighting the increased importance of the role that grandparents and family members play as they try to plug the gap to help parents, and in particular for helping to delineate the problems of the recruitment of nursery staff.

We have heard in today's debate how important affordable and high quality childcare is, and about the difficulty that families face today in accessing childcare and all the consequences that follow on from that to children, parents and businesses. Fixing the problems with childcare provision should be far more of a priority for the Government than it appears to be, so I look forward to seeing what the Minister implements to support families in the coming year.

This is the last day of the school term for many, just as it is for parliamentarians here today, so I want to put on the record my thanks to all nursery nurses, daycare centre staff, breakfast club providers, teachers and everyone else in the childcare sector for the really important work that they do for our children.

Finally, as this is the last Westminster Hall debate of 2022, I want to put on record my thanks to all the staff of the House who support these important debates. I

[Mr Dhesi]

wish all the staff of the House and everyone here a very merry Christmas. I look forward to seeing everyone in the new year.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Merry Christmas, everybody.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the affordability and availability of childcare.

5.12 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 December 2022

TREASURY

Mortgage Guarantee Scheme Extension: Contingent Liability

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): Today I can inform the House that the mortgage guarantee scheme will be extended by an additional year to continue to support homebuyers and movers with smaller deposits. The scheme will now close to new accounts on 31 December 2023.

HM Treasury launched the mortgage guarantee scheme in April 2021, which provides a guarantee to participating lenders across the UK who offer mortgages to first-time buyers and existing homeowners with a deposit as small as 5% on homes with a value of up to £600,000. Since its launch last year, the scheme has successfully restored the availability of 91 to 95% loan-to-value mortgage products, directly supporting over 24,000 households to buy their homes—85% of which were by first-time buyers. Since 2010, more than 687,000 households have been helped into home ownership through Government schemes.

While the mortgage guarantee scheme was originally planned to close to new mortgage applications on 31 December 2022, HM Treasury has decided to extend the scheme by an additional year to continue to provide lenders with the confidence to offer low-deposit mortgages to consumers.

Guarantees issued under the scheme are valid for up to seven years after the mortgage is originated. Participating lenders pay HM Treasury a fee for each mortgage entered into the scheme. This is set so that expected claims against the guarantee should be covered by revenue from the fee.

In order to ensure products remain available, HM Treasury will therefore be extending the duration of the Government's contingent liability for an additional year beyond its planned closing date of 31 December 2022. The Department is also reducing the maximum contingent liability cap from £3.9 billion to £3.2 billion, which remains set at a level so as not to constrain the ability of lenders to access the scheme. This liability would only materialise if the sum of commercial fees paid by lenders would not be sufficient to cover calls on the guarantee.

Authority for any expenditure required under this liability will be sought through the normal procedure. HM Treasury has approved this proposal.

[HCWS471]

UK Electricity Generators: Tax on Extraordinary Returns

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): Along with resurgent demand for energy following the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and weaponisation of gas supplies has driven UK wholesale

gas prices to record highs. Due to the composition and structure of the UK electricity market, higher wholesale gas prices are in turn driving higher wholesale electricity prices and leading to exceptional returns arising to some electricity generators in the UK.

Consistent with action taken in other countries, from 1 January 2023 the Government are introducing a temporary 45% tax on extraordinary returns made by some UK electricity generators. HM Treasury will today publish on www.gov.uk draft legislation, along with an updated technical note explaining the policy in detail. The levy will be applied to a measure of extraordinary revenues, defined as revenues from selling periodic output at an average price above £75/MWh. That is approximately 1.5 times the average price of electricity over the last decade. It will apply to revenues from electricity generation in the UK from renewable—including biomass—nuclear, and energy from waste sources and will be focused on the largest generators through a generation threshold of 50GWh of annual output and a £10 million allowance.

This temporary measure is not designed to penalise electricity generators. It is instead a response to the fact that, as a result of exceptional and unforeseen geopolitical events, some electricity generators are realising extraordinary returns from higher electricity prices—higher prices that have imposed substantial costs on households and business energy users and necessitated the Government to take unprecedented action with £55 billion to directly help households and businesses with their energy bills. The Government have previously considered a price cap in response to the current crisis. We have instead adopted this levy as a more proportionate approach. It leaves generators—whose continued investment in the industry is vital to our long-term energy security—with a share of the upside they receive at times of high wholesale prices.

The levy will end on 31 March 2028. This reflects the possibility that wholesale electricity prices remain elevated for a number of years and the need for businesses to have certainty around the measures the UK is taking in response. However, should the crisis abate and prices fall below the benchmark price, the revenue forecast from the levy will not materialise and consideration would be given to the tax's ongoing application.

Furthermore, responding to concerns that have been raised around the tax's duration and its impact on investment, the £75/MWh the benchmark price will be indexed to CPI inflation from April 2024, and relief will be provided for certain exceptional costs that are reducing the degree to which generators are benefiting from higher electricity prices.

Support for investment in renewables

The Government are committed to decarbonising power systems by 2035 and reaching net zero emissions by 2050. Britain is a global leader in renewable energy. Last year, nearly 40% of our electricity came from offshore wind, solar and other renewables. Since 2010, our renewable energy production has grown faster than any other large country in Europe. We are committed to ensuring that the UK remains one of the best places in the world to invest in clean energy and have set stretching deployment ambitions, including up to 50GW of offshore wind by 2030 and a fivefold increase in solar by 2035. As we move towards these ambitious goals, the Government will seize the opportunities for growth through the

transition, creating the right framework to crowd-in billions of pounds of new investment into the UK's economy. That includes:

Our highly successful Contracts for Difference scheme continues to bring more and more generation online, with our most recent auction delivering a record capacity of almost 11 GW. A consultation for the sixth Contracts for Difference round was published last week.

The Offshore Co-ordination Support Scheme, which will provide up to £100 million of grants to energy projects to develop co-ordinated options for offshore transmission infrastructure, was launched earlier this month.

Government also continue to work with the Offshore Wind Acceleration Taskforce and other developers to identify and address barriers to deployment. This includes reforming the planning system, where Government are acting to ensure that consents are secured faster, and the risk of delays are reduced.

We have heard calls for the tax system to provide strengthened incentives for—long-term—investment in the low-carbon electricity generation sector, including investment in new capacity as well as investment needed to maintain and upgrade existing capacity. The Government continue to recognise the value of capital allowances for supporting investment within a sustainable fiscal strategy, and any further changes will be set out at a future fiscal event in the usual way.

Government are undertaking the Review of Electricity Market Arrangements (REMA) which will assess how our power markets can best deliver a low-cost, low-carbon and secure electricity system, whilst reducing our exposure to international oil and gas prices.

[HCWS475]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Annual Negotiations for 2023 Fishing Opportunities

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): Each year, the UK negotiates with the EU, Norway and other coastal states in the north-east Atlantic, and via regional fisheries management organisations, to agree catch opportunities and sustainable management measures for shared stocks, including in international waters.

Successful annual negotiations for 2023 fishing opportunities

The UK has now concluded these negotiations and reached agreement with the EU, Norway and other coastal states in the north-east Atlantic on catch opportunities for 2023. Across these negotiations, the UK has secured agreement on 86 TACs—total allowable catches—providing £750 million of potential fishing opportunities.

The UK has also concluded an agreement with Norway for continued access to each other's waters for 2023, as well as an exchange of fishing quota.

The UK Government have worked closely with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and the outcomes secured will enable us to improve the sustainable management of our fish stocks and support the whole of the UK fishing industry.

UK-EU agreement

As a result of quota share uplifts agreed in the trade and co-operation agreement, the UK has around 30,000 tonnes more quota from these negotiations than it would have received with its previous shares as an EU member state. The UK has agreed 69 TACs and

arrangements for non-quota stocks with the EU for 2023, providing fishing opportunities of more than 140,000 tonnes. In total, this is worth around £282 million, based on historical landing prices.

An initial estimate suggests that the number of TACs that align with scientific advice from ICES—the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea—has increased by 13% compared with last year. This is the largest increase since 2020, when the UK first started using this metric. The Government will publish shortly a full assessment of the number of TACs set consistent with ICES advice across all annual negotiations.

For 2023, we have also agreed access arrangements on albacore tuna and spurdog in the North sea for the first time through the UK-EU written record.

For NQS—non-quota stocks—we agreed a roll-over of access arrangements for 2023 to ensure continued access for the UK fleet to fish NQS worth around £25 million per year in EU waters. This is alongside further flexibility for seabass management measures within the ICES advice.

UK-EU-Norway trilateral negotiations

The UK has also reached agreement with Norway and the EU on catch limits for 2023 for six stocks, worth over £202 million to the UK fishing industry in the North sea and a further £11 million in other waters around the UK, based on historical landing prices.

The parties have agreed increases in TACs for five of the six stocks, including North sea cod. They have agreed to a cut in North sea herring. All TACs are at or below the level advised by ICES. For two stocks—haddock and whiting—the parties have agreed to take a more precautionary approach than the scientific advice to avoid risks to the recovery of North sea cod, given the close interactions between the stocks, and set a 30% increase on each.

The parties renewed their commitment to deliver long-term management plans for their shared stocks, and have agreed to develop new and more effective management measures for the North sea herring fishery, focusing on stability for industry and sustainability.

The parties have also agreed to continue building on the work undertaken this year on monitoring, control and surveillance of their shared stocks.

UK-Norway bilateral negotiations

The UK has agreed with Norway on continuing to allow vessels to access our respective waters for demersal fisheries, as well as exchanges of quota worth around £5 million to the UK fleet. UK vessels will be able to fish their North sea whitefish quotas, such as hake and cod, in Norwegian waters, up to a total of 30,000 tonnes. We have also agreed to reciprocal access for herring, up to 20,000 tonnes. On exchanges, we secured around £3 million worth of North sea quota from Norway—including valuable stocks such as monkfish—together with around £2 million-worth of stocks in Arctic waters. This complements over 5,200 tonnes of cod in waters around Svalbard, worth an estimated £10 million, that Norway has allocated to the UK under a separate arrangement.

The mutual access will also allow respective fleets more flexibility to target the stocks in the best condition throughout the fishing year, supporting a more sustainable and economically viable fishing industry.

Multilateral “coastal state” negotiations

The UK has agreed TACs at the level advised by ICES on the three stocks we share with other coastal states in the north-east Atlantic: mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring—ASH. The opportunities will be worth over £250 million to the UK fleet in 2023.

The UK has also chaired negotiations throughout 2022 on a new quota-sharing arrangement for mackerel. These negotiations are making steady progress, and the UK remains committed to securing a fair, sustainable and comprehensive sharing arrangement. Negotiations will resume in early 2023, with an aim of concluding them by 31 March, alongside parallel discussions to agree new quota-sharing arrangements for blue whiting and ASH.

[HCWS474]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Canada and Gulf Cooperation Council

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The Department for International Trade has made progress on two key trade negotiations. This statement provides Parliament with an update on the United Kingdom’s trade negotiations with Canada and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

UK-Canada trade negotiations

The fourth round of the UK-Canada free trade agreement negotiations commenced on 28 November and concluded on 2 December. The negotiations were hosted in Ottawa and conducted in a hybrid format, with technical discussions held across 32 policy areas over 73 separate sessions.

This round saw the first full chapter agreed in principle, Transparency, and we provisionally identified candidates for closure in the next rounds. We continued to make steady progress and agree text where there was clear alignment, including in innovation, small and medium-sized enterprises, technical barriers to trade, anti-corruption and financial services.

Discussions were largely constructive, but key differences remain and there is more work to be done towards acceptable landing zones in important areas such as services, investment and procurement. Both negotiation teams took actions to consider each other’s priorities and identify opportunities to move closer together ahead of the next round.

As always, we closely monitored the interdependencies between the bilateral and comprehensive and progressive trans-Pacific partnership negotiations, particularly considering that CPTPP members were meeting in London the following week.

We expect to hold the fifth round of negotiations in London in March 2023.

UK-Gulf Cooperation Council trade negotiations

The second round of negotiations for an FTA between the UK and the GCC took place between 5 and 9 December.

The second round was hosted in London and held in a hybrid fashion. More than 100 GCC officials travelled to London for in-person discussions, with others attending virtually. Technical discussions were held across 29 policy

areas over 36 sessions. In total, more than 100 UK negotiators from across Government took part in this round of negotiations.

During the round, the UK set out its policy positions having exchanged draft chapter text with the GCC across most policy areas before the round. A key objective at this stage was to continue to build a firm understanding of the GCC’s policy positions and priorities. Both negotiation teams took actions to further consider each other’s positions and identify opportunities to move closer together ahead of round 3.

Both sides remain committed to securing an ambitious, comprehensive and modern agreement fit for the 21st century.

An FTA will be a substantial economic opportunity, and a significant moment in the UK-GCC relationship. Government analysis shows that, in the long run, a deal with the GCC is expected to increase trade by at least 16%, add at least £1.6 billion a year to the UK economy and contribute an additional £600 million or more to UK workers’ annual wages.

We expect the third round of negotiations to take place in Riyadh next year.

His Majesty’s Government remain clear that any deal we sign will be in the best interests of the British people and the United Kingdom economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations the national health service and the services it provides are not on the table.

His Majesty’s Government will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS473]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Intergovernmental Relations Quarterly Report: Quarter 3 2022

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): Today, the Government published the report of our engagement with the devolved Governments in quarter 3 of 2022 on gov.uk.

The report covers a period where we have seen unprecedented events, and gives an insight into the extensive engagement between the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland Executive between 1 July to 30 September 2022. During this reporting period the Governments collaborated on a number of areas, not least in organising the commemoration of the sad passing of Her Majesty The Queen.

The report is part of the Government’s ongoing commitment to transparency of intergovernmental relations to Parliament and the public. The Government will continue with publications to demonstrate transparency in intergovernmental relations.

[HCWS472]

PRIME MINISTER**UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Appointments**

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Gagan Mohindra).

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) has been appointed as a full member in place of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who has been appointed as a substitute member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti).

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) has been appointed as a full member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell).

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) has been appointed as a full member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew).

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Pauline Latham) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory).

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Sheryll Murray) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher).

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Richard Holden).

My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) has been appointed as a substitute member in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey).

[HCWS470]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 20 December 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Strep A Treatments: Supply

The following is an extract from the urgent question on the supply of strep A treatments on 19 December 2022.

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.

[Official Report, 19 December 2022, Vol. 725, c. 28.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in the urgent question on the supply of strep A treatments.

The correct response should have been:

Maria Caulfield: We recognise that there are supply issues with pharmacies. That is why pharmacists have had the flexibility **since early last week to give different formulations**. 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.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

The following is an extract from Report stage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill on 13 December 2022.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am very grateful to the Minister for taking an intervention and for the time she gave me last week to discuss this matter. Can she clarify whether it is now the Government's intention to make short-term lets a separate category of planning use following the consultation? If so, when would that come in? Will she also ensure that planning departments have the resources to enforce that?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for speaking on this issue and indeed other issues on this topic. We are committing to consulting on the issue. We propose to consult early in the new year. Following that consultation, we hope to bring in some legislation, if that is the result of the consultation. There is a very tight timetable both for that and the registration scheme, and the registration scheme will be coming through in autumn.

[Official Report, 13 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 960.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer):

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on Report stage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

The correct response should have been:

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for speaking on this issue and indeed other issues on this topic. We are committing to consulting on the issue. We propose to consult early in the new year. Following that consultation, we hope to bring in some legislation, if that is the result of the consultation. There is a very tight timetable for both that and the registration scheme, and **we intend to lay the legislation for the planning use class change in autumn 2023, subject to the outcome of the consultation**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 20 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	113	TREASURY—continued	
Core Northern Powerhouse Rail: Public Funding ..	113	Inflation: Student Maintenance Loan Increases.....	120
Cost of Living: Fiscal Steps	124	Levelling Up Communities: Fiscal Steps	117
Education Sector Funding	126	Poverty Levels in Scotland	116
Energy Costs: Fiscal Support	123	Public Spending: Value for Money	118
Energy Costs: Fiscal Support	124	Tax System: Fairness.....	121
Energy Producer Profit Trends	114	Topical Questions	127
Financial Conduct Authority: Loyalty Penalties in Insurance Market.....	115		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 20 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	29WS	PRIME MINISTER	33WS
Annual Negotiations for 2023 Fishing Opportunities.....	29WS	UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Appointments	33WS
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	31WS		
Canada and Gulf Cooperation Council	31WS	TREASURY	27WS
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	32WS	Mortgage Guarantee Scheme Extension: Contingent Liability	27WS
Intergovernmental Relations Quarterly Report: Quarter 3 2022	32WS	UK Electricity Generators: Tax on Extraordinary Returns	27WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Tuesday 20 December 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	3MC
Strep A Treatments: Supply	3MC
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	4MC
Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill	4MC

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 20 December 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 113] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Annual Fisheries Negotiations with EU and North Atlantic States [Col. 135]
Answer to urgent question—(Mark Spencer)

Service Family Accommodation [Col. 143]
Answer to urgent question—(Alex Chalk)

Ukraine [Col. 154]
Statement—(Mr Wallace)

Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) [Col. 172]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Darren Henry)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business
Christmas Adjournment [Col. 175]
Motion—(Bob Blackman)—agreed to

Bus Routes: Local Consultation [Col. 242]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Family Businesses: Contribution to Local Communities [Col. 17WH]
Future of Rail Services [Col. 41WH]
Expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone [Col. 49WH]
Entrepreneurs from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds [Col. 75WH]
Childcare: Affordability and Availability [Col. 83WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 3MC]
