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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 10 January 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Support for Rape Victims

1. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve support for rape victims in the criminal justice system. [903012]

5. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve support for rape victims in the criminal justice system. [903016]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): We have a comprehensive package of measures under way to improve support for victims of rape, and I can tell the House that in the last year, adult rape convictions rose by 65% over the previous year.

Mark Fletcher: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. A constituent recently raised with me concerns about registered sex offenders being able to change their names while in prison, which causes immense concern to the families and loved ones of victims. What steps are being taken to ensure that, in such cases, offenders are not able to walk away from their crimes?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can tell and reassure him that governors are under no obligation to accept requests for a change of name. Public safety is the most important consideration. When a change of name is recognised, probation records are updated, police are notified, and victims and others affected would also be notified.

Robin Millar: I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer. In particular, I welcome the opening of a new rape crisis line offering essential support to victims. Does he agree that such a service should be made available across England and Wales, and will he ensure that it is promoted across England and Wales?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank him for raising that. It is critical for victims of rape across the United Kingdom. The new 24/7 support line is available to victims aged 16 or over in England and Wales. There is also a steering group, working with central Government and the Welsh Government, that has oversight of the service. I think it is a great example of what the UK Government are delivering for the people of Wales.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The independent inquiry in child sexual abuse highlighted how victims are repeatedly failed by inconsistent application of the victims code, demonstrating the desperate need for legislation. Will the Government listen to the inquiry and commission an inspection of compliance with the victims code in relation to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse? When will the victims Bill be introduced?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. She will know that the victims Bill has gone through pre-legislative scrutiny—I am poised to respond to the Chair of the Select Committee—and it will address all the issues that she raises. I hope that it will have the full-hearted, full-throated support of those on the Opposition Benches.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): One of the better ways of supporting rape victims is to ensure that when the rapist comes up for parole, the families of victims and the victim themselves are informed that parole is being considered. In the case of Andrew Barlow—the so-called “Coronation Street rapist”, who was convicted of many rapes—that has not happened. The Parole Board is now recommending that he be released. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that in such cases, the parole system works properly and effectively?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that case. That notification should happen. I will take this up and write to him afterwards. That support for victims right through the process, including for the parole of the perpetrator of such a serious offence, is important. I also gently say that I would welcome the support of the Opposition when we introduce our parole reforms so that we have stronger ministerial oversight of the release of the most dangerous offenders. The Opposition cannot keep talking tough while not supporting the action that we are putting through this House.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The significant rise in the number of rape convictions is extremely encouraging. As the Secretary of State will know, at the heart of that success, and indeed of support for rape victims, lies a new operating model: Operation Soteria. Can he update us on how many police forces and Crown Prosecution Service areas have now adopted that new operation, and when does he expect the 100% roll-out so that we can see that kind of rise across the whole country?

Dominic Raab: I have to start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend for the exceptional job that he did working on this issue in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. The increase in rape convictions—we are restless to go further—is in no small part due to his efforts. I believe that Operation Soteria is ready for a June national implementation, and Ministers in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice are liaising with all the outstanding police forces to make sure they are signed up. Again, I thank him and pay tribute to him for the work he did.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Rhianon Bragg was ambushed and held at gun point for eight hours by former partner Gareth Wyn Jones after years

of physical and verbal abuse. He was imprisoned in August 2019. Rhianon and I called for his parole hearing to be held in public, but the Parole Board insisted that the perpetrators' rights override those of the victim. In the meantime, appallingly, it turns out that Ministry of Justice staff sent a dossier containing intimate details about her, including a clinical psychologist's letter, to her abuser in prison over 10 months ago. Does the Secretary of State consider that there should be circumstances in which a victim can appeal a Parole Board decision to hold hearings in private? Does he agree that this breach of GDPR means that it is in the public interest for decisions about Jones's release to be held in public?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising that very important and sensitive case with me. I cannot talk about the details, but I will write to her with the answers to the questions she has raised. All I would say more generally is that she will know that we had the first public parole hearing recently, which is part of the increase in transparency that I have introduced across the board, but in particular for parole hearings. We also have that extra check on the release of dangerous offenders, particularly murderers, rapists, terrorist offenders and child killers. I hope it will have her full support when we come forward with legislation to apply that ministerial veto.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Operation Soteria report on the handling of rape cases was quietly released just before Christmas. It reports of explicit victim blaming, botched investigations and serving officers claiming sexual offences should not be a priority, and those are just a few takeaways from its 191 pages. It is a dark stain on this Government. We still have no victims Bill and no Victims' Commissioner, so what is the Secretary of State actually achieving in post?

Dominic Raab: I will tell the hon. Lady exactly what we are doing. We have introduced a 24/7 rape support line. We have rolled out Operation Soteria in the way that my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) mentioned. We have introduced section 28 pre-recorded victim evidence across all Crown courts in England and Wales. It is precisely because we are driving forward Operation Soteria and dealing with some of the challenges in the past, particularly between police and prosecutors, that we have seen a step change. What she does not refer to is the increase since 2019, with an almost doubling of the number of police cases referred to the CPS. She does not refer to the increase by two thirds in the number of adult rape cases charged by the CPS since 2019. She does not refer to the near doubling of the number of adult rape Crown court receipts. We are restless to go forward, but she should not downgrade the efforts we are making, because that can only deter more victims from coming forward, and I do not think that is what she wants.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), for her fantastic work in this role, and in

particular on the defence of human rights. On that theme, the former Victims' Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, recently highlighted the dangers of the Lord Chancellor's so-called Bill of Rights, arguing that it would harm women,

"affect victims of violence against women and girls and their ability to drive the police to do better"

and

"absolutely shatter any positive impact from the victims' bill".

Will he now listen to victims and their representatives and abandon his plans, which undermine them?

Dominic Raab: That critique is total and utter nonsense. There is not a shred of substance to it. The Bill of Rights will actually help victims of crime, not least by enabling us to deport more foreign national offenders. I look forward to bringing the victims Bill forward and having support from all Members on the Opposition Benches.

Stuart C. McDonald: That answer completely misunderstands how important convention case law has been in helping to protect victims of violence against women and girls. Even worse, in various December appearances, neither the Secretary of State nor the Prime Minister could bring themselves to rule out complete withdrawal from the European convention altogether, which would be a disaster for victims. Is this a reflection of the political weakness at the heart of Government that his ex-colleague Claire Perry O'Neill alluded to in her article yesterday, or will he come to the Dispatch Box now and categorically rule out the appalling idea of withdrawal from the convention?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman will know that our plans for a Bill of Rights retain membership of the European convention, but we have said that withdrawal is not off the table forever and a day for the future, and that remains the Government's position.

Sentencing Policy: Rural Crime

2. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of sentencing policy in reducing levels of rural crime. [903013]

13. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling rural crime. [903024]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has regular meetings with Cabinet colleagues and others to ensure a joined-up approach to tackling crime, including rural crime. Rural crime has a huge impact on those individuals and communities affected, which is why prevention, policing and prosecution are all vital to tackling rural crime, which remains a priority.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. I raise the question on behalf of Councillor Dan Morris and Stuart Jones, who are both farmers in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that rural crime is often linked to organised crime groups who target and exploit rural communities across a range of

crime types, such as organised plant and livestock theft, burglary targeting firearms, fly-tipping and poaching? Sentencing needs to reflect the serious organised criminality involved in these offences.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend highlights a number of crimes that particularly impact rural communities—crimes highlighted in the National Police Chiefs' Council strategy on rural crime. It is important that the courts have appropriate sentences available to them. Although sentencing in individual cases is a matter for the judiciary, sentencing guidelines are clear that offending that involves a high degree of planning or that is committed for profit, as is often seen in organised crime, will attract tougher sentences.

Dr Hudson: Rural and wildlife crime sadly continues to affect our local communities, from theft of farm machinery, fly-tipping and vandalism to the distressing theft of animals and animal cruelty. These are just some of the issues facing rural areas. Cumbria has the excellent Cumbria farm watch and horse watch schemes—partnerships between people and Cumbria police. What reassurances can my hon. Friend give my constituents that the Government are supporting the police and communities in the fight against rural crime?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the work going on in Cumbria. I pay tribute to the work of the police and crime commissioner Peter McCall and Cumbria police to tackle rural crime through Operation Lantern. Alongside Government investment in 20,000 more police officers nationally, we are supporting the police through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 by introducing new hare coursing offences and supporting the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) to prevent quad bike theft.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Fly-tipping has doubled in Barnsley during the last year, costing the local council nearly £200,000 to deal with. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues across Government to ensure that fines and sentences for fly-tipping are a strong enough deterrent?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is quite right to highlight a rural crime that blights both rural and urban communities, but predominantly rural communities including mine in Leicestershire. We have regular discussions with colleagues in both the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about issues such as this. I am happy to meet her in due course if she wants to highlight any cases.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer to those questions. Back home in Northern Ireland the Ulster Farmers Union, in which I declare an interest as a member, have regular meetings with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to put invisible markings on machinery and to have visibility on tractors. One of the big problems is machinery from Northern Ireland and from the UK mainland going down to the Republic of Ireland. Has the Minister had any opportunity to talk to the Garda Síochána to work across the border to ensure that those criminal gangs involved in machinery theft are curtailed?

Edward Argar: I have not had any direct discussions with the Garda on this matter, but in looking at the National Police Chiefs' Council's rural crime strategy I have seen the work being done in Northern Ireland to highlight exactly the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises—both marking and the challenges around farm machinery. If he wants to write to me with further details from his constituency perspective, I would be very happy to receive that.

Backlog of Court Cases

3. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What recent progress he has made on tackling the backlog of court cases. [903014]

19. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What recent progress he has made on tackling the backlog of court cases. [903030]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): In the Crown court, the outstanding caseload has reduced from 60,400 in June 2021 to about 57,300 cases at the end of March 2022. However, the caseload has increased again, primarily due to the Criminal Bar Association action, which has now stabilised. We are taking action across the criminal justice system to bring down backlogs and improve waiting times for those who use our courts. That includes such things as increasing our judicial capacity and investing a significant amount of money across the criminal justice system.

James Sunderland: Could the Minister outline how he intends to reduce backlogs in the family court, in order to minimise the impact on families and children both in Bracknell and beyond?

Mike Freer: The issue of family courts is particularly pressing because of the impact on families and children. That is why we are investing a significant amount of funding by increasing the number of fee-paid judges, sitting days and judges who are able to sit, and we continue to invest significant sums in family mediation vouchers, to keep families and children out of the court system.

Peter Aldous: The backlog in court cases is causing enormous personal distress and anguish. My constituent originally in 2018 reported an historical rape. The trial has now been postponed four times and is currently scheduled for this June. I shall write to my hon. Friend providing full details of the situation, but can he leave no stone unturned in eliminating the backlog very quickly, as in such historical cases, justice delayed really can mean justice denied?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. While I cannot talk about a specific case, the allocation and listing of cases is a judicial responsibility, and I can reassure him that the judiciary continue to work to prioritise cases involving custody time limits, as well as those involving vulnerable complainants and witnesses, domestic abuse and serious sex cases. The judiciary are incredibly sensitive to the need to ensure that the most vulnerable complainants and victims get their day in court as fast as possible.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The civil legal aid review finally announced last week is an admission that cuts brought in by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 have left the civil courts, which the Minister did not even mention, in a dysfunctional state, with a third of providers out of business and longer and longer delays in proceedings. The timetable for the review takes its implementation beyond the general election, which is another abdication of responsibility for the chaos in the courts that this Government have caused. Should they not bring forward either the review or the general election?

Mike Freer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Reform of all parts of the justice system is a priority, but within the spending envelope that we are operating in, we have to spend the money where we can get the best return for our investment. If he has some serious options for how we could spend the money better, I am all ears.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Like the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), I have seen extraordinary situations with cases of serious sexual assault where the court case has been listed three years after the attack, in one case, with the victim saying, “I just want to give up and get on with my life.” This is a real challenge. Will the Minister outline what he is doing to get more judges in place, which is one of the brakes on this? When the Public Accounts Committee looked at this, we concluded on the evidence that, even with the interventions he has outlined, the Ministry will only be back on target from where it was with the backlog before covid by about 2024–25.

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady raises an important point. There are a variety of reasons why cases can be delayed. It is not just about the availability of the judiciary; sometimes it is the availability of defence and prosecution. There is a particular focus on trying to improve the number of cases that do not come forward because they are incomplete and not ready, and there is a massive campaign to improve the number of available sitting days and courts, but the most important thing is the massive recruitment of 1,000 judges for our criminal justice system.¹

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Julian Lewis.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is kind of colleagues to respond in that way.

Some months ago, the Government took the welcome decision to raise the retirement age for justices of the peace from 70 to 75. However, the question of reinstatement for those previously caught by the 70 age limit has been left, I believe, to local regions, rather than a wider cohort being allowed to go back on the bench, even if they are willing to travel. Can more flexibility be put into this system, so that people can be reinstated under those circumstances?

Mike Freer: It is my understanding that this issue is subject to the oversight of the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice. I understand that it is very firmly on their radar and that they will use their discretion as appropriate.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Has the Minister seen the Law Society’s five-point plan to get rid of the backlog, including investing in buildings and staff and properly funding legal aid? If he has not, will he sit down with the Law Society? These people are at the heart of our justice system.

Mike Freer: I have seen the plan and I have sat down with the Law Society. The Lord Chancellor and I continue to have fruitful discussions to address the particular issues that the Law Society has raised.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is always someone else’s fault. I have listened to the Minister trying to talk up progress, but both he and I know it is not good enough. I can understand the anxiety in Government over the failure to make any real impact—at the current rate of progress, the backlog will continue into the next Parliament, if not beyond. The Minister will agree that it is bad for victims, staff and defendants and, above all, is a failure of justice. What will he do to reassure our dedicated court staff that he will get the disastrous common platform IT system sorted out? Will he confirm how much extra taxpayers’ cash is being thrown at the system to get it right?

Mike Freer: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the common platform is not a disaster. In fact, I have taken a specific interest in ensuring the roll-out is appropriate and that users are actually engaged.

Alex Cunningham: Have you spoken to the staff?

Mike Freer: I have spoken to staff, who said that yes, there are teething problems—that has been admitted—but they are fully committed. They understand that the common platform is a good programme and will work. We are listening to the staff to make sure it works. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. If he wishes to revert to legacy systems that will collapse and make things even worse, he is welcome to make that argument.

Criminal Justice System: Support for Victims

4. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support victims in the criminal justice system. [903015]

20. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support victims in the criminal justice system. [903031]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): In May, we published our landmark draft Victims Bill and a wider package of measures to improve victims’ experiences of the criminal justice system. The Bill will enshrine the overarching principles of the victims code in primary legislation, increase oversight of criminal justice agencies’ treatment of victims and enable improvements in the quality and consistency of victim support services. The Bill will be introduced as swiftly as parliamentary time allows. Alongside those measures, we are more than quadrupling the funding for victim and witness support services by 2024–25.

1. *[Official Report, 11 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 8MC.]*

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The reality is that victims are not being supported. My constituent, Mr Singh, is subject to identity theft. He and his family have been held by Border Force, his immigration status is in jeopardy, his family are being placed in danger and his health records are in utter chaos. Various Ministers, Secretaries of State and one of our recent Prime Ministers have all promised action, yet not one of them has bothered to honour their word. Will anyone in this Government help Mr Singh?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady and I have worked together on previous cases. While I suspect that some elements of what she is referring to come under other Departments, hence her involving the Prime Minister and others, I am happy to meet with her to see if there is something I can do to assist.

Stephen Morgan: Only 1.5% of recorded rapes result in a charge, compared with 5.4% of all other crimes. Does the Minister accept responsibility for this, and for so badly letting down victims?

Edward Argar: We all have a shared desire to improve victims' experiences, particularly in cases of rape and serious sexual offences. The rape review action plan set out the steps we are taking, and we are seeing continued increases and improvement in respect of total police referrals, receipts for a charge, CPS charges and Crown court receipts. There is more still to do. We are ambitious to go further, but we are making good progress and we will continue to focus on this.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I thank the Lord Chancellor for meeting with Claire, the mother of Charlotte-Sky, before the Christmas recess to hear about the pain and anguish she has suffered through the criminal justice system in order to get justice for her daughter, who was tragically killed in Norton Green in 2021. As the Lord Chancellor heard, the problem with this case is around the taking and testing of blood when it comes to death by dangerous driving. Can we have a review to ensure that blood can be tested regardless of consent to speed up answers for victims and help police to find answers to those problems quicker?

Edward Argar: I apologise to my hon. Friend for not being able to attend that meeting as I was caught in another meeting. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has related that meeting to me, however, and I know that he and we reflect carefully on the points made in it.

Operation Safeguard: November 2022

6. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): For what reason he triggered Operation Safeguard in November 2022.

[903017]

9. **Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): For what reason he triggered Operation Safeguard in November 2022.

[903020]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): There was an unprecedented short-term rate of growth in the requirement for places in adult male prisons in October and November, and Operation Safeguard creates a contingency to maintain headroom should it be needed. Meanwhile, we press on with our programme of estate modernisation and expansion.

Clive Efford: I am grateful for that answer. The Prison Officers Association says that the lack of staff is exacerbating the crisis in prison places. The Police Federation says that Operation Safeguard puts its members and the public in danger. Napo says that there is a link between the lack of prison places and the workload crisis, which is leading to an increase in the number of recalls. If Operation Safeguard fails, where on earth will the Government go next?

Damian Hinds: As I said, Operation Safeguard is a contingency that provides additional headroom; we are not currently housing prisoners in cells as a result of Operation Safeguard. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to identify that physical capacity is one side of the coin and staffing is the other, which is why we are putting so much emphasis on recruitment and retention in the prison service.

Feryal Clark: Napo has said that the insufficient capacity to hold prisoners is directly linked to staffing and workload crises in probation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) said. Does the Minister agree with Napo's view that there is a workload crisis in probation services? If so, who caused it?

Damian Hinds: That is similar to the point of the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford). Of course, all the services are linked, but as with the Prison Service—it is a fact across many different occupations in the public and private sector—there is a very tight labour market with high rates of employment and low rates of unemployment by historical standards. Recruitment is a challenge, but we are putting a huge emphasis on recruitment into the Prison Service and probation, which fundamentally drives workload. The other side of that is, as always, making sure that we retain staff.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I do not blame my right hon. Friend for triggering Operation Safeguard—in the circumstances, it was sensible—but he would not have needed to if the 12% of the prison population who are foreign national offenders had been imprisoned in their countries of origin. The top three groups are made up of 1,300 Albanians, 800 Polish nationals and 750 Romanians. Can we have more compulsory prisoner transfer agreements so that those people are sent to jail in their own countries?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is correct that there are a large number of foreign national offenders in our prisons, and facilitating the movement back to their home country is important. We have had the prisoner transfer agreement with Albania since May 2022, and we are looking at more.

Backlog of Criminal Court Cases

7. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the size of the backlog of criminal court cases in Jarrow constituency.

[903018]

8. **Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the size of the backlog of criminal court cases in Birmingham Yardley constituency.

[903019]

21. **Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the size of the backlog of criminal court cases in Stockport constituency. [903033]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The outstanding case load in the Crown court in Newcastle upon Tyne was 1,598 at the end of June 2022. In Birmingham, the outstanding case load in the Crown court was 1,748 and in Manchester, the outstanding case loads in the Crown courts were 1,271 and 1,259 at the end of June 2022. As I have said in previous answers, we are taking action across the criminal justice system to bring down the backlogs and improve waiting times for those who use our courts.

Kate Osborne: The Minister says that it is not a disaster, but the courts backlog has undeniably been made worse by the common platform system that Crown Prosecution Service members have been taking strike action over. It is a £300-million-plus IT scandal that has been dubbed “Horizon mark 2”; workers at my local court say that it is driving them to despair and judges have said that the system is not fit for purpose. Can the Minister confirm what cost-benefit analysis was done before making such drastic changes? What is being done to tackle the fundamental flaws in the system?

Mike Freer: First, I do not accept the characterisation of the common platform system. The hon. Lady forgets to mention the number of legacy systems that were on the verge of collapse, and they needed to be replaced. The members of staff I have spoken to accept that, while all IT roll-outs have teething problems, it is a worthwhile programme and will deliver benefits. If the hon. Lady would like to have the full implementation and benefits laid out in the business case, I will share what I can. On the ability to address the specific issues raised by members of staff, the programme team do on a regular basis engage with staff, and log all the issues and suggestions made by members of staff so that they can be resolved quickly.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Every Crown court centre in the country is affected by backlogs, which are rising to crisis proportions once more. The Government rightly resolved the issue of the availability of defence counsel by increasing defence fees, but now the issue is the continued and repeated unavailability of prosecution counsel. Since our system requires equality of arms—barristers of equal seniority and ability to prosecute and defend—is it not important that the Secretary of State and his junior Minister support the Attorney General in getting increased funding from the Treasury for equivalent prosecution fees so that we have a joined-up system?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, and I share his concern about ensuring that all elements of the criminal justice system, whether solicitors or barristers, are paid and rewarded appropriately for their efforts. There is a continuing debate about how we can invest in the whole criminal justice system so that it runs smoothly for all those involved, but especially for victims. I am very happy to discuss the details with my hon. Friend next week, I think, in the Justice Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): While the Lord Chancellor is busy scrapping the Human Rights Act 1998, the criminal justice system is on its knees. The numbers of duty solicitors and criminal legal aid firms continue to fall at an alarming rate, yet the Government refuse to follow the recommendations of their own review of criminal legal aid, which has only worsened the courts backlog. What steps are being taken by the Government to improve staff recruitment and retention to ensure justice for victims and help reduce the courts backlog?

Mike Freer: I am very happy that the hon. Gentleman and I are meeting later today, when we can have a more detailed conversation, but the Bellamy report, which he alluded to, has been implemented. There are some elements we still want to work on to avoid any perverse incentives, but the investment this Government have made in the criminal justice system of £138 million will in our view bring the stability that he seeks.

Offender Rehabilitation Programmes: Effectiveness

10. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help offenders (a) desist and (b) find employment. [R] [903021]

16. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of HM Prison and Probation Service-commissioned programmes on the (a) rehabilitation and (b) employment-readiness of offenders. [903027]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): The proportion of persons released from custody employed at six months from their release rose by almost two thirds over the last year, and we are delivering the further measures set out in our White Paper because we know this has a huge impact in cutting reoffending.

Rob Butler: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Key to reducing reoffending is prisoners getting jobs when they are released from custody, and key to prisoners getting jobs is having employers that are willing to take on ex-prisoners, who often prove to be extremely diligent and conscientious workers. What progress are my right hon. Friend's Department and HMPPS making to encourage more employers, including other Government Departments, to recruit ex-prisoners and so contribute to cutting crime?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a doughty campaigner on this issue. He is right about the Government, who are a significant employer and can show a lead. I can tell him that we have committed to recruiting more prison leavers to civil service roles, with nearly 200 offered or filled across Government. I am pleased to say that, in the Ministry of Justice, we have offered or filled almost 100 of those roles—not that I am competitive.

John Penrose: It is great to hear that more offenders are finding jobs after being released. Will the Secretary of State undertake to publish the outcomes and success rates of all publicly commissioned programmes to prepare offenders for work, together with an independent evaluation

of their effectiveness and value for money from the evaluation task force, so everyone can learn what works and what does not, taxpayers can see whether they are getting value for money, and ever more offenders can get a second chance to put their lives back on track?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right to focus on the data. We are doing this because it gives offenders a chance to turn their lives around, but we also know that getting offenders into work can cut reoffending by up to 9 percentage points, which keeps our streets safer. We publish a range of data—there is the justice data lab, and we review international evidence—and we will certainly publish as much as we can on the Government's website so the analysis he talks about can take place.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But the Secretary of State must know that staff shortages in the probation service are leading to dangerously high levels of workload for the existing staff, who are then leaving in droves, creating a vicious circle against rehabilitation, putting staff at risk and also potentially the public. It has led to the chief inspector of the probation service saying his service is in crisis mode. What is the Secretary of State going to do to break this vicious circle?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the people who work in the prison and probation services are critical to driving down reoffending. We have an independent pay review body that looks at these things, which we have supported and engaged with precisely to make sure we get the balance right. We have increased funding for the probation service by an additional £155 million a year to help recruitment, and the reforms we have introduced since 2010 are working. We have reduced the overall reoffending rate from 31% under Labour to 25.6% under this Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

To protect the public, prisons must rehabilitate as well as punish, but under the Conservatives they have become colleges of crime: offenders going in clean but leaving as drug addicts; enrolment in rehabilitation programmes down nearly 90%; and the percentage of prisoners released with jobs to go to halved since 2010. When will the Government finally get a grip, fix our broken prison system, and keep the public safe?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid I do not accept that litany of spin. The fact is that crime—[*Interruption.*] No, I will tell the hon. Lady what the facts are. Excluding fraud and computer misuse, crime has been slashed by more than half since Labour left office, violent crime is down by half, and reoffending is five percentage points lower than when Labour left office. On employment, for offenders leaving prison within six months there has been an increase in one year alone since I have been in the job by two thirds. We are restless to go further. We have appointed all the chairs to the employment advisory boards in 92 prisons, we have appointed 66 out of 92 prison employment hubs, and we have appointed 91 of our 92 prison employment lead roles, which are all going to get offenders into work and drive down reoffending.

Convictions for Joint Enterprise: Racial Disparities

11. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make an assessment of the reasons for racial disparities in the level of convictions for joint enterprise. [903022]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Government recognise that convictions based on joint enterprise appear to affect ethnic minority groups disproportionately. However, the Crown Prosecution Service can only apply the law when making charging decisions and plays no part in the decision making on individual joint enterprise cases. Data is collected on the ethnicity of defendants who are prosecuted and convicted of a criminal offence, but not on whether the crime was part of a joint enterprise. However, we are considering whether such data could be collected as part of the common platform programme.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for his response but research by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies suggests that the doctrine of joint enterprise is routinely applied in a racist way leading to many miscarriages of justice. Assessing why it disproportionately targets ethnic minority communities, especially young black men, is only the first step; what is needed is urgent action. Will the Minister tell us what he is doing to right historical wrongs and prevent future miscarriages of justice due to joint enterprise?

Mike Freer: What I can do is confirm that the Government have of course implemented many of the recommendations of the Lammy review. I understand how passionately the hon. Member feels about this, so I would like to sit down with her and go through some of the specific issues she wants discussed in more depth, rather than talk across the Dispatch Box; I think that would be more fruitful and practical and I hope the hon. Member will accept my invitation.

Immigration Courts: Waiting Times

12. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reducing waiting times for cases in immigration courts. [903023]

22. **Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reducing waiting times for immigration cases. [903034]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): We are committed to ensuring faster throughput in immigration and asylum tribunals to support the Government's priority to combat dangerous small boats crossing the channel.

Maggie Throup: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the quickest way to end the use of hotels such as those in my constituency as temporary accommodation centres is to speed up the processing of immigration cases and, when cases are rejected by the courts, for the Government to act swiftly to remove failed claimants from the UK?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is part of the solution, and I am working closely with the Home Secretary on that. Our aim, working together, is to eliminate the backlog of people who claimed asylum before June 2022 by the end of this

year. We will support the Home Office in delivering that so that we can end the use of hotels by 2024. Part of that is about the throughput, so we are doubling the number of decision makers in tribunals from 1,270 to 2,500. Digital can also play a role. Overall, we are driving forward that process to the ends that she describes.

Dean Russell: Further investment in the immigration process is welcome. However, last year we saw a stark increase in the number of people attempting to enter the country illegally in small boats. That is unsafe for those genuinely in need, unfair on those who moved to this country through safe and legal routes and unacceptable for the working people of the UK, including those of Watford, who foot the bill. As one of the Government's priorities for the new year, will my right hon. Friend set out what practical steps are being considered, including by the Justice Department, to ensure that we have the most effective border in the world by 2025?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will have heard what the Prime Minister said about the five pledges, one of which is to end the small boats coming across illegally. I mentioned what we are doing with the Home Office to get the backlog down in the immigration tribunal. My hon. Friend will know about the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have also talked about further measures being brought forward shortly. Of course, the Labour party has opposed every single one of those measures. It is no surprise that, in 2010, the last Labour Government left a record backlog of asylum claims. We are the ones fixing that mess.

Bill of Rights

14. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Whether he plans to replace the Human Rights Act 1998 with a Bill of Rights. [903025]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): The Government were elected with a manifesto to reform human rights. We have published the Bill of Rights, and we will bring it forward for Second Reading as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Munira Wilson: The Human Rights Act, which protects so many of our freedoms and basic rights and our access to justice, helped secure an inquiry into patient safety for families at Mid Staffs and empowered victims of the black cab rapist to ensure that the police were held to account when those crimes were not properly investigated. My constituents, the Secretary of State's constituents and the wider public do not want the Human Rights Act to be ripped up. Is not the truth that, yet again, his shameful pet project to do so and replace it with a Bill of Rights has been shelved by the Prime Minister?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for at least giving me the opportunity to rebut some of the myths that are flying around. The truth is that the terrible situation at Mid Staffordshire was not brought to light as a result of a case under the Human Rights Act. It was the result of questions raised, campaigns and issues raised by hon. Members in this House. Of course, nothing in the Bill of Rights would affect any of the

important expectations that people such as victims and patients have. What it will do is strengthen free speech and help us to deport more foreign offenders. She should get behind it.

Topical Questions

T1. [903037] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Since the last oral questions, we have published our rape review progress report, which shows that adult rape cases charged and cases received at the Crown court were up by 65% and 91% respectively compared with 2019. We have launched a 24/7 support line for the victims of rape so that we can be there to provide the support they need in their hour of need.

Today, I can announce to the House that, by the end of March, we will have installed 83 new X-ray scanners at 44 prisons to stop the inward flow of contraband.

David Johnston: I have been supportive of my constituent Sharon Gaffka's campaign on spiking. She was spiked twice and has more than 1,500 testimonies of people aged 14 to 64 who have had the same experience. Will my right hon. Friend update me on the discussions he has been having with the Home Office about punishments and prosecutions so that we can stamp this crime out?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his consistent campaigning on such an important issue. He will know that spiking is already a criminal offence with a maximum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment. The primary barriers to prosecution that we have identified are suspect identification and the gathering of sufficient evidence. We are taking a range of practical measures to address that, such as reclassifying gamma-hydroxybutyric acid—the so-called date rape drug—from class C to class B, investing in projects such as safer streets and the safety of women at night fund to protect women, and working with the police to produce a forensic strategy to ensure that we have stronger prosecutions and law enforcement in this area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Steve Reed.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): There were a quarter of a million violent assaults inside prison over the last decade. Last year alone, over 8,000 weapons were found inside prison. Does the Secretary of State accept responsibility for the fact that violence is now rife in our prisons?

Dominic Raab: I do not accept that categorisation. What I would say is that we have introduced a whole range of measures, from drug testing to X-ray scanners, and we are now seeing enforcement picking up contraband which, frankly, was not being dealt with before. Last year, the hon. Gentleman criticised the funding we are putting into X-ray scanners. I wonder whether he will now withdraw those remarks.

Steve Reed: I wonder whether drug testing is working, because drug abuse in prisons has shot up by 400% since the Conservatives came to power. Last year, crack cocaine

was found being manufactured in cells inside Sudbury prison. Rising violence, rising drug abuse—does the Justice Secretary admit that the Government have lost control of our prisons?

Dominic Raab: No, and as I announced just a few moments ago we are introducing more scanners so that we detect, pick up and stop the flow of contraband into prison, whether drugs, mobile phones or weapons. We also have a step change in the approach to drug treatment. For example, we have fewer heroin addicts dumped on methadone indefinitely, and more drug recovery wings and more incentivised wings for substance-free living. That is the way to sustainably get offenders off drugs, and it also links in with all the work we are doing to get offenders into work.

T3. [903039] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Carshalton and Wallington residents are deeply concerned about burglaries. I welcome the Metropolitan police's commitment to attend all burglaries, but will my right hon. Friend outline what his Department is doing to ensure that those who are arrested receive appropriate sentences?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can tell him that domestic burglary has actually fallen by half since 2010, and the Metropolitan police's operational tenacity is one element of that. On sentencing, the maximum sentence is 14 years. That is obviously an individual decision for judges, but I can also tell him that since 2010 the average sentence has increased by nine months, from 22.6 months to 31.6 months. There has been a step change and an increase in sentences for burglary, as well as the measures we are taking on police and law enforcement.

T2. [903038] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The Government were supposed to respond by the end of November to the Justice Committee's hard-hitting report on IPP—imprisonment for public protection—sentences, yet they still have not done so. Will the Secretary of State tell us exactly what the hold-up is and when we can expect his official response?

Dominic Raab: This is an important issue, and I am grateful to the Select Committee for raising it. We want the number to come down, but the right way to do that is not to let out offenders who have been deemed dangerous in the past based on legislation passed under the Labour Government that would not apply now. Therefore, we are taking every measure to ensure offenders can pass the threshold and satisfy decision makers that they are safe to be released. We will release the response to the report shortly.

T6. [903042] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): This morning, Buckinghamshire youth offending service received a rating of good following an inspection by HM inspectorate of probation. The inspectors say leadership is strong, that staff are skilled and motivated, and that, crucially, feedback from children themselves is positive. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Bucks YOS? Does he agree that effective and efficient local youth offending teams are crucial in steering young people away from crime? [R]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): I am delighted to hear that result and I totally agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of youth offending teams. They have been a great success since 2010 in reducing the number of under-18s who are locked up. They are fundamental to helping to put young people on a better path and stopping them getting on to the path of incarceration and reoffending.

T4. [903040] **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Women eligible for early release from prison are being denied that opportunity due to the lack of safe move-on accommodation. Many of those women are mothers and a safe home would allow them to re-engage with their children. Will the Secretary of State please look urgently at investing more money and innovation in developing safe community accommodation like that available through the Hope Street Project, to allow more women across the country to benefit from early release?

Damian Hinds: We are also locking up fewer women and that is right where it is possible to avoid incarceration. We are investing large amounts of money into an increased accommodation offer. I will absolutely look at the particular project the hon. Lady mentions and am happy to discuss it.

T8. [903044] **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Robert Brown murdered his partner Joanna Simpson. He battered her to death before burying her in a pre-dug grave. This dangerous man is due to be released from prison in November after serving only 13 years of his sentence. Will the Lord Chancellor urgently review that decision? The family and friends of Joanna Simpson are terrified for their lives.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter. I pay tribute to her and to the family, who are very much in my thoughts. She will know that we have an extra power, which we introduced in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022; it is quite a confined power, but I will undertake to look at it in this case. Of course, I would make the broader point that when we introduced these measures to protect victims and the public, again, the Labour party voted against them.

T5. [903041] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State considered the effect of his Bill of Rights proposals on disabled people and organisations, who consistently use the Human Rights Act in their fight to ensure that disabled people are treated humanely and equitably, for example by ensuring that they receive the same health treatments that are routinely given to the rest of the population?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady raises a critically important point. Of course there is nothing in our Bill of Rights that would impact on the healthcare that disabled individuals or communities would receive.

T9. [903045] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend liaised with colleagues in Government with regard to amending the Data Protection Act to ease the bureaucratic burden on policing and speed up the administration of justice?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): We are determined to reduce any unnecessary bureaucratic barriers that make it harder for our police, and our criminal justice system more broadly, to work as effectively as possible. Although I am not aware of any discussions about the specific issue that my hon. Friend mentions, or about the section 29 exemption for policing under the DPA, I am aware that the Police Federation is doing some work on the issue. If he is willing to write to me with more details, I am very happy to look into the matter further.

T10. [903046] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): Figures unearthed by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) show that the Prison Service has lost more than 99,000 years of prison officer experience since 2010. That is startling. Is this absolute failure of Government policy what has caused the current state of chaos and crisis in His Majesty's Prison Service?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to prison officers for the amazing job that they have done—particularly through the pandemic, but also more generally. We often pay tribute to frontline emergency service workers, but prison officers in particular are out of sight, out of mind. That is why it is so important that we followed the recommendations of the pay review body. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that since 2016 the number of full-time prison officers has increased by 3,662.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Despite IPP sentences having been abolished more than 10 years ago, 2,926 IPP prisoners were still in custody as of June 2022, of whom 608 were 10 years over their original tariff. Does my right hon. Friend agree that many of those people are locked in prison as a result of mental health conditions that they have developed while in custody, rather than because of the threat that they pose to the public?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend has raised the issue with me a number of times, and I respect his view. Of course, we have repealed the IPP legislation, but we are dealing retrospectively with the backlog of cases. I can understand some of the issues that he has raised; I think the right way to approach them is to ensure that offenders who can be released safely get the support, training and rehabilitation that they need to convince decision makers that releasing them is safe. That is the approach that we take, but I am very mindful of the issue and am continually looking at what more we can do.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Too many women and girls are victims of violent crime, yet the Government have still not delivered the long-promised victims Bill. They have also failed to appoint a Victims' Commissioner since last September. Victims need support and the Government are letting them down. Why do the Government not prioritise victims?

Dominic Raab: I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady: we are funding victims to the tune of quadruple the level under the last Labour Government; we will appoint a new Victims' Commissioner shortly; and the victims Bill will be coming forward as soon as parliamentary time allows. I hope the hon. Lady will also recognise the 24/7 rape support line, the increase to more than

1,000 independent sexual and domestic violence advisers, the roll-out of section 28 and the work that we are doing through Operation Soteria.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My last meeting of 2022 was probably the most important, because I met our police chief and police commissioner to discuss rape victims in Essex. The number of prosecutions is rising but it is still far too low, and one of the factors that put women off is the long court delays. As more judges are recruited, will the Government please ensure that they focus on rape cases, so that 2023 can be the year in which women who have been raped know they will have access to justice?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is right. In June last year, we announced—this is on top of the measures I have already mentioned—enhanced specialist sexual violence support in three specific Crown court locations where there is a high throughput of rape cases: Leeds, Newcastle and Snaresbrook. As I said earlier, we have already increased the number of rape convictions by two thirds, and we are restless to go much further in 2023.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Under this Government, an abysmal one in 100 reported rape cases results in a charge. The Government say that they want to return to 2016 charging levels, but at this rate we are never going to get there. Labour has been calling for specialist rape courts and legal advocates for victims. When will the Secretary of State finally take the action that is needed to secure justice for as many victims as possible?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue, which comes up at every session of Justice questions. In fact, the conviction rate in rape cases has risen in the last year, from 68% to 69%. The hon. Lady asked about specialist rape courts; I have just mentioned the three specialised fitted courtrooms that we have introduced in the areas with the highest throughput of rape cases to achieve exactly what she is asking for.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): In February, it will be four years since my private Member's Bill became the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc) Act 2019, obliging the Government to introduce regulations giving coroners powers to investigate stillbirths. During Justice questions on 18 October, I asked the Minister why nothing had happened, and asked for a meeting to make progress on the issue. Three months on, still nothing has happened. Why not?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): My hon. Friend is right—he has raised this matter before—and I shall be happy to sit down with him and find out what the logjam is so that we can move this forward for him.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is simply unacceptable that drug dealers are able to continue to peddle their trade so easily behind bars. Last year, there were 17,700 cases of drugs being found in prisons, an increase of well over 411% since the Conservatives came to power in 2010. Who exactly does the Secretary of State blame for this failure in law and order?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of checking and stopping the flow of drugs and other contraband into prisons. He should speak to the shadow Justice Secretary, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), who, when we introduced £100 million of investment in X-ray scanners last year, said that it was a waste of money.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the existence of public spaces protection orders in some council areas. Is he also aware of a scandalous event that took place in Birmingham just before Christmas? A woman standing alone, quietly and with no protest material, outside an abortion clinic which was closed was arrested by police and asked what she was doing. When she said that she was quietly praying in her head, she was arrested and taken to a cell, and, while being questioned by police, was asked what she was praying about.

Dominic Raab: I do not know the facts of that case. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me, I will make inquiries to the extent that I am able to do so.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In answer to Question 11, asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), what the Minister seemed to say was that he was willing to assess the racial disparities in joint enterprise prosecutions once the data was available, which it is not at present but which it will be in the near future. Am I right to draw that conclusion?

Mike Freer: What I said was that the issue was complex, and that I would be happy to sit down with the hon. Member for Edmonton to go through the exact details and the exact concerns, rather than addressing such a sensitive issue across the Dispatch Box, so that we could have a meaningful discussion and see whether we could find a way forward to resolve the underlying issues.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Five years ago, the Right Rev. James Jones reported on the experience of the Hillsborough families. My constituents and I are waiting for the Government to introduce a Hillsborough law that will change the way in which justice is delivered in this country. When will that happen? We are sick of waiting.

Dominic Raab: With regard to the independent public advocate, I am very sympathetic and I want to make an announcement on that shortly. I reassure the hon. Lady that we have been working hard across Government to get the right answer ready, to be able to provide her with the reassurance that she needs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My constituent, a victim of historical child sexual exploitation, has had her case postponed three times

since she reported her abuse back in 2019. Each time it is cancelled, she relives the trauma that she experienced, and this has been made worse by the clerk of the court saying that only important cases were being prioritised. What percentage of historical CSE cases are delayed for four years and responded to so insensitively?

Dominic Raab: This is an acutely sensitive issue and if the hon. Lady wants to write to me about that specific case, I would be happy to look into it. Of course, listing decisions and things like that are made by the judges independently in those particular cases.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I have previously raised the case of a man who, after pleading guilty to sexual abuse, was given permission to go abroad on holiday. The Secretary of State asked me to write to him, but in the response from the Minister, the central point of concern about bail conditions was not addressed. Will the Secretary of State or a Minister say whether, in general terms, they think it is appropriate for sex offenders to go on holiday? I do not. Do they?

Dominic Raab: I would want to put public protection first and foremost, but of course it will all depend on the circumstances of any individual case.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Speed is compromising scrutiny in the magistrates court when it comes to the issuing of warrants to fit prepayment meters. In one court, 496 cases were signed off in just 3 minutes and 51 seconds, including cases involving children, disabled people and people experiencing fuel poverty. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that magistrates scrutinise every single application?

Mike Freer: I appreciate that this is a sensitive issue for families and people who can be very vulnerable. Obviously the judiciary is independent, but I will raise those concerns with the judiciary to see if I can find out the details, and stress the importance of getting it right and not rushing justice.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What advantages does the Secretary of State see in convening a special international tribunal to try offences committed in Russia's war on Ukraine, including the crime of aggression?

Dominic Raab: We are doing a huge amount to support the Ukrainian authorities with domestic trials. We are also one of the large group of leading countries referring the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court, and in a couple of months I will be convening a meeting here with the Dutch Justice Minister and getting countries together to ensure we can avoid any impunity for Putin's illegal and disastrous war.

Windrush Lessons Learned Review: Implementation of Recommendations

12.37 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the progress in implementing the recommendations of the Windrush lessons learned review.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Since the injustices of Windrush came to light, there has been a concerted effort across the Home Office to right the wrongs suffered by those affected. That work continues, and the Department is making sustained progress on delivering on the recommendations of the Windrush lessons learned review of 2020 and the commitments made in the comprehensive improvement plan of 2020. In her report last year, the independent reviewer Wendy Williams concluded that 21 of her recommendations had been met or partially met. She acknowledged that the scale of the challenge she had set the Department was significant and that change on that scale takes time.

We have made progress in delivering against Wendy Williams's recommendations. In October 2022, the Home Office established the Office for the Independent Examiner of Complaints, and Moiram Ali was appointed as the independent examiner following a public appointment recruitment process. The Home Office has also held over 200 engagement and outreach events across the country, and the Windrush help teams have attended over 120 one-to-one surgeries to help people apply for documentation.

As of the end of October 2022, the Home Office has paid out or offered £59.58 million of compensation to Windrush victims. The "Serving Diverse Communities: Acting on Our Values" learning package was launched across the Home Office in June 2022, starting with recommendation 24 on learning for senior civil servants and recommendation 29 on diversity and inclusion. The learning package for recommendation 6 on the history of the UK and its relationship with the rest of the world has been designed and is undergoing final review prior to implementation.

I am pleased that the independent reviewer of Windrush progress has concluded that there are several areas in which very good progress has been made, but she rightly holds the Home Office to account for areas and recommendations where sufficient progress has not yet been made. She concludes that there can be "no doubt" that the Department has risen to the "daunting challenge" she set us.

We know there is more to do. Many people suffered terrible injustices at the hands of successive Governments, and the Department will continue working hard to right the wrongs and to deliver a Home Office worthy of every community it serves.

Stephen Kinnock: The reality is that this Government's treatment of the Windrush generation is surely one of the most shameful episodes in our post-war political history. The Windrush community played a pivotal role in rebuilding Britain. We all owe them a debt of honour and gratitude but, instead, consecutive Conservative

Governments have treated them with utter contempt. First, they were victimised under the hostile environment policy, and then they were let down by a poorly administered compensation scheme, under which just 1,300 people have been awarded compensation when the Government originally estimated that 15,000 should be eligible. Now it is reported that the Government are set to betray the Windrush generation once again by U-turning on their commitment to implementing all 30 recommendations in Wendy Williams's lessons learned report.

In September 2021, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), restated her aim to put right the wrongs of this sorry affair, yet today we find the Government are rowing back on some of their commitments, including by refusing to hand additional powers to the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration and by scrapping reconciliation and community events.

Why are the Government so terrified of scrutiny? Their toxic combination of incompetence and indifference is failing the Windrush generation, just as it is failing the country as a whole. Given that Wendy Williams says that only eight of her recommendations have been implemented, will the Minister tell me today how many of the Williams recommendations have been implemented and how many the Government are ditching, as is widely reported by the media?

Why have thousands of the Windrush generation still not received any compensation at all? On the 75th anniversary of the Windrush landing, are the Windrush generation being betrayed by this Government once again?

Miss Dines: This Government are absolutely not betraying the Windrush generation. Successive Governments of all colours have failed to step up to the mark, but this Government are stepping up. The Windrush generation are rightly identified as British and have the right to be in this country, and this remains separate from the many narratives that have been written.

The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government do not comment on leaks. What I can say is that we have matched the scale of Wendy's challenge with the scale of our ambition and delivery. Wendy acknowledges that our ambition to achieve genuine cultural change requires ongoing reflection, which is what we are doing. The Home Office has provided regular updates on the good progress, and the statistics bear out the hard work that is happening.

I am afraid that the narrative is simply not quite right. I remind the House that 4,558 claims have been received, and the total compensation offered is £59.58 million, of which more than £51 million has already been paid. Fifty-nine per cent. of claims have a final decision and, as a lawyer in my previous profession, I know that that is quite a high number. The Government are absolutely committed to righting this injustice.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is worth noting that the Wendy Williams review looked across a catalogue of issues that affected the Windrush generation. I was particularly struck by the fact that the first case listed in her initial report was from 2009. So this is not just something that has occurred in the past 10 years. On the commitment to implementing the review's recommendations, it was very clear, certainly from my

right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), that the Government were absolutely committed to putting them all in place to rebuild the confidence of the Windrush generation. Could the Minister reassure me that that commitment remains and will be taken forward?

Miss Dines: I suggest that the commitment is clear to many, but there is clearly more work to be done. It is refreshing to see the amount of engagement locally that there has been. The casework reflects that. The other thing I wish to mention is that these things evolve, as they should. Dramatic changes have been brought in to make sure that the new system brought in by the Government is even more generous than before. There are many new aspects to this. For example, the introduction of new living costs allows compensation to be awarded to close family members for losses that were not previously covered under the scheme. The Government are doing more, as they should. The introduction of preliminary payments for close family members allows for part of a compensation payment to be paid earlier in the process. There needs to be more change, but we are effecting this and the Government's commitment is unswerving—my hon. Friend is correct on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Whitehall sources have been quoted in *The Guardian* as saying:

"The Williams review is not set in stone".

It would be a betrayal of that review and of those affected if there is to be no migrants commissioner, no reconciliation events and no extra powers for the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration. The Windrush compensation scheme has been painfully slow, with at least 23 people known to have died while their claims were being processed. So will the Minister confirm that none of the planned changes will affect the already ineffective compensation scheme and that the claims still outstanding will be concluded at the earliest opportunity? What confidence can those who do us the honour of coming to these islands for sanctuary, for work, for study and for love have in this Government when the UK Tory Government ignore the terrible injustices of Windrush, fail to learn the lessons and double down on attacking their fellow human beings?

Miss Dines: The hon. Lady should not believe everything she reads in the paper because there is no end date to Wendy Williams' appointment, she continues to review and the Government take her views very seriously. I do not accept the premise of the "delay". These issues are dealt with sensitively. It is important not to have a knee-jerk reaction and rush. Detailed, fundamental work needs to be done and Members must judge the "delay"—or the progress, as I would rather say—by the fact that there is a 59% success rate and so much money paid out. What is important is that the engagement, which has improved over the past three to six months, has meant a dramatic increase in the number of those taking up the scheme. There is always more to do and the Government will not say that they are doing everything right, but they are 100% committed and I do not accept that there is delay or a willingness to ditch, as is implied, the independent reviewer, whose work is so important.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The previous Home Secretary rightly energetically embraced the Wendy Williams findings and pursued the recommendations. Notwithstanding those individual recommendations, Wendy Williams said that at the heart of what must change was the Home Office's culture

"to recognise that migration and wider Home Office policy is about people and, whatever its objective, should be rooted in humanity."

What evidence is there that that is changing and will change substantially? Is there a risk that the current problems with the migration backlog have deflected attention from dealing with the Windrush problems more urgently?

Miss Dines: The Government are very committed, as Members can see from the level of engagement. Where massive mistakes were made, where cultural change is needed, there is evidence, as Wendy Williams acknowledges, of change in attitude and culture, which has been seen with those hard workers in the civil service who deal with these claims. However, we must not conflate the issues of the Windrush generation, who are rightly identified as British and have a right to be here, with the enforcement of policies for individuals who have no right to reside in this country. That distinction has to be clear. Caseworkers will need to continue to be empathetic in the way they deal with our citizens and progress has been made.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee has spent a great deal of time looking at the Windrush scandal and the work of Wendy Williams, including a visit to the compensation scheme unit in Sheffield, because we remain very concerned about that scheme and we reiterate our call for it to be given to an arm's length body outside the Home Office. Very worrying are reports that the Government are planning not to take forward the recommendations on the migrants commissioner or the recommendations on the extension of the powers of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, who is currently the only inspector in Government who cannot publish his reports without the permission of the Home Office, and only one out of 23 of his reports has been published on time. That comes alongside the delays in the appointment of a new modern slavery commissioner. Can the Minister confirm today that the particular recommendations around the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration will be taken forward quickly by the Government?

Miss Dines: I do not accept that there is any delay or difficulty in rising to the challenge but, as the right hon. Lady knows, the Government cannot comment in relation to leaks. The Government must be judged on what they actually do, not on worries about what journalists say might be happening. Let us wait a modest amount of time to see what the Government actually do. We must judge the Government's record on delivery, not on speculation in *The Guardian*.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government intend to deal with these claims on a strictly first-come, first-served basis, or are they able to

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

exercise discretion in favour of claimants who may be more aged, more frail, but who may only have put in the claim somewhat later in the cycle?

Miss Dines: I thank my right hon. Friend for that interesting question. It is something that is worth while reviewing and I will make sure that he gets a detailed answer. What I can say is that there is an ongoing system of improvements. Glitches in terms of whether family members are entitled to money, or whether people are being dealt as appropriate for their age are serious issues. I would like to get back to him with some more detail on that.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The Minister talks about how refreshing it is to see the engagement of local people. These local people are desperate. Their lives have been stripped away from them. It is not refreshing; it is actually disheartening. Can the Minister confirm whether the Windrush scheme will remain open, and whether additional resources will be used? At the moment, there is an 18-month delay. I am not sure about the 59% figure to which she refers. Is it the ones the Government have dealt with, or is it the ones in the pipeline in the 18-month delay? I do not know what the West Indian community have done to this Government to be treated so cruelly, so harshly and so heartlessly.

Miss Dines: I do not accept that this Government are treating those applying under the scheme cruelly or harshly. On the contrary, while this Government have made mistakes, as have successive Governments, they are doing all they can. Various improvements have raised the minimum payment from £250 to £10,000 per applicant. That is not treating people with disrespect. That is rising to the challenge.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): The Minister mentions some of the issues that have been faced by the Windrush generation. Can she update the House on the work of the cross-governmental working group and on how that has gone about addressing some of these issues?

Miss Dines: This has been an opportunity for learning. The cross-governmental work has been very valuable. On commitment, I reiterate that there has been a change in culture. Wendy Williams accepts that there has been a massive shift among those working in the community and the caseworkers. That cross-governmental work will continue in the months ahead.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The former Home Secretary promised to implement all 30 recommendations in the Wendy Williams review. It seems that we need to remind the Minister that it was a Government review, so why is that promise now being broken; it is like shifting sand? Is it therefore correct to say that the Government can no longer be trusted and have run out of time?

Miss Dines: This Government can be trusted. Again, I remind the House that the Government do not comment on leaks. That is simply not acceptable. On an issue as

important as this concerning the rights of our citizens, it is simply not good enough to accept what is written in *The Guardian* without judging on the facts.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am sure that we are all pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government remain committed to implementing all the Williams recommendations. Presumably, therefore, the Home Office has a plan for the implementation. Can the Minister tell the House what the target date for completion of that plan is?

Miss Dines: The whole point of this work is that there is not a target finish date. That would be against the principles of continual improvement and continual financial assistance for successful applicants. It would be wholly wrong to say that we are stopping it; we are not. We are continuing and there is no target end date. We continue to work at pace.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): In the progress update that Wendy Williams published, she made it clear that the Department was at a tipping point: it could either drive forward and achieve lasting cultural changes, or abandon any commitment to change. Well, we have our answer. What does the Minister think of Wendy Williams' conclusion that a failure to drive change would mean that it was just a matter of time before we faced another difficult outcome like the Windrush scandal?

Miss Dines: The Government greatly respect and take seriously what Wendy Williams says. There is no question of abandoning this change in culture. The change has been fundamental within the Government. It is across all Departments, not just the Home Office, because these issues attach to all Departments. The change has been dramatic and that has been refreshing to see, but there is still more work to be done, which is why Wendy Williams will continue on this most valuable work.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): If the Government are indeed still committed to the recommendations of Wendy Williams, then, obviously, the Minister can have no problem in coming to the Dispatch Box to confirm that there will be a migrants commissioner. Can she tell us when we can expect the migrants commissioner to appear and to be appointed?

Miss Dines: On that issue, I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman in relation to the timings. But I can reassure him that there is a huge commitment here, and no one should be under any misapprehension that the Government do not take the matter seriously. The issues along the way will be addressed. I am pleased with the progress that we have made but, as I have said, there is more work to be done. This is not a case of harping on; it is a case of looking at how we can best help people in the future.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Before Christmas, I asked the Home Office how many of my constituents in Erdington had applied to the Windrush compensation scheme. Shamefully, the way the Government record applications means that they cannot tell me. Now we hear that Ministers are abandoning

most of the recommendations of the Windrush review. Can the Minister tell me, a child of the Windrush generation, why the Government are intent on pretending that the Windrush scandal is now behind us?

Miss Dines: I remind the hon. Lady of what I said a little while ago. The Government are not finishing a project; they do not have an end date. They continue to work on it. They are certainly not abandoning people who are part of our community and as British as everyone here. The number of claims received by the scheme was 4,558, so there is statistical analysis and proper knowledge of what is happening with the scheme. But I welcome the hon. Lady's input. I would meet her at any time, as would the Minister who holds the brief, to discuss that further. I am very grateful to her for her question.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Five years on from the outrage of the Windrush scandal and the hostile environment, these reports of scrapped commitments and the cases of so many of my constituents, who are still harassed and persecuted by this Home Office, make it clear that this Government never had any intention of cleaning up the hostile environment towards migrants and minorities in this country. At the very least, will the Minister accept the reality that the Windrush generation, migrants and minorities have lost all confidence in this Home Office and this Government?

Miss Dines: I respectfully suggest that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. I have been a junior Minister in the Home Office for just a few months, but I have not witnessed that hostile environment he speaks of. Mistakes have been made historically, but I have witnessed civil servants working together to put right this wrong. I will work hard to make sure that we continue, so that each and every citizen of our country is treated with fairness in the same way.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Human rights are universal: no class of person present in this country should be exempted from human rights protection, regardless of whether they are a British citizen. In our 11th report, "Black people, racism and human rights", the Joint Committee on Human Rights said:

"We expect the Government to fulfil its promise to implement the recommendations from the Windrush Lessons Learned Review...as a matter of urgency."

That was more than two years ago. Can we take it that the delay in implementing the regulations and the reports that some of them are now to be ditched are indicative of the fact that the Government are unconcerned whether their forthcoming immigration legislation is human rights compliant?

Miss Dines: It is absolutely not the case that the Government have not treated these issues with urgency. When we deal with serious issues, we have to have a rapid but detailed and reliable response. We cannot just rush ahead with something that will not work. This is about a large transformational programme of the Home Office and the fact that it has dealt with people in an unacceptable way in the past. This Government are committed to doing everything that is right. I simply do not accept that the Government are abandoning the recommendations. We are working through them very

hard, and Wendy Williams has accepted that and said the Government have stepped up to the plate, to use an American form of words. There will be more work done, but the commitment is already there.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): The Minister talks about engagement, so can she please confirm why the Home Office is now refusing to hold reconciliation events despite having promised to do so?

Miss Dines: I understand that that was part of the argument put forward in the seemingly inaccurate article in *The Guardian*. The level of engagement has been incredibly high, and engagement is a key part of delivering the review. Home Office officials are actively engaging with internal and external organisations and staff at all levels, including unions, support networks and the Department's race board, to ensure that the findings of the review are implemented. Across the whole community there have been many engagement exercises, but, again, it is not appropriate to comments on leaks or news articles that may not be accurate.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): One would think from the way the Minister is speaking that this was an urgent question on an article in *The Guardian*. This is an urgent question about a Home Office that, as the Home Affairs Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have both repeatedly pointed out, failed to recognise the pattern of behaviour despite many flags in the system, introduced a compensation scheme that then did not deliver, had to review the compensation scheme and is now goodness knows where. One of the recommendations from the Public Accounts Committee was that more work be done to identify people from Commonwealth countries other than from the Caribbean who were also impacted. Can she update the House on progress on that?

Miss Dines: It is regrettable that some of the work the Home Office has done has not been acknowledged. There has been a sea change. Things have changed. The process has been improved and there is a constant system of review; even since the August changes were made, more work has been done. I mentioned earlier the introduction of preliminary payments for close family members, which allows for part of a compensation payment to be made far earlier, meeting one of the core concerns of close family members about receiving that assistance and money. The commitment is definitely there. It has been suggested that this has now become a UQ on *The Guardian*, but that is because of the fallacious and inaccurate information in *The Guardian* that has seemingly led to these questions being asked.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the compensation scheme, as she believes it to be an outstanding example of success. That is not the view of the Home Affairs Committee and it is not the view of my constituents applying to the scheme, who have had the most appalling experience, from the tone of the correspondence to the delays in receiving responses and the paltry sums offered for absolutely appalling travesties of justice. The Windrush scandal was the most egregious breach of trust. The full acceptance and implementation of the Wendy Williams recommendations is the bare minimum that the Windrush

[Helen Hayes]

generation have the right to expect. Will the Minister confirm that the Home Office remains committed to implementation in full?

Miss Dines: This is about progress. I am very clear that we must compensate members of the Windrush generation and their families for the losses and impacts they suffered. Those impacts were the result of a scandal that arose under Governments of varying colours, and we must put that right. I simply do not accept the suggestion that there is no serious effort being put into implementation. I do not say everything has been a success; mistakes have been made, but improvements are also being made. We have offered and paid out almost £60 million. That is an extremely good start. It is not enough, but it is the way forward, and Wendy Williams has acknowledged that there has been significant change.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Minister give the House a clear assurance that the Home Office will appoint a migrants commissioner?

Miss Dines: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. I will have to check and write to him. That is not in my brief, but I am enjoying this urgent question and listening to Members across the House. That information will be sent to him shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Minister outline how she will apply the lessons of Windrush to the attitude of some on immigration—specifically on allowing people to work here and help to fill the gaps in industries? One of the recommendations and suggestions of the Wendy Williams review is that people should be entitled to bring their families and build a life while also building this nation, as those who came over in the Windrush generation did before them. Can the Minister confirm that that is truly the case?

Miss Dines: I can confirm that this Government are committed to treating people fairly and to putting right historical wrongs in such a way that progress is made at pace and without unnecessary delay. The Government must do what we can to protect our borders, but we must also look at those who are legitimately here. That is an ongoing process; it is a very specialist area, and the Government are committed to a change from historical wrongdoings in how people have been treated. This is a growing area, and from what I have experienced, the Government are committed to assisting those who are lawfully in this country.

Industrial Action

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on industrial action and minimum service levels.

Nurses, paramedics and transport workers are called key workers for a reason. They truly are the lifeblood of this country; every person sitting in this Chamber is grateful for the work they do and I know everyone will agree that we cannot do without them. The Government will always defend their ability to withdraw their labour.

However, we also recognise the pressures faced by those working in the public sector. Yesterday I invited union leaders in for talks across Government, and I am pleased to say we have seen some progress. We want to resolve disputes where possible, while also delivering what is fair and reasonable to the taxpayer. At the moment, all households are struggling with the repercussions of high inflation caused by covid and Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, and the Government are absolutely focused on tackling that.

Granting inflation-busting pay deals that step outside of the independent pay review settlement process is not the sensible way to proceed and will not provide a fair outcome. We will instead continue to consult to find meaningful ways forward for the unions, and work with employers to improve the process and discuss the evidence that we have now submitted. In the meantime, the Government also have a duty to protect the public's access to essential public services. Although we absolutely believe in the right to strike, we are duty-bound to protect the lives and livelihoods of the British people.

The British people need to know that when they have a heart attack, a stroke or a serious injury, an ambulance will turn up, and that if they need hospital care, they have access to it. They need to know not only that those services are available, but that they can get trains or buses—particularly people who are most likely to be the least well-off in society.

I thank those at the Royal College of Nursing, who, during their last strike, worked with health officials at a national level to ensure that safe levels of cover were in place when they took industrial action. They kept services such as emergency and acute care running. They may have disagreed, but they showed that they could do their protest and withdraw their labour in a reasonable and mature way. As ever, they put the public first, and we need all our public services to do the same.

A lack of timely co-operation from the ambulance unions meant that employers could not reach agreement nationally for minimum safety levels during recent strikes. Health officials were left guessing the likely minimum coverage, making contingency planning almost impossible and putting all our constituents' lives at risk. The ambulance strikes planned for tomorrow still do not have minimum safety levels in place. That will result in patchy emergency care for British people. This cannot continue.

It is for moments such as this that we are introducing legislation focusing on blue-light emergency services and on delivering on our manifesto commitment to secure minimum service on the railways. I am introducing a Bill that will give the Government the power to ensure that vital public services will have to maintain a basic function, by delivering minimum safety levels to ensure

that lives and livelihoods are not lost. We are looking at six key areas, each of which is critical to keeping the British people safe and society functioning: health, education, fire and rescue, transport, border security and nuclear decommissioning. We do not want to use this legislation, but we must ensure the safety of the British public. During the passage of the Bill, we intend to consult on what an adequate level of coverage looks like in fire, ambulance, and rail services. For the other sectors covered in the Bill, we hope to reach minimum service agreements so that we do not have to use the powers—sectors will be able to come to that position, just as the nurses have done in recent strikes.

That is a common-sense approach, and we are not the first to follow it. The legislation will bring us in line with other modern European countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Germany, all of which already have these types of rules in place. Even the International Labour Organisation—the guardian of workers' rights around the world to which the TUC itself subscribes—says that minimum service levels are a proportionate way of balancing the right to strike with the need to protect the wider public. The first job of any Government is to keep the public safe, and unlike other countries, we are not proposing to ban strikes, but we do need to know that unions will be held to account.

Opposition Members who object to minimum safety levels will need to explain to their constituents why, if they had a heart attack, stroke, or life-threatening illness on a strike day, there were no minimum safety standards in place—[*Interruption.*] I can see that they do not want to hear it, but they will also need to explain why their leader, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), has already promised—without hearing any of these details—to stand in the way of this legislation and to repeal minimum safety levels, which are in the interests of their constituents, are in place in every other mature European democracy and neighbouring country, and would protect lives and livelihoods in this country. That is the difference between a Conservative Government who take difficult decisions to protect the welfare of our nation, and the Opposition, who too often appear to be in the pay of their union paymasters. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesperson.

1.14 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare that I am a proud member of a trade union.

I will start by tackling the Secretary of State's comments. The first thing that comes to my mind in this debate and in what the Secretary of State said is what happened to my constituent Bina, who waited more than an hour for an ambulance—who died waiting for an ambulance. That was not on a strike day; it was because of the disastrous chaos we have in the system under this Conservative Government. In the past few months, we have seen ambulance workers go on their first major strike in 30 years, and the first ever strike in the history of the Royal College of Nursing. Teachers, pharmacists and civil servants—among others—are balloting as we speak. His Government offer no solution because they have caused the problem.

The economic crisis made in Downing Street has left working people facing an economic emergency of sky-high inflation and recession. I notice that in his opening statement, the Secretary of State did not even mention—let alone apologise for—the fact that the Government crashed the economy. Nobody wants to see these strikes happen, least of all the workers who lose a day's pay. How are the Government responding to a crisis of their own making? Not with any attempt to reach a serious long-term solution in the public interest, but by playing politics and promising yet another sticking plaster.

The Secretary of State claims that he made progress yesterday, but the read-out from trade union representatives was dismal. Is there any chance of a deal this year? Where is the consultation he mentioned for a meaningful way forward, or was that all for show? That is the implication of his other proposal—his sacking nurses Bill. It is an outright attack on the fundamental freedom of British working people. How can he say with a straight face that this Government will always defend the ability to strike? Can he tell us whether he stands by his article in *The Telegraph* last summer, in which he listed yet more plans to attack that basic right? Does he deny that he considered banning some key workers from joining unions at all? So much for levelling up workers' rights. Where is the Government's promised code of conduct on fire and rehire, and the long-abandoned Employment Bill that they promised would tackle insecure work?

The Secretary of State goes in one breath from thanking nurses to sacking them. That is not just insulting but utterly stupid. There is no common sense about this at all. He says that he recognises the pressures faced by key workers, but he knows that the NHS cannot find the nurses it needs to work on the wards, and that the trains do not run even on non-strike days such is the shortage of staff, so how can he seriously think that sacking thousands of key workers will not just plunge our public services further into crisis? The Transport Secretary admits it will not work, the Education Secretary does not want it, and the Government's own impact assessment finds that it will lead to more strikes and staff shortages.

The Secretary of State says that he is looking into six key areas. What do other Ministers think about that? Will they have to disagree on that, too? He is scraping the barrel with comparisons to France and Spain, but those countries, which he claims have these laws on striking, lose vastly more strike days than Britain. Has he taken any time at all to speak to their Governments or trade unions to learn any real lessons from them?

The Secretary of State quotes the International Labour Organisation—I am surprised that he even knows what it is—but he will know that the ILO requires compensatory measures and an independent arbitrator. Are those in his Bill? The ILO also says that minimum service levels can happen in services only when the safety of individuals or their health is at stake. That does not include transport, Border Force or teachers, as he proposes.

Excess deaths are at their highest levels since the pandemic peak. The public are being put at risk every day because of the Government's NHS crisis and staffing shortages. The Secretary of State is right that his Government's duty is to protect the public's access to essential services, but livelihoods and lives are already being lost. We all want minimum standards of safety, service and staffing; it is Ministers who are failing to

[Angela Rayner]

provide that. Does he not accept that trade unions and workers already take steps to protect the public during action? He singles out ambulance workers. Paramedics agreed to operate life and limb deals on a trust-by-trust basis, as he knows, to ensure that the right care continues to be delivered. He should know that service levels were at 82%, with ambulance workers consistently leaving the picket lines to make sure that emergency calls were responded to. He is threatening to rip up that protection, and for what?

Let us look into what this is really all about: a Government who are out of ideas, out of time and fast running out of sticking plasters; a Government who are playing politics with nurses' and teachers' lives because they cannot stomach the co-operation and negotiation that are needed; and, a Government desperately doing all they can to distract from their economic emergency. We need negotiation not legislation, so when is the Minister going to do his job?

Grant Shapps: It is almost as if covid and the pressures on the NHS never occurred, according to the Opposition. I am pretty sure I heard this straight. It is almost as if Putin did not invade Ukraine, force up energy prices and force up inflation, and it is almost as if the right hon. Lady does not think that the rest of Europe is going through exactly the same thing. I was just reading an article in *The Guardian* saying exactly that—that other health services are experiencing exactly the same problems.

If we are going to have a sensible debate and start working from the facts and then have a discussion, we ought to acknowledge that covid and the war in Ukraine have had a huge impact on health services here and around the world. Then we can go on to have a sensible conversation about balancing the right to strike. As I said at the top of my speech, it is a right that we fully respect and fully endorse. We believe it is part of the International Labour Organisation's correct diagnosis of a working economy that people should be able to withdraw their labour, but that should not mean withdrawing their labour at the expense of our constituents' lives. The right hon. Lady talks about how the ambulance service, in her words, has been reasonable and offered back-up on a trust-by-trust basis if people have heart attacks and strokes, but heart attacks and strokes do not accept or work to the boundaries of trust borders. They work nationally, and so to manage the ambulance system, we need to know that each and every one of our constituents is protected. To deny and to vote against legislation that brings in minimum safety levels to help our constituents is to attack their security and their welfare.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): With the Opposition completely unable to control their own MPs and stop them from joining picket lines or to give a straight answer on whether they support the strikes, we can clearly see which Members of this House are on the side of the public. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what we have today are fair and proportionate measures equivalent to what is already in place in a number of other European countries, such as France and Spain?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is worth the House reflecting on the fact that the police were banned from striking in 1919, and that agreement has been in place for more than 100 years. It would have been possible for a Minister to come to this Dispatch Box and say that we would do the same with ambulance workers and perhaps with firefighters, but that is not what we are proposing today; we are proposing to bring ourselves in line with other modern European economies. It makes every bit of sense to ensure that if strikes are going to occur, our constituents' lives are protected with minimum safety levels. Frankly, it is extraordinary that anyone would argue against.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This Government have already created the most restrictive and anti-trade union laws in Europe. This new right-wing culture war stinks, and they are using ambulance cover as a pretext to attack workers' rights. It was the Tory membership that gave us a Prime Minister who tanked the economy overnight, put people's mortgages up and gave us high inflation, yet it is the Tories who continue to demand that public sector workers take the hit to balance the books.

Everyone can see the irony of the Tories clapping key workers and now giving them a pay cut and threatening them with the sack for future action. Does the Secretary of State really think that ordinary people support Tory plans over the nurses? Does he realise that the public can see Pat Cullen and Mick Lynch destroying their arguments and soundbites? Does he understand that train commuters, who already suffer from appalling service, will be raging when they find out how much money train companies are making from strike days, paid for by taxpayers? How much money has been paid to train companies that could have gone to workers instead?

It has not been easy for the Scottish Government, but they have negotiated better pay settlements for Police Scotland, train crews and NHS workers. It is something that the Royal College of Nursing would be willing to discuss with the UK Government. Those actions were commended by the unions, but not even acknowledged by Labour. There are no ambulance strikes in Scotland, and that has been done within a fixed budget and negotiations with one hand tied behind our back. Now, despite working with the unions, Scotland is to have the same anti-worker or anti-union legislation imposed on it, against the wishes of the Scottish Government. It is an imposition made easier by the Labour party agreeing with the Tories that workers' rights should remain with Westminster and not be devolved to Scotland. We do not want to be part of plans designed to sabotage workers' rights. This situation has clearly shown once again that if Scotland is to become a fairer, more equal country that respects workers' rights, the only way to do so is to become a normal independent country.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman tries to push the argument that somehow this legislation will take us out of step with other European countries, and I have already explained that it is we who are out of step with what already occurs elsewhere in Europe. If we go beyond Europe, he will be interested to hear that in

Australia, Canada and many states in America, blue-light strikes, as we would call them, are banned entirely. We are taking a moderate, sensible approach. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would wholeheartedly support protecting his constituents in that way. While we are taking lectures from him about how the Scottish Government handle these things, I could not help noticing that Scottish primary school teachers are on strike and secondary teachers go on strike in Scotland on Wednesday.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Strikes have a disproportionate impact in rural Britain, where there are no other modes of public transport. The nearest alternative hospital may be more than 60 miles away and ambulances have already travelled far further to get there, and that is without mentioning the vacancy rates in public services, which are so high due to our housing crisis. Can my right hon. Friend confirm how these measures will help support rural communities?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right. These so-called forever strikes, which have continued for month after month on the railways, are particularly hurting rural communities. It is easy sometimes for people to imagine that those affected will just sit at home on Zoom or Teams and have those conversations. That view of the world is much easier for someone in a desk job, perhaps in management. It is much harder for someone in a rural community or for a hospital porter or cleaner who needs to get to the hospital. The very people being hurt most by these strikes that never seem to come to a conclusion on the railways are the hardest-up in society. This Government will stand behind them with minimum service levels.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): One minute the Secretary of State is clapping the key workers, and the next he is sacking them. What is really behind this legislation? Only time will tell, but why is he looking to criminalise the great key workers who brought us through this pandemic, and whose only crime is to demand decent wages and terms and conditions, as well as a safe environment for themselves and the general public?

Grant Shapps: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is an enthusiastic supporter of everything that the unions do, and they are an enthusiastic supporter of the hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps not all of them. But if one of his constituents has a heart attack, stroke or serious accident on Wednesday, I do not understand why he would seriously have an objection to a national level of agreed safe services? That is what we propose and I am surprised that he would vote against the safety of his own constituents.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend try to impress on Opposition Members, who keep referring to this as an anti-union measure, that public support for the unions will be endangered if they do not preserve minimum services for people whose lives are at risk?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are trying to correct a problem that is very current. Ambulance workers and the unions have not provided a national level of guaranteed safety for the strike that is due on Wednesday. Right hon. and hon.

Members on the Opposition Benches could help us get that in place across the economy, particularly in vital services, so that even though we take this primary power, we never need to use it. That would be the ideal solution. Why do they not help us bring safety to their constituents, which would help both them and the unions?

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that he supports the right to strike—by banning workers from striking. Does he not see the ridiculous position he has got himself into? The whole point of having an assessment of policy is to find out whether it will work. When the Government are told that their policy is bonkers, the sensible thing to do is to bin it. Where does he think declaring war on working people will end?

Grant Shapps: As I have mentioned a couple of times at the Dispatch Box, the hon. Gentleman will need to explain his position to his friends and colleagues in countries as radical as France and Spain, where they have these rules in place and act already. On the impact assessment, which is a point that has been made several times, including from the Opposition Front Bench, the final impact assessment—which will come through primary legislation, with secondary legislation in the form of statutory instruments to bring it into place—is yet to be published, so he is wrong about that as well. How can anyone seriously argue that guaranteed rescue by ambulances of somebody who is seriously ill could have a harmful impact? It is simply beyond belief.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Coming back through Heathrow recently, I spoke to someone who works there who praised the armed forces for the incredible job they did covering Border Force, and told me how the process worked without any problems at all, and what a sad reflection it was on the public service that they could not do the same thing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Opposition Members, the unions and many who work in the public service seem to have forgotten that we spent £400 billion safeguarding their jobs, their futures and their careers?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to the Army, who did fantastic work. The Army has a no-strike clause already, along with the police. Once this primary power has been taken, it will be for Secretaries of State, including the Home Secretary, to determine and consult in other areas for secondary powers to bring in minimum service levels. Most people working in the public service are doing a hugely valuable job. They are trying to do their best, and many are frustrated by their radical union leaders who often lead them up the garden path.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The right hon. Member asked whether we acknowledge the impact of covid and Ukraine. Of course we do—we live with it every day. All our constituents live with it every day. All those working in the NHS and the ambulance service live with it every day. He says that the British people need to know that an ambulance will turn up when they have a heart attack, a stroke or a serious injury, and that they will have access to hospital care. Does he not agree that a better way of ensuring that is to deal with the actual problem: to invest, recruit and retain staff in the NHS and the ambulance service, and provide the service

[Christine Jardine]

that is being cried out for not just by us but by those people? Rather than tinkering about with what cannot solve the problem, fixing it might be a better way.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is right in the sense that we have seen huge backlogs because of covid. We are hiring a lot more nurses as a result—thousands more since 2019. We are also funding the healthcare system more than ever in history with some £168 billion. As the Prime Minister described in his speech last week, bringing down those waiting lists is his No. 1 priority. We are doing all those things as well, but it is undeniable that not having a minimum safety level in place during strike days puts lives at risk. This Government will take the responsible decision to prevent that from happening in future.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): It is important to remember that public sector workers are employed and paid for by the great British taxpayer. I sympathise with some of their demands, but does my right hon. Friend agree that their first loyalty should be to the British taxpayer, not some power-crazed union barons who fund the Labour party and have, in the past, paid off Labour MPs' mortgages?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to those in the NHS: there is a very good reason why, when the public sector in this country got a zero pay rise last year because of covid, over 1 million people in the NHS did receive a pay rise. At the moment it is worth about £1,400 per individual. I appreciate that in these times, with Putin's evil war and the impact that has had on inflation, everyone would like more money as a pay rise, but the Government must consider what that would do to people's taxes, to interest rates and to mortgage rates. We would get into a circle where we are never able to get inflation down. Inflation is the biggest evil of all. We are taking sensible steps to address it. That lot over there simply want to roll over and not address the difficult problems.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

With the Royal College of Emergency Medicine highlighting more than 300 excess deaths every single week, where is the Government's minimum service level agreement to the public? The best way to avert a strike is to negotiate. Within the Secretary of State's legislation, what obligations will there be on Government to enter meaningful negotiations, and how does he describe "meaningful"?

Grant Shapps: I want to pick up the hon. Lady on those figures, because the NHS itself says that it does not recognise those numbers. When we have a strike such as the one on Wednesday by ambulance workers, there is no way that she or anyone else in this House can realistically argue that people will somehow be better off without a national minimum safe level of service. That is what we will focus on, and that is why she and Opposition Members should support this Bill.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend was right to mention other European countries, but he could have added to that list South Africa, Argentina,

Australia and Canada, all of which are members of the International Labour Organisation and have minimum service levels in essential services. In every single case, the ILO has reviewed the MSL and determined it to be a necessary and proportionate restriction of the article 11 right to strike. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the British people are entitled to exactly the same lawful protection and to have their basic needs met at times of industrial action in essential services?

Grant Shapps: It is worth reminding the House that my hon. Friend is an acknowledged expert in employment law. I am grateful for her thoughts and clarification that the International Labour Organisation says that the legislation is compatible with article 11. I have been able to sign off the European Court of Human Rights compatibility on this measure. As she rightly points out, it is not just friends and neighbours in Europe but around the world where strikes are, in many cases, banned—not what we are proposing—and minimum safety levels are in place. There is nothing illegitimate about what we are doing. It fits with the ILO, and who signs up to the ILO? The TUC and many other unions besides.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Every single concern that the Secretary of State and all those on the Government Benches have raised so far is already covered by existing legislation, because trade unions are legally obliged to provide life and limb cover. That is the existing law. Will the Secretary of State tell us what the difference is between that and his proposed legislation? That will be the test of whether the new legislation is an attack on workers.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point, which I am pleased to answer. When strikes are taking place tomorrow and we are not able to get a simple answer to the question of what the national level of emergency cover will be for people in the most urgent situations—heart attacks, strokes and other life-threatening ailments—that is why we need minimum safety levels. When for many, many months, some of the poorest in society have been unable to go to work to earn their own living, perhaps as a cleaner or a hospital porter, that is why we need minimum service levels on our railways. I very much hope he will see the point and help to represent his constituents who are being prevented from earning money or, indeed, from being safe, should they have an accident tomorrow.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Last week I met Daniel Jobsz, who runs the Wardrobe Bar and Kitchen in the City. He did not open last week; he said there was no point, because of the rail strike. Before Christmas, he lost tens of thousands of pounds because people were cancelling, as they could not come into central London because of the rail strike. UKHospitality calculates that around £1 billion of business was lost in central London because of the rail strikes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while it is right to protect the right to strike, there must be legislation in place to protect businesses in other sectors, such as hospitality, and to protect workers from job losses?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and it brings me on to an important consideration, which is the disparity between the public sector settlements

on offer and the average in the private sector at the moment, which has typically been lower. It is right that, as a responsible Government, we have to balance off all these different considerations across the economy. It is right that we consider those running small businesses—tea rooms, pubs and the services sector—in this balance, which is why minimum service levels, as well as minimum safety levels, are right for this economy.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have listened carefully to what the Secretary of State has had to say, and however he tries to dress it up, this is part of an alarming authoritarian drift. We have an attack on the democratic right to strike, an attack on the democratic right to vote through attempted vote rigging, with the introduction of voter ID, and an attack on the democratic right to peaceful protest. Is the Secretary of State not ashamed to be a member of the most authoritarian Government in Britain in living memory?

Grant Shapps: I have heard some stuff at this Dispatch Box, but the idea that this is the most authoritarian Government—has the hon. Gentleman seen what happens in truly authoritarian states, particularly in Marxist states? It is a ludicrous claim about British democracy. Actually, he can help, with his many union links, because all we are saying is that we will take powers to ensure that the minimum safety level exists. We are saying at the same time that we do not need to use these powers; we simply need to get agreement for his constituents and for all our constituents that on a strike day, an ambulance will be able to turn up because national levels have been agreed. That is it, and he should get on board and support this.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Last week, rail users in Guildford trying to get in and out of the constituency, including key workers, were completely cut off because there were zero trains. At no point have the Opposition condemned widespread strike action that disrupts the public. Will my right hon. Friend join me in asking the Opposition to back the measures we are putting forward, to keep the public safe and to keep our economy going and growing?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are on the side of people who are working hard, who are trying to get on with their lives and livelihoods, and who are concerned about their lives when it comes to emergency services. Who are Opposition Members interested in? Not once have I heard them condemn these strikes, which have been inflicted on people's lives month after month—not a word from the Opposition. When we try to bring in even the most moderate and considerate legislation, which simply says that we will ask for a minimum safety level, what do they do? They object to it and attack their own constituents in the process.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. May I gently remind Members that Mr Speaker has determined that anybody who came in five minutes after the start of the session will not be called?

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I know that the Secretary of State likes to fly around in his own private plane, but I can tell him for a fact that while he has been

doing that, many nurses in my constituency have been accessing food banks. This Government seem very uncomfortable with nurses standing on picket lines but totally relaxed about them lining up to get food for their families at food banks. If this Government are serious about stopping the strikes, surely now is the time to pay these essential workers properly.

Grant Shapps: I would be interested to hear from those on the Labour Front Bench whether it is their policy to pay a 19% pay rise and, if so, whether they can explain how they will raise the extra money. Will it be extra taxation? Will they be putting it on borrowing, with all the hikes in interest rates, mortgage rates, car loans and the rest of it that that would bring? That is the question they need to answer, and the more they waffle around the subject, rather than bringing forward serious measures to limit the impact of these strikes at the most serious point—the life and death point—the less they will get the respect of the general public.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring forward these proportionate measures, and not least in the urgency with which he seeks to protect the safety and lives of all our constituents at risk from strike action. Children have suffered in these strikes; many children in Buckinghamshire use the railways to get to school. Does he agree that when the consultation comes forward, the ability of children to get to school on the railways must be included in the minimum service levels?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have talked about workers getting to work and people losing their salaries because of these strikes, but children and their education are also being impacted. That is a crying shame, particularly after two years of covid and having to study from home, and now they are being put through this again when there is a decent offer on the table for the railways. When union bosses have actually put this offer to their members—the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, for example—they accepted it, and it was a very similar offer to the ones that the RMT and other unions refuse to put to their members. We just need some common sense from these unions and, I hope, a little pushing from Opposition Members.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Can the Secretary of State not just for once acknowledge the stress levels of workers—postal workers, rail workers, health workers and teachers—who have had 10 years of frozen pay and 10 years of reducing living standards and are going through enormous stress at work, with many leaving the teaching and nursing professions as a result of it? Nobody is likely to vote to take strike action unless it is an act of desperation; they do it because they want to get decent pay for themselves, their loved ones and their families. Can he not for once face the issue of the poverty that people face, rather than trying to bring in draconian laws to prevent people from taking effective action to remedy the injustice that they are facing?

Grant Shapps: It is obviously not true that there has been a pay freeze for 10 years. The right hon. Gentleman stands there and makes that claim, but as I just mentioned, because the NHS was under huge pressure during covid, 1.2 million nurses and workers in the NHS were provided

[Grant Shapps]

with an uplift of £1,200 last year, with £1,400 proposed this year—at the time, inflation was low—even though the rest of the public sector was not receiving pay increases. He talks about stress for public sector workers, and I recognise the hard work and the hours that they put in, particularly in the NHS, which is why we have expanded by many thousands the number of nurses, for example, but what about the stress for people who cannot get to work because of these strikes and have not been able to for months? What about the stress for people who are waiting for an ambulance when we do not have nationally agreed safety levels in place? That is the stress I am also worried about.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when unions such as the RMT reduce their customary referendum period from 14 to six days to force through a false ballot result to strike and then go to strike straightaway, against what are necessarily the wishes of all members, this is an important statement to make and an important piece of legislation? Will he confirm how promptly he will bring forward this Bill?

Grant Shapps: The Bill is being introduced today. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. We have seen that the RMT has not put the offers to its members, which, as I mentioned before, is a real problem. When the TSSA put an almost identical offer to its members, it was accepted and the strike was therefore over. Any attempt not to allow members to see the full range of what is being offered is wrong. Because members have not seen the full offer, they will be unaware of the different elements of that offer. It has not been formally put to them—that is something the unions can change immediately. I very much hope that they do so.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I noticed a moment ago that the Secretary of State said that striking workers were in danger of pushing up interest rates. I remind him that many of those people are on strike because they cannot afford their mortgages or rent as a result of the hike in interest rates caused by his colleagues' economic incompetence. I imagine that many essential workers are in receipt of the sort of wage that the Secretary of State would not get out of bed for in the morning.

On the legality of the legislation, the TUC general secretary has said that forcing workers who have democratically voted to strike to work and sacking them if they do not comply would almost certainly be illegal. Is that not right? Can the Minister really say that the detail of his Bill will comply in every respect with the United Kingdom Government's obligations under both the ECHR and international labour law? On the detail, Minister, what is the position?

Grant Shapps: I do not know whether I am correcting myself or the hon. and learned Lady, but I was not saying—I did not mean to say, at least—that striking workers pushed up interest rates. It is inflation that pushes up interest rates. If we paid a 19% increase across the economy, we would have to borrow the money; we would then have more borrowing and more debt and, therefore, higher interest rates. Everybody would pay more on their mortgages and car loans.

Businesses would pay more. That is the quite simple maths that I would have thought we have tested to destruction. It would not make sense to go ahead along those lines.

The hon. and learned Lady asked specifically about the ECHR, and I can confirm that the Bill is ECHR-compliant. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), who is no longer in her place, talked about employment law and how the Bill fits with the ILO and the ECHR; I have been able to sign that declaration. I can further confirm that there is proof of this, as many neighbouring countries already do exactly the same thing, which is also compliant with the ECHR.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I proudly put on the record my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a former teacher and a former trade union member and representative for the NASUWT. I am very worried seeing teachers going on strike, because it is the pupils who will suffer most, particularly disadvantaged pupils from areas such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. While I am a huge admirer of the incredible work that teachers do, they are sadly being cajoled out of the classroom by baron bosses in unions such as the "Not Education Union", led by Bolshevik Boustead and Commie Courtney, along with their Labour mates, to make sure that kids continue to suffer. What can we do to ensure pupils will not be victims any further?

Grant Shapps: Minimum levels of service in education and elsewhere will of course help. Again, I want to stress to the House that we do not necessarily want or wish to introduce legislation in all these areas; that will be a matter for the House in secondary legislation and for further consultation. I very much hope, though, that this legislation gives the unions and some of their supporters in this House the opportunity to stop and think about whether minimum safety is appropriate in their particular areas. I very much hope that teachers will hold back from the threshold of strikes, which would be damaging to them and to pupils.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Nurses' pay down 20%, teachers' pay down 20%, firefighters' pay down 12%, junior doctors' pay down 26%—these are the consequences of 13 years of Tory rule. Let us be honest and talk about the real problem here: it is not workers going on strike, but the Tory Government and the economy they have built, which forcers workers to strike. This new anti-worker law would make things even worse, sacking teachers and nurses for striking for fair pay. Surely the easiest, safest and fairest way of guaranteeing minimum service provision is to pay nurses, firefighters and paramedics a decent wage with good conditions and the resources to do their jobs. Why will the Secretary of State not do that instead?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady might want to inquire of Members on her Front Bench—most of them are gone now, but one or two are still here—whether they would support a 19% pay increase. If they would, nice as that would be to do, how would they explain it to their constituents and to the financial markets as interest rates rise? If they would spread that across the entire economy, what would the impact be on the economy at large? Those are the simple but, unfortunately, difficult

decisions that need to be made in government. Frankly, Labour's failure to answer those basic questions is why it is not ready to run this country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not often I get called to speak before halfway through, but I am very pleased to have been called. The sentiments expressed inside this Chamber about seeking a solution do not appear to match the negotiations outside of it. As the Secretary of State will know, for many NHS staff, this is about not just money, but safety on the wards. Many nurses have stated that they would be happy with additional staff to lighten the load along with a modest pay rise to cover the cost of living. Will the Secretary of State indicate what assessment has been made of safety on the wards in the light of ongoing action? Will the Secretary of State guarantee safety and a cost of living wage increase?

Grant Shapps: Of course, one reason that we have employed tens of thousands more nurses and doctors is to help to relieve the pressure post covid. We all understand that, given what happened with covid and what is now happening with flu, which is the worst it has been for 10 years, we are seeing particularly strong pressures on our hospitals. The point I am making today is that none of this is helped by the uncertainty. It is fine for workers to withdraw their labour—it is obviously a last resort, but we understand it—but please, give us an indication or a guarantee of where the safety level will be, and do so on a nationwide basis. In fairness to the Royal College of Nursing, it has done that. The ambulance unions, I am afraid, have not. We invite them to do so.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Government's failed industrial relations approach has led to the worst strikes in decades. Sadly, they have often sought to scupper talks by throwing in last-minute spanners. Now, they propose going from clapping nurses to sacking nurses. The Secretary of State will be aware that the Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill's impact assessment stated that imposing minimum service levels could actually lead to an "increased frequency of strikes". What exactly has changed in the past two months since that was published?

Grant Shapps: First of all, no one is talking about sacking nurses. I have just checked the figures: we have more than 44,000 more nurses since 2010, and more than 34,000 more doctors. There has been a big increase even from 2019. Nothing in the Bill we are announcing today is about getting rid of nurses, any more than any employment contract has to be followed. It is worth remembering that the pay that is on offer is as a result of the independent pay review body—bodies that the unions themselves called to be set up 20 years ago—being put into action.

I have heard union bosses make the point about last-minute spanners, which is completely untrue. I seem to be living rent free in Mick Lynch's head at the moment—I have not even been close to these negotiations. The deal on the table is the same discussion that has always been there. Rather than parroting those lines, the hon. Gentleman might do better to check the facts and encourage the unions to put these offers to their members.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When the Tory party spoke about taking back control, none of us thought that would mean suppressing votes with voter ID legislation, a policing and crime Act that curbs the right to protest, a House of Lords with unelected clerics and a Government who are withdrawing the basic fundamental human right to strike. How much longer will this Government continue to claim that this silly little island is a functioning democracy?

Grant Shapps: I am pretty sure the hon. Gentleman has been in the Chamber from the beginning, otherwise you would not have called him to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. He will therefore have heard me say, not once or twice but three times now, that this legislation is compatible with the International Labour Organisation rules that the unions themselves sign up to and many of our European neighbours follow. I am struggling to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument that this is somehow unfair, undemocratic or against international law.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): From the way the Secretary of State is speaking, one might think he is the knight on a white charger coming to rescue the system. Let us be clear, however, that it was this Government who froze pay in the public sector and then increased it below inflation, and this Government who reduced recruitment in the national health service, particularly among nurses, where we have a recruitment gap of 40,000. What we are actually hearing is chickens coming home to roost, isn't it? He ought to take responsibility as a Minister in this Government.

Grant Shapps: I simply make the point that it is not the case that we have frozen recruitment, because we have 44,000 more nurses, not fewer—that is an increase rather than a decrease. It is also not the case that we have frozen pay, other than during the aftermath of the financial crash, which as I recall happened under the Labour party and we had to pick up the pieces, and through covid, although not all the way through covid, as I mentioned. Last year, even while the rest of the public sector was experiencing a pay freeze, we made an exception for NHS workers and paid them more, so the hon. Lady's narrative is simply not true. Again, if the Opposition are saying that they would pay 19% more, I do not understand where that money would come from and whose taxes would be raised to pay for it and the increased interest rates.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is astonishing: I did not realise that, when we were making the comparison with France and Spain, we were talking about Franco's Spain and the Vichy regime in France. Many elements of the laws in this country already do not comply with ILO regulations; we are one of the most restrictive anti-worker countries in the world—that is a fact.

I and my constituents would like the Government to stop blowing up the talks with the trade unions, as they did against the NHS over the weekend, with Unite reps coming out of that meeting in a worse state, or against the RMT by dropping driver-only operation into the talks. The Government could end the strikes in multiple

[Sam Tarry]

sectors; instead they have upped the ante to wage war on working people who are suffering because of their rancid governance.

Grant Shapps: At least we know where the hon. Gentleman stands: against the instructions of his Front Bench, it is on the picket lines. He is one of the people who has helped to extend the rail strikes. Driver-only operation has been in there from the outset and there has been no change in that at all. It makes perfect sense and operates on the line that my constituency is on. It causes no problems and is a safe way to operate. It is the kind of modernisation that would help to bring this industrial dispute to a close. I did not follow his point about Franco and the Vichy Government. Spain and France have moved on a bit from that and seem to manage to have minimum safe levels of service on strike days under the International Labour Organisation.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State opened his statement with warm words about our key workers, but he will be acutely aware that the longer the Government refuse to address their fair pay demands, the more staff morale will be depleted and the more people will leave the service, which will exacerbate the staffing crisis that the unions have highlighted as part of their demands. Does he not see that standing there and lecturing about safe staffing levels when healthcare workers across the UK are saying that staffing levels are unsafe is frankly ridiculous? The way to ensure staffing at all times is to pay our healthcare workers properly.

Grant Shapps: Of course we want to see healthcare workers paid, and I meant the words that I used at the top of the statement. Hon. Members will remember that my father was ill during covid, so I experienced the NHS at its best and most heroic while it was struggling to serve people under almost unbelievable pandemic circumstances. I absolutely agree with her about the incredible work that NHS staff do. There is a pay offer on the table that has not been invented by the Government—it has come from the independent pay review body. The Government have accepted in full and in every circumstance the recommendations of the independent pay review bodies this year. Those who say that we should ignore the independent pay review bodies need to explain why and where they will find the money to do that so that it is fair to other taxpayers.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This statement is an attack on fundamental employment rights. More than 12 years of Conservative Government failure to invest in vital public services has led to nurses, ambulance crews, civil servants and transport workers taking industrial action. I stand in solidarity with them. If the Government wanted to protect the levels of public services, they would give them the funding and staffing that they need instead of running them down. Why are the Government determined to run down our public services and national health service? Why will Ministers not engage in proper negotiations to end the disputes?

Grant Shapps: In the politest possible way, I think that once we have been going for an hour, some of the questions that were written in advance and possibly even handed out by the unions have been categorically

disproved—as I have explained many times, this is not against international law or the ECHR, for all the reasons that I have already covered—but they continue to be read out as if they are a new contribution. Those questions ignore the basic fact that there is another side to the issue, which is the safety of the hon. Lady's constituents and ours. Tomorrow, when there is an ambulance strike and the unions refuse to commit to national safety levels with the management of the trusts, everyone's life will be more at risk than it should be. It is perfectly reasonable to introduce what happens throughout much of the rest of the world, and certainly our European neighbours, and to have minimum safety standards in place so that we can protect the public.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The Government intend to use minimum service levels to force workers to work against their wishes, which undermines their legitimate disputes and imposes servitude on workers. The safest level of provision is to pay our firefighters, nurses, teachers, paramedics and rail staff a proper decent wage and to give them the appropriate resources to do their jobs effectively. Why does the Secretary of State need a new law to help the Government to effectively drive down the wages of the key workers in vital services who he clapped during the pandemic?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady described people as working in “servitude” if there are minimum service levels, but I point out to her that they would be paid for that servitude. At Network Rail, the average worker is on £46,000 of servitude and the average is £62,000 of servitude for train drivers. If we are going to have a serious debate about minimum service levels, I should say that they are designed to ensure that school kids can get to school again; that office workers, who may be on lower pay, can get to their job; and that the constituents of Members across the House can be guaranteed minimum safety levels during a strike tomorrow. The idea that that is somehow enforcing servitude is absolute nonsense.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Government Members talk about hard-working members of the public, but will the Secretary of State acknowledge that trade union members are also hard-working members of the public? Will he confirm whether the reported £320 million has been paid to the train operators during these strikes because they are indemnified? How much of that £320 million would it have taken to settle the strikes? We have heard a lot about safety measures today, so when will the Government stop trying to force through driver-only operated trains, and when will the NHS get the workforce strategy that it desperately needs?

Grant Shapps: The Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) reminds me that driver-only operated trains were introduced under the Labour Government. They are entirely safe; as I mentioned, they operate on my Govia line and I have never had a single constituent come to me to say otherwise. The hon. Lady asks whether trade union members are hard-working; I absolutely agree that they are. Many of them work extraordinary hours, as I already said, particularly in the health context but across the economy.

A responsible Government have to balance the pay in the public sector with the pay in the private sector and across all elements of the economy, which is why we have the independent pay review bodies. Unless the Opposition are now trying to destroy the independent pay review bodies and say that we should ignore them and go beyond what they say, I do not see a better alternative.

The hon. Lady fundamentally misunderstands the way that the railways operate in this country: the receipts are collected and the train operating companies simply receive the money for operating the service.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and I proudly supported picketing workers at Glasgow Central. Not only did we not have to ask for permission, but nobody was photoshopped out of the photograph. Avanti West Coast and TransPennine can barely deliver a minimum service as it is. The Smith commission could have devolved employment rights to ensure that the right to strike was sacrosanct and fire and rehire was banned, but Labour blocked it. Mick Lynch has said that Scottish Ministers “want to resolve” issues, but “politicians down here” want to “exacerbate” them. Is it not therefore the case that Scottish workers will be fully protected only with independence?

Grant Shapps: Well, I never expected that contribution from the SNP Benches. I should just point out to the hon. Member that I would never knowingly remove the former Prime Minister, whom I served enthusiastically, from anything I put out. He makes a point about Scottish independence, somehow shoehorned into a statement about minimum safety levels, but his constituents will be among the first to benefit when there are national strikes and we are able to run a minimum safe level of service, for example, between ambulances and the hospitals.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The measures outlined today represent a profound attack on the right of key workers with whom the Government are still in active negotiation. The Government’s strategy is clear: when they cannot get what they want through negotiation and compromise, they simply legislate to get their own way. However, does the Secretary of State accept that these proposals risk breaching human rights legislation and potentially even modern day slavery law? Will he concede that the public interest would be better served by addressing the legitimate grievances of the nurses, firefighters, teachers and rail workers who are now in dispute, rather than by curbing their democratic right to take industrial action?

Grant Shapps: How many times—I am going to check the *Hansard* record afterwards—do I need to explain that the ILO says itself that it is perfectly proper to have minimum safety levels in place? Many of our European neighbours already have that in place. Many other countries—Australia, Canada, parts of America, South Africa and elsewhere—actually ban strikes in blue-light services. We ban them ourselves for the police, but I am not even proposing going that far. All I am saying is, “Please tell us if you’re going to withdraw your labour, and let’s agree a minimum safety level.” I

do not think there is anything unreasonable about that whatsoever, and I have to say that I am shocked that the Labour party does.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a proud member of the GMB and Unite the union.

The reality is that the Government have refused for months to discuss pay with nurses, they have failed to avert the transport strikes and they are now introducing these shoddy plans to distract from their own failure to negotiate. I know the Secretary of State said earlier that he does not knowingly erase the former Prime Minister from his tweets, but that is exactly what he did recently, so perhaps he should spend less time on Photoshop and more time on the day job—sitting down and negotiating.

Grant Shapps: That was a slightly stretched question, but I think the basis of it was quite straightforward. As I have mentioned, it makes perfect sense to have a situation where we can guarantee national minimum safety standards for our constituents, and I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman would say to his constituents tomorrow when they may or may not be able to call an ambulance, depending on the trust he is in, about the failure to support such standards. I do not think his constituents should suffer from a postcode lottery, and I am prepared to legislate to make sure that does not happen, even if he does not want it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In the five years I had the privilege of leading the third largest council in Scotland with a workforce of 20,000, we had our share of industrial disputes. Every single time the unions came to us well in advance, and they told us what parts of services they wanted to exempt from industrial action, because they cared as much for the welfare of vulnerable people as we did. Is it not the case that if the Government cared half as much about education as teachers do, if they cared half as much about the health service as nurses and ambulance drivers do, and if they cared half as much for a decent public transport service as train drivers do, this bullyboy legislation would not be needed? The enemies of the health service are not on the picket line; they are on the Government Front Bench.

Grant Shapps: SNP Members make it sound as if they did not have any industrial strife. I think it is fantastic if the unions and the management get together to resolve these things—that is exactly what we want to see happen—but the reality is that, where it does not happen, strikes evolve sometimes. This legislation is about making sure those strikes are less damaging, particularly when it comes to people’s health and the security of the nation. The hon. Member makes his point as if they do not have strikes in primary schools and as if secondary schools in Scotland, where this is devolved, are not going on strike on Wednesday. The reality is that sometimes strikes do break out and, when they do, we want to make sure the public are properly protected.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Just before Christmas, I went to the ambulance station in Warrington, which is in the North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust. I spoke to workers there who have withdrawn their labour—paramedics, ambulance workers. They

[Mike Amesbury]

have done that with a heavy heart and as a last resort. They have done that because they are fighting for a fair deal, because their mortgages have gone up and the food bills have gone up. By the way, while I was there, they were providing a minimum level of service—I saw the ambulances going out, and rightly so, to deal with critical care incidents—so the current arrangements actually facilitate that. This is very un-British: it is a fundamental attack on the democratic right to withdraw one's labour. How many teachers are going to be sacked, how many ambulance workers are going to be sacked, how many social workers are going to be sacked and how many rail workers will be sacked for standing up for their right to strike and withdraw their labour?

Grant Shapps: The answer to the question is none. I have not seen a single police officer sacked or a member of the Army sacked, and they have no-strike deals. We are not proposing no-strike deals here; we are simply saying, I think very reasonably, that the level of emergency service provided by the fantastic workers—and I accept what the hon. Member said about people going on strike with a heavy heart—in his particular ambulance trust should be provided to all Members across the House, no matter where they are. In the case tomorrow, the union has failed to agree that with the management. I rather hope that he and Members on the Opposition Front Bench will join us in persuading people to provide that minimum safety level. If not, they will need to explain to their constituents why they are failing to vote to support the safety and security of their own constituents' lives.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a proud member of Unite and the GMB trade unions.

During the pandemic, my constituents and I stood on our doorsteps and clapped our key workers—we clapped the nurses at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary and the Blackpool Victoria, and we clapped the postal workers working out of our delivery offices in Lancaster, Fleetwood and Garstang—and now this Government are putting more effort into putting those workers' jobs at risk than into trying to resolve the strikes. It is clear that the Secretary of State is obsessed about the ongoing strikes. I can assure him that many of the workers who are losing days and days of pay are upset, too. Can I try to help him and suggest that he puts more effort into sitting down with trade unions and finding a resolution than into trying to stamp on workers' rights?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Lady will know, various different unions have been invited in, there have been discussions across the different sectors and we are doing everything we can to encourage a settlement. I do need to gently point out to Opposition Members that this is not a Government who have ignored the independent pay review bodies, come up with our own number and, say, halved the amount of money that was suggested should be paid. We have actually accepted in full the recommendations of those independent pay review bodies, so we are actually following the science and following the evidence. She is wrong to suggest, and to continue frightening people by saying, that their jobs could be at

risk. Nobody's job is at risk. I have already explained that we are hiring more, particularly nurses and doctors, and this legislation will simply say that, if we cannot get there voluntarily across the country—not just, for example, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), but everywhere—we will have legislative power to make sure we are able to require minimum safety levels for everybody, not just some.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Teaching staff at my daughter's school are on strike today and staff at my son's school are on strike tomorrow, and I fully support their right to do so. We all know the Scottish Government's budget is constrained, having been short-changed and underfunded in the face of soaring inflation. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor to ensure a fair funding settlement for the Scottish Government so that Scottish public sector workers can get the pay rise they deserve to deal with the Tory cost of living crisis?

Grant Shapps: All of us want our kids to be able to get to school, and the example in Scotland demonstrates that strikes occur regardless of who is in power at a particular moment, but the hon. Member and those on the Opposition Front Bench are wrong to suggest this is a UK problem that does not affect other parts of the world, because exactly the opposite is the case. We are in this situation and have this level of inflation because of the war in Ukraine, because Putin illegally invaded his neighbours' country, because it pushed up energy prices, and because that pushed up inflation. It makes all of us poorer when that happens. If Members think the solution is simply not to worry while people's livelihoods and safety are put at risk, that will be up to them to decide when they vote. This party will be voting to ensure people's security and safety no matter which strikes come next.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): The Minister's proposals criminalise workers for taking action in legitimate disputes, threatening to turn the clock back on workers' rights by 200 years. The Tolpuddle martyrs were criminalised for withdrawing their labour and deported to Australia, as were the seven men of Jarrow for protesting about their working conditions. These proposals would see NHS, education and other key workers sacked for the same crime. Workers need a pay rise, not a P45. When will Ministers put our country first and invest in, not attack, key workers?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is wrong on several fronts. First, it cannot be criminal if in fact that is a law that this House has passed. Secondly, it is no more criminal than breaching an employment contract; that is the level of, as she describes it, criminality. Is this going to be the line—is this how they are going to explain things to their constituents on the doorsteps over the next few days or weeks when ambulances are not necessarily going to turn up in one area and may in another? If their only answer is, "We didn't think we should put in place the same measures that exist in countries such as France, Spain and Italy," may I suggest that, rather than raving on about criminalisation, which is utter nonsense—nobody is criminalising anything—

she simply agrees that minimum safety levels are a proportionate, sensible and modern way to go about things and she should support that?

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): As the TUC says, public sector workers have experienced the longest pay squeeze in 200 years, with workers losing out on £20,000-worth of wages due to pay not keeping up with prices since 2008. Now, when we are experiencing historically high inflation, the Government want to both reduce real-terms pay and legislate to enforce it. Is it not the case that the Government are proposing yet another authoritarian, draconian act to enforce their attack on our living standards?

Grant Shapps: The questions from Labour Members have remained remarkably consistent throughout, and I am not sure whether they have been handed out by their Front Bench or their union paymasters. But the fundamental facts are that the independent pay review bodies decide on the level of pay and the Government have accepted that in full. If these questions are being handed out by Labour Front Benchers, they will need to explain what they plan to do with the independent pay review bodies. Are they now going to routinely ignore their advice, which is not something we have done? Are they going to tell their constituents that they will not have a minimum safe level of service if they have a heart attack or a stroke, or are they going to pay the 19%, in which case they need to explain to their constituents why their tax is going up, why inflation is going up further and why interest rates are going up as well.

Points of Order

2.24 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As someone who spent 33 years on the frontline in the NHS, I am disappointed that I have not been able to contribute to this debate and highlight that actually the biggest challenge to all four NHSs and patient safety is protection of the workforce. That is because—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order.

Dr Whitford: I am not seeking to ask a question; I want to make a point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is an endeavour to extend the question time. I may be green as a Deputy Speaker but I am long in the tooth in the Chair. The Speaker has made it absolutely plain that hon. Members, on either side of the House, must be here at the start of the question session in order to participate.

Dr Whitford *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady is fully aware that she was not here; she will take her seat please.

Dr Whitford: That was due to the change to the sitting for the previous business. Should we not have a bell warning for when sittings change?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is a matter that the hon. Lady may wish to raise with Mr Speaker, but it is not a question for me now.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If it is the same question, it will be the same answer.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a serious issue, when the Government are going on about market forces, except when it comes to workers, we need some notice when things are changed in this place, because at the moment the start of things is pretty chaotic. We should have a bell ringing to give at least a five-minute warning so Members know when things are changing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has been in this House for a very long time indeed—perhaps not quite as long as I have, but he has been here for a very long time—and he knows perfectly well that it is an hon. Member's duty and responsibility to be here on time when the session starts. He was not here.

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am now moving on.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act:

Finance Act 2023.

BILL PRESENTED**STRIKES (MINIMUM SERVICE LEVELS) BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Grant Shapps, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Steve Barclay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Suella Braverman, Oliver Dowden, Secretary Gillian Keegan and Secretary Mark Harper, presented a Bill to make provision about minimum service levels in connection with the taking by trade unions of strike action relating to certain services.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 222) with explanatory notes (Bill 222-EN).

**Elected Representatives
(Codes Of Conduct)**

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

2.27 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for a statutory code of conduct for Ministers of the Crown; for a statutory code of conduct for Members of the House of Commons and members of the House of Lords; for a statutory code of conduct for councillors in England; and for connected purposes.

Many, if not most of us, on all sides of this House became Members of Parliament because we wanted to help improve the lives of our constituents and all citizens across our great country and its nation states. As MPs, we have duties set out in our now updated codes of conduct, which also apply to Ministers and the Prime Minister. In addition to upholding the law and the general law about discrimination, these duties include:

“to act in the interests of the nation as a whole”,

with a “special duty” to our constituents; recognising the trust that has been placed on us as elected representatives; and to

“always behave with probity and integrity,”

including in our use of public resources. Within these duties we have the “General Principles of Conduct”, often referred to as the Nolan principles, which apply to all aspects of our parliamentary and public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. But, as we know, too often over the last few years we have seen a small minority of Members pay scant regard to these duties and principles, even wilfully ignoring them.

The scandals of the last few years are not the issue of just one Administration. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who is responsible for regulating the Members’ code, was initially set up in 1995 to investigate the cash-for-questions affair, and there have been other scandals since then. These have usually resulted in changes to the Members and ministerial codes, as well as the business appointment rules which regulate the so-called “revolving door” employment between the public and private sector of former Ministers and senior officials.

The impact of these abuses cannot be underestimated. It may be a tiny minority who bend or break the rules, but we all become tarred by the same brush, corrupted by association. According to polling by Compassion in Politics, four in five people have no respect for politicians and 40% of parents would be concerned if their child expressed a desire to become a politician. Office for National Statistics data shows that only one in three people trust the Government and two in three think politicians are only out for themselves. Let us pause for a moment to consider what that tells us about the health of our democracy and the prospects for democratic engagement in Britain today and in the future.

Many hon. Members will have experienced at first hand the extreme effects of the steady disintegration in our social fabric. Too many voters have become apathetic; some have become actively hostile. Hate, intolerance and violence are all products of the escalating distrust

and increasing disdain with which the public view the political class. Part of how we restore confidence in politics and politicians is by actively demonstrating that all elected representatives will abide by the rules and principles set out in our codes of conduct.

I want to acknowledge the role and work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and their office in regulating the Members' code. I also recognise the work of right hon., hon. and noble colleagues on the Committee on Standards, the Committee on Privileges, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I also pay tribute to their lay members. Those Committees' recent reports and recommendations for changes to strengthen the various codes of conduct will, I believe, help in that regard. However, there is a need for much more significant reform in the accountability systems that regulate Parliament's conduct. The current systems are spider's webs, built up over the past 400 years or so, which interact and overlap. Inevitably, there are still issues.

My Bill cannot deal with everything that is needed for a whole-system reform, but it could tackle the most serious and urgent issues, the first and most egregious of which is the Prime Minister's remaining the arbiter of the ministerial code. The terms of reference for the new so-called independent adviser to the Prime Minister on Ministers' interests, appointed on 22 December last year, have not changed since the previous adviser under the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). They still fail to give independence and autonomy to initiate new investigations into breaches of the ministerial code or to publish the findings of any investigations. That has to change.

My Bill proposes that, as in Northern Ireland, the ministerial code, including the seven Nolan principles, are put in statute, and that an independent commissioner on ministerial standards is established as a statutory office. His or her role would be: to advise the Prime Minister on all aspects of the ministerial code; to undertake investigations, both independently and referred, into potential breaches of the code; to appoint a panel of parliamentarians and lay members to take part in such investigations; to publish the findings of such investigations; and to make recommendations regarding sanctions for any breaches. He or she would also have the power to make a statement on ethical matters of general public interest affecting Ministers.

The second issue is how Members of Parliament are held to account outside of election time. The October 2022 code of conduct procedure set out what the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards can and cannot do to hold MPs to account on potential breaches of the code. It defines other regulatory systems that hold Members to account—for example, expenses are for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, and conduct in the Chamber is obviously the domain of

Mr Speaker—but paragraph 17 expressly prohibits the Commissioner from investigating allegations solely about breaches of the seven principles of public life. Although it has been argued that that is because principles are not judicable, for me, there is a gap. My Bill proposes that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards should also become a statutory office and that, under their purview, in addition to investigating Members for potential breaches of code of conduct rules, Members could be investigated for serious and serial breaches of the seven principles of public life.

Thirdly, I turn to the important role that our local councillors play in our communities and in our democracy as a whole. Again, the vast majority of councillors work tirelessly at trying to make a difference in their communities, but unfortunately a minority use their positions for their own purposes and threaten our democracy as a result. Although there is a requirement for councillors to have a councillor code of conduct under the Localism Act 2011, such codes vary greatly between different local authorities. My Bill proposes a standardised statutory councillor code of conduct, which includes the Nolan principles and is accompanied by a statutory accountability system.

Finally, we need to review how our parliamentary system, and the elective representatives within it, are regulated in a way that reflects the modern, inclusive, empowering democracy that we want to become in the 21st century and beyond. Polling by Compassion in Politics found that 76% of people believe that they should have the right to influence our codes of conduct. As such, my Bill proposes that an independent ethics commission of constitutional legal experts is established by Parliament to advise on system reforms. The ethics commission would also work with a citizen's assembly to come up with final recommendations to Parliament.

As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for compassionate politics, I have argued for the need to reform the culture of our politics. The Prime Minister and other Ministers and Members have talked about the need for compassion in politics. Good policies can come only from good politics. That must start with the conduct of those in high office. As such, I hope that the Government will support my Bill.

Finally, I extend my thanks to Matt Hawkins from Compassion in Politics, George Hulme in my office and Jolyon Maugham of the Good Law Project. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Debbie Abrahams, Kim Leadbeater, Caroline Lucas, Layla Moran and Dr Dan Poulter present the Bill.

Debbie Abrahams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February, and to be printed (Bill 223).

Stamp Duty Land Tax (Reduction) Bill

Considered in Committee

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

REDUCTION OF SDLT ON ACQUISITION OF
RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY

2.38 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 2, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

“(1) This section makes modifications of Part 4 of the Finance Act 2003 in relation to any land transaction the effective date of which falls in the period (“the temporary relief period”)—

- (a) beginning with 23 September 2022, and
- (b) ending with 31 March 2025.”

This amendment provides that the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill is only to apply until 31 March 2025.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Roger Gale): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment (a) to amendment 1, after “transaction” insert

“(except in relation to additional dwellings)”.

This amendment is intended to remove the relief from stamp duty land tax for second homes (see Amendment 15 to leave out subsection (3)).

Amendment (b) to amendment 1, leave out “31 March 2025” and insert “31 March 2028”.

This amendment is intended to extend the temporary relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax so that it expires at or around the time as the frozen thresholds for Income Tax, Inheritance Tax and National Insurance are due to expire.

Government amendments 2 and 3.

Amendment 15, page 1, line 13, leave out subsection (3).

This amendment is intended to remove the relief from stamp duty land tax for second homes (see Amendment (a) to Gov 1).

Government amendments 4 to 12.

Clause stand part.

Government amendment 13.

Clause 2 stand part.

New clause 1—*Comparison of temporary and permanent relief*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, publish an assessment of the change in Government policy on stamp duty land from—

- (a) the Plan for Growth published on 23 September 2022, to
- (b) the Autumn Statement published on 17 November 2022.

(2) This review must include—

- (a) an assessment of the costs of implementing the change in policy referred to in subsection (1) for the Government, the property industry, and homebuyers;
- (b) an assessment of any wider costs and impacts of the change in policy referred to in subsection (1) on the housing market; and

- (c) what measures the Government is planning to ease the impact on tax revenues, home purchases and the housing market of the reduction in stamp duty land tax coming to an abrupt end on 31 March 2025.”

This new clause would require the Government to publish a review of the change in Government policy to make the relief in this Bill temporary instead of permanent.

New clause 2—*Review: first-home buyers*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must conduct a twice-yearly review of the impact of this Act on the number of people buying their first home and must publish a report of this review at six-month intervals.”

This new clause is to ensure that a regular report is made on the impact of the proposed Act on the number of people buying their first home.

New clause 3—*Review: second homes in National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must publish an annual report on the impact of this Act on the number of second homes in National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty.”

This new clause would require that an annual report is published on the impact of the Bill on the number of second or subsequent homes in National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty.

New clause 4—*Review: house prices in rural areas*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must publish an annual review of the impact of this Act on house prices in rural areas.”

This new clause would require that an annual review is published on the impact of the Bill on house prices in rural areas.

New clause 6—*Review: availability of affordable housing and the private rented sector*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must conduct an assessment into, and publish a report on, the impact of this Act on the housing market, including (1) the impact on the availability of affordable housing and (2) the private rented sector.”

This new clause would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to conduct an assessment into the impact of the Bill on the housing market, including the availability of affordable housing and the private rented sector.

New clause 7—*Report on effect of temporary relief*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, three months before expiry of the temporary relief period, publish an assessment of the impacts of the temporary relief provided by this Act.

(2) This assessment must include an assessment of the impacts on—

- (a) the volume and value of housing transactions on the housing market,
- (b) any wider costs for the Government, property industry, housing market and/or homebuyers, and
- (c) tax revenues.

(3) The assessment must make a recommendation as to whether the temporary relief period should expire or whether the House of Commons should consult on extending it or making it permanent.”

This new clause would require the Government to publish an assessment of the impacts of the temporary tax relief and a recommendation before the temporary relief period comes to an end.

Government amendment 14.

Victoria Atkins: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

At the autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out how the Government are dealing with the global economic challenges that we face. The consequences of Putin’s illegal invasion of

Ukraine and the covid-19 pandemic mean that we must be fiscally responsible while supporting the economy and encouraging our businesses to grow and our constituents to thrive. We need a balanced approach to support our objectives, which includes helping people get on to and move up the housing ladder—and indeed to downsize.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend allow me?

Victoria Atkins: It is very soon, but because it is my right hon. Friend, I will certainly give way.

Sir Desmond Swayne: My hon. Friend is most generous and kind. Those of us who voted with enthusiasm for the Bill's Second Reading on the grounds that there was to be a permanent change for the benefit of those people wanting to get on to the housing ladder are somewhat discomfited by the fact that Government amendment 1 will make it merely a temporary measure to assist those who want to do so. We want them to be permanently assisted. Can she reassure me?

Victoria Atkins: I very much understand why my right hon. Friend raises that point. I know he took a great interest in the autumn statement and listened carefully to the submissions and oration of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). We had to take some difficult decisions in the course of the autumn statement to ensure that our approach to the economy is fiscally responsible. This is one way in which we hope to stimulate the housing market in the next two years in the difficult economic circumstances we find, but thereafter we are confident that the economy will improve and we will be able to return to the status quo as it was before 23 September. However, the broader picture about reducing the taxation burden on our constituents still stands. Indeed, I hope my right hon. Friend listened with great interest to the Prime Minister's speech last week in which he made it clear that that is our ultimate goal.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On 17 October, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer told this House that this particular element of the mini-Budget relating to stamp duty land tax would be retained. It was on that basis that the Bill was introduced in the House. It was only a month later that we had the autumn statement when the Chancellor of the Exchequer went back on what had been said earlier.

Victoria Atkins: Again, my hon. Friend puts his finger on the point as to the very, very fast-moving economic conditions we have faced in the last few months. He will recall the autumn statement and the great detail the Chancellor went into in terms of ensuring that our approach is fiscally responsible. We had to acknowledge and react to the conditions as we found them then. We are confident that the sunset clause in the Bill will enable us to support our constituents. Indeed, it is happening at this very moment in time, because, of course, we brought in the measures as soon as possible immediately after the original announcement. They are helping, for example, first-time buyers get on to the housing ladder.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I will take one more intervention, and then make a little progress.

Barry Gardiner: I am very grateful to the Minister. I listened carefully to what she was saying about global economic circumstances, in particular Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the effect that that has had on people in this country through their energy bills. She will know that the Government set a target for a 78% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2035. To achieve that, will she consider looking at whether stamp duty might be raised up or put down in accordance with the energy performance certificate ratings of properties, perhaps providing a way for households to benefit financially but ensure that they meet the Government's target?

Victoria Atkins: That is an interesting suggestion. At first blush, my mind goes immediately to the complexity of such a scheme, particularly given our proudly antique housing stock—certainly in my constituency, with beautiful farmhouses and market town high streets that are many, many hundreds of years old. I therefore think it unlikely—I will be honest with the hon. Gentleman—but he is always welcome to write to me. I will make this point: the Government's very real progress over the last decade, on drastically cutting our carbon emissions, with the help of industry, homeowners and members of the public, should be acknowledged. Dare I say it, if it is not unparalleled across the world, we are certainly in the top few. What is more, we have tried, through measures such as VAT zero rating on energy-saving materials, to encourage homeowners and others to plug gaps and make their homes more energy efficient. So, I do not think stamp duty is the way to help, but certainly the Government have already put in place measures to try to help us meet our very, very ambitious climate targets.

The last few years have, frankly, been tough on us all and we want to help people take that next step in their lives to buy a new home. The Bill cuts stamp duty land tax for first-time buyers and other homeowners to reduce the upfront cost of moving home. It is because we want to help people as quickly as possible that the rates are already in force, helping our constituents.

The provisions in the Bill apply only to purchases of residential property in England and Northern Ireland, as land transaction taxes have been devolved to Scotland and Wales.

2.45 pm

The Bill contains two clauses. Clause 1 provides for the thresholds at which stamp duty land tax is due on residential property to be increased, with effect from 23 September 2022. That means the nil-rate threshold is being raised from £125,000 to £250,000. As a result of the change, 43% of transactions will pay no stamp duty whatever, boosting transactions and supporting the property market. For stamp duty land tax chargeable on leasehold transactions, the nil-rate threshold is also raised to £250,000. Because home ownership is a priority for the Government, the clause also amends the nil-rate threshold for first-time buyers, which increases from £300,000 to £425,000. First-time buyers will not pay a penny of stamp duty land tax on properties under £425,000. The

clause will also increase the maximum purchase value for which a first-time buyer can claim relief from £500,000 to £625,000. The changes mean that over 98% of first-time buyers in several regions will pay no stamp duty land tax whatever in several regions, including the north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber, the north-west, the east midlands and Northern Ireland. Over 60% of all purchases, including home movers in the north-east, will pay no stamp duty at all. Clause 2 simply names the Bill the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Reduction) Bill.

Government amendments 1 to 13 end the provisions in clause 1 on 31 March 2025, as announced to the House by the Chancellor on 17 November at autumn statement. As I said, the Chancellor has been very clear that the Government are committed to stability and fiscal responsibility. It is right that the provisions in the Bill remain in place over the next two years to help support the hundreds of thousands of jobs and businesses reliant on the property market during a difficult economic period. But as part of our commitment to getting debt falling in the medium term, the amendment will end the changes on 31 March 2025. From 1 April 2025, the thresholds will revert to their previous levels. Government amendment 12 includes transitional rules to support people who have substantially performed their purchase before the end of the temporary relief, but who complete after the 31 March 2025 end date.

Government amendments 13 and 14 amend clause 2 to rename the Bill the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Temporary Relief) Bill to reflect the sunset clause that will now end on 31 March 2025. The Bill comes into force on Royal Assent, but applies in relation to transactions with an effective date on or after 23 September 2022 until 31 March 2025. As a result of the resolution passed by the House of Commons under the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, the Bill's provisions have been in force since 23 September 2022. Our constituents who have bought a home in the last few months have had the benefit of those reductions. We very much look forward to supporting homeowners, including first-time buyers, in the coming two years with the Bill.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Sir Roger, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The Government's proposal in the Bill will do some marginal good, reducing the cost of buying for some people. The danger is that it meets the needs of a very small number of people. The overwhelming majority of people living in my constituency who cannot afford a home are not in the waiting room, shall we say, to be able to access a new home on the basis of this change. If we think, for example, that £250,000 constitutes the price of an affordable home, we are not in touch with reality—certainly not in the Lake district and the rest of Cumbria. I do not propose to vote against the Government's proposal, because I can see how it could do some good at the margins, but if we were really bothered about the fact that most people cannot afford to be a first-time buyer with a home of their own, we would be tackling the lack of development of new council homes, social rented homes across the board and shared ownership, and we would be looking at making better use of the current stock.

The reality is that whatever benefit the stamp duty cut might have brought to families has already been quashed and exceeded by the additional cost they will

have to bear through mortgage interest rate increases resulting from the Government's failures. I am told that in the financial markets, those who are in the know refer to the increased mortgage costs, which dwarf any benefit that the stamp duty may bring to new homeowners, as the moron premium—I promise you that those are not my words, Sir Roger. That is the consequence of a very foolish decision that this Government made just a few months ago.

That is not to say that there is no benefit in what the Government are choosing to do. However, my new clause 3, which—with your permission, Sir Roger—I shall move today, would give the Government the opportunity to recognise that there are unintended consequences. We know that because they have already happened. We all remember that in July 2020, when the current Prime Minister was Chancellor of the Exchequer, there was a stamp duty holiday for purchasers of properties of a value of up to £500,000. The impact on the Lake district was instant and catastrophic: 80% of all new house sales in our community were in the second home market. Some 84% of properties in Elterwater, and more than 50% of properties in Coniston, are not lived in. Communities that were already on the margins might have lost enough full-time occupants that they cannot sustain a local school, post office or bus route or have any community life whatever.

There have also been consequences for our workforce. We are all rightly focused on the impact of the massive pressures on our health and social care services; in the lakes, they are under even more pressure because the homes that care workers and health workers once lived in are no longer available to them. That possibility has been wiped out, partly because of a well-intended but poorly informed decision that the current Prime Minister made as Chancellor in July 2020. We have learned that lesson, so there is no excuse for the Government to act without thinking about the unintended consequences and making some attempt to mitigate them.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I agree fully about areas of high housing pressure where people in local communities cannot buy their own home. May I commend to the hon. Gentleman what we have done in Wales? The Welsh Government have brought in a land transaction tax to replace stamp duty, which is a devolved matter, as the Minister said. Under that system, anybody who buys a second or third home pays a premium on that tax, which comes out of the first property as a disincentive to buying more than one home. Furthermore, in areas of high housing pressure, local councils can choose to treble council tax; indeed, my county council, Carmarthenshire, has announced that it will double council tax on second homes.

Tim Farron: Yes. Most of our good ideas were somebody else's first, so there is no harm whatever in looking at what devolved Administrations such as the Welsh Senedd Government have done. There are positives there from which we could learn, but it is also good to learn from our own mistakes—and the Government made a well-intentioned mistake two and a half years ago, with a very damaging impact on the lakes, on many other rural parts of England and across the United Kingdom.

Let me ram home what that means. It robs us of the life of our communities and the services on which we rely, but it also robs us of a workforce. That means

fewer people working not only in social care or health, but in our hospitality and tourism industry. The lakes are the second biggest visitor destination in the country, with 20 million visitors a year, but with a very small population. The workforce that services all the folks here and the many others who holiday in the lakes have nowhere to live any more. We are in the terrible situation of facing a recession nationally but, bizarrely, having more tourist demand in the lakes than we can meet. We cannot meet that demand because we do not have the workforce, and one reason is that the Government have been negligent in providing and ensuring enough affordable homes for people in our communities.

I support the Opposition amendments that would ensure that the stamp duty cut is not available for the purposes of buying a second home; I think that is wise. My new clause 3 would place a responsibility on the Secretary of State to look every year at the policy's impact on the number of second homes bought, not just in communities like mine but across the country.

The Government know what is happening. The evidence is before their eyes: their temporary stamp duty cut in 2020, a well-intentioned attempt to boost the economy at the beginning of the pandemic, had the immediately negative consequence of hollowing out communities in my area in Cumbria and in Northumberland, the west country and other parts of the UK. I am not theorising; it has already happened. My communities were badly hit by a well-intentioned but foolish Government policy. Why would the Government not accept new clause 3, which would allow them to do something about a policy that is positive on the whole, but that they know has a negative consequence on communities such as mine?

We will not vote against the Bill. We recognise that it does some good, although we think it is a bad use of public money. We could do so much more with that money by investing it in affordable homes for local families, ensuring more council homes and making sure that we tackle inequalities in rural communities in particular. We reckon that there is a marginal benefit from the Government's policy, but there is a disbenefit for communities such as mine. Will the Minister take new clause 3 on board and agree simply to review the situation year on year, to prevent communities such as mine in the lakes, the dales and the rest of Cumbria from being hollowed out? Otherwise, they will be turned into ghost towns, their workforces will be eradicated and no young people will be able to set up a home there—all because of a decision with an unintended consequence of which the Government cannot now claim to be unaware.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The shadow Minister may be slightly perplexed as to why I did not call her first, but the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) had indicated to me that he wished to press new clause 3 to a Division, so I thought it might be helpful for her to hear his arguments before being called to speak.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Roger. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon. I was not perplexed at all.

When we debated the Bill on Second Reading in October, the stamp duty cut that it seeks to introduce was one of the last few measures to have survived from the Tories' reckless mini-Budget in September. As we said at the time, we oppose the stamp duty cut because it would not be the right way to spend public money and would not be responsible. On the back of 13 years of economic stagnation, our economy has just suffered long-term damage from the Tories' recklessness at the end of last year. We made it clear that spending £1.7 billion a year on the proposed stamp duty cut simply could not be justified.

In October, as hon. Members may remember, there was a last-minute flip-flop in parliamentary business. Four days before we were due to debate all stages of the Bill, the Leader of the House announced that we would debate only its Second Reading. No reason was given for that last-minute change to parliamentary business, so we speculated that the decision might have been intended to give the new Prime Minister and his Chancellor the chance to change their mind about these stamp duty changes. That is indeed what has happened.

Rather than reversing the stamp duty cut altogether, however, the Government's amendments seek only to impose a time limit on it. Ministers could have used the breathing space since last October to do the right thing and scrap the stamp duty cut, but instead the Chancellor proposes only a partial U-turn. Government amendment 1 will amend clause 1, imposing a sunset date of 31 March 2025. The Government's other amendments, which are consequential on that change, include an amendment to the name of the Bill.

The Opposition remain opposed to the stamp duty cut. Even if Government amendments 1 to 14 are agreed to, the Bill will still represent a failure by the Conservatives to spend money wisely.

We are not talking about a small amount of money: the Government's own figures make the Bill's price tag clear. Even if the stamp duty cut is time-limited, it will still cost taxpayers £3.2 billion. We are serious about spending public money wisely, and the Government should be as well. For that reason we will vote against the Bill on Third Reading even if it has been amended, but before we reach that stage we still want to use this Committee stage to interrogate the Government on some of the detail, and to urge them at least to amend its provisions if they are not willing to drop it entirely.

3 pm

Clause 1(1) sets out the headline changes in stamp duty thresholds, while subsection (5) amends the specific thresholds for first-time buyers and the maximum amount that they can pay for a house and still be eligible for relief. We believe it is crucial to help first-time buyers get a foot on the property ladder, and that is something that the Minister mentioned very recently, but we have to say that after 13 years of Tory government during which home ownership rates have fallen, first-time buyers need more than a stamp duty cut to be given any hope of being able to buy their homes.

However, it is not just Labour Members who are saying that. The head of residential research at Savills, the estate agent, was quoted in the *Financial Times* as saying, on the day of the autumn statement, that higher borrowing costs were likely to overshadow any impact

of the tweaking of stamp duty thresholds. We accept that the interest rate on the average two-year fixed-rate mortgage has risen from 2.3% in December 2021 to 5.75% a year later, but any savings from the stamp duty cut pale into significance in comparison with the higher mortgage bills that people will face for years to come as a result of the Conservatives' economic recklessness.

The truth is that a stamp duty cut seems to be all the Conservatives have to offer first-time buyers, beyond bad news about mortgage rates. In fact, even that stamp duty cut will not benefit swathes of people across the country: an analysis carried out by the Resolution Foundation has shown that the Bill's changes to first-time buyer's relief will be of no benefit to the average first-time buyer outside London and the south-east. However, while many first-time buyers will see no saving from the stamp duty changes, clause 1(3), which increases the threshold for people buying second and additional homes, will ensure that second home buyers, or landlords buying additional properties, will receive a tax cut of up to £2,500 on each transaction.

Surely that is the part of the Bill that Ministers must struggle hardest to defend. Even if the Government are determined to retain stamp duty cuts overall, surely they can see that a cut targeted at second home buyers is not the way in which public money should be used. I therefore urge the Government at the very least to support our amendment (a) to Government amendment 1, along with amendment 15, which would prevent a tax cut from applying to buyers of second and additional homes.

Sir Christopher Chope: The hon. Lady seems to be obsessed with the issue of second homes. What about the point she made earlier about the number of young people becoming home owners, which has declined so dramatically since 1987? In 1989, 51% of 25 to 34-year-olds owned a home; now about half that number do so. What are the Opposition going to do about it?

Abena Oppong-Asare: In fact, the statistics quoted by the hon. Member show that the Bill will not help people. It will not help first-time buyers, and it is not just Labour Members who are saying that: the Resolution Foundation has provided statistical evidence that it will not help them. We want to help first-time buyers as well, but this is not the right solution. It will be mainly second and additional homes that benefit. Our two amendments would amend Government amendment 1 to remove the relief for buyers of additional dwellings, and would remove clause 1 (3), which raises the threshold for them. They would prevent the Bill from giving relief from stamp duty to buyers of second homes. I hope the hon. Member will support our proposals, particularly our amendment to enable first-time buyers to get on to the ladder as he wishes them to do.

As I have made clear, we do not believe that this stamp duty cut is the right or responsible way in which to spend £3.2 billion of public money, but if the Government are not willing to cancel the cut altogether, I urge Conservative Members at the very least to support our amendment to prevent second home buyers from receiving a £2,500 tax cut.

New clause 1, which Labour has also tabled, requires the Chancellor to be up front and transparent about the costs of the partial U-turn on the stamp duty cut, and to set out the measures that the Government will take to

mitigate the impact of the abrupt end of the stamp duty relief at the end of March 2025. We know from the Government's policy paper on this tax change that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs will have to incur costs in the region of £300,000 to change IT systems, and about £2.4 million in extra staff costs. That is ridiculous. Through new clause 1, we aim to push Ministers further by asking them to set out specifically the costs of implementing their U-turn

"for the Government, the property industry, and homebuyers", as well as

"any wider costs and impacts of the change...on the housing market".

We are also asking them to set out the measures they are "planning to ease the impact on tax revenues, home purchases and the housing market of the reduction in stamp duty...coming to an abrupt end on 31 March 2025."

We know from Government amendment 12 that Ministers are introducing measures to ensure that transitions that straddle the end of the temporary relief benefit from the reduction, but the question of the impact of ending the stamp duty relief goes much further than that. In 2016, the Office for Budget Responsibility published a paper on property tax changes and forestalling when transactions are brought forward to benefit from lower tax rates. The OBR found that in each historic case that was analysed, the preannouncement of an upcoming tax increase led to a sizeable forestalling. Forestalling is therefore expected to be an important issue in relation to the end of the temporary stamp duty cut, and we urge the Government to set out the measures they are planning ahead of that. If they are not willing to accept our new clause 1, I urge the Minister to set out the detail that we request, either at the end of the debate or subsequently in writing.

When our country is suffering the consequences of 13 years of low growth and of the Conservatives' economic chaos at the end of last year, now is not the time to be spending £3.2 billion on this tax cut, particularly when hundreds of millions of pounds will go to the buyers of second homes. We urge Members in all parts of the Committee to support our amendments to remove the tax cut for second-home buyers, and to join us in opposing the Bill on Third Reading.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I think that the Government have made a number of admissions today about the importance of property taxes, and stamp duty land tax in particular. During the covid period we used a reduction to try to stimulate the market and keep it afloat, for good reasons. I heard what was said by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). There are often flip sides, downsides and unintended consequences from tax changes, but the implicit admission from the Minister was that lower stamp duty encourages market transactions. In my mind that has to be a good thing, because property sales refresh housing stock. I imagine that the first thing any of us who are lucky enough to own a property will do when we purchase it is to do stuff. We might improve the bathrooms—or whatever we fancy, if pockets are deep enough—but those transactions that we make with local builders and others add to the local market. They add jobs, and there are VAT revenues and profits for B&Q and elsewhere. This all comes with it.

A trap that the Liberal Democrats and the Opposition Front Bench fall into is that they do not see tax as a game of chess. Too often we—the Treasury included—see tax as a one-step move: if we do this, it will create just that. It is far more complicated than that, because there are other outcomes in terms of economic activity that are not always recognised. But the strict admission by the Government Front Bench today is that lower stamp duty makes the wheels turn, and that has to be to the good.

We are currently seeing a modest reduction in house prices, so this type of measure to reduce stamp duty is very much to be welcomed, but I have a rather more long-standing objection to SDLT and to this form of capital tax generally, but most particularly to SDLT, because it stops labour mobility. If one of my constituents, someone with a family, were offered a job elsewhere in the country, the most natural thing would be to sell their property and move to that new area. But when they are faced with a stiff bill for SDLT, they have to be doubly or triply sure that this is the right move, because it is likely to cost tens of thousands of pounds. It worries me that people are not taking up roles elsewhere because they need to be absolutely sure. What probably happens is that they take a rental property elsewhere to get a feel for the area and find out whether the job is right. That is not helpful for their family life in the longer term.

The Government Front-Bench team made another admission this afternoon. Not surprisingly, the Minister announced with great fanfare the very good news that in vast areas of the country, the majority of transactions will fall outside of stamp duty. That is particularly true for those buying a property for the first time. We often talk about tax, and people's idea of fairness will probably be different depending on where they sit in this House, but can it really be fair that a constituent in South Thanet who is trying to purchase a modest property will face this SDLT charge just because they are in Kent in the south-east, whereas someone buying the self-same kind of property in another part of the country will not pay that tax at all? I am not entirely sure of the fairness of that. I would rather that everyone paid a similar amount in a property transaction, possibly based on the size of the property.

Another area that I have discussed with many colleagues over the years, including at a few roundtables, is retirement mobility. Too often, people who have lost their partner, a husband or wife, are stuck in their old property. We are very much aware of the cost of heating that type of property. They do not have the ability to do more work to increase their annual income, and they are stuck in a property that is too big for them, with all those memories of old. They realise that they really ought to move somewhere smaller that is more energy efficient and closer to services. However, if they live in an area of the country that is expensive, they might find an ideal property that is smaller and has all those good things, but there will be a very big SDLT charge.

I know the thoughts of older people, because I have had these discussions with my father and friends, and when they look at the potential bill just for doing the right thing through retirement mobility, they often say, "Do you know what, I'm not prepared to pay it. I'm just not going to pay £10,000 or £20,000 or whatever the

price may be to do the right thing." They do not want to pay that much to move somewhere more appropriate for older living.

I implore the Minister to receive a document from me and to have a conversation about the concept of a downsizing relief for older people. It could be fixed to retirement age, when people's ability to earn has gone because they have retired. Perhaps they could get some credit, such as free stamp duty, for doing the right thing in moving to a smaller home, which is sensible for them, the family and everyone else. In so doing, they would be releasing those bigger homes for the families who need them.

3.15 pm

We have heard this afternoon about people's concerns over second home ownership, and I get that. This party has actually done a lot in that direction—for good, bad or indifferent reasons. That includes the 3% surcharge on second property purchases, but we have also restricted mortgage interest relief for those with buy-to-let properties. I made a speech in opposition to that, back in 2016, because I was unhappy with what George Osborne said at the time. It seemed to break the whole spirit of a cost being applicable against a profit, no matter what enterprise one does. It would be wrong for the Opposition to say that we have done nothing to discourage buy-to-let and second home ownership, because we most certainly have acted. I think we have done more than ever done through the Labour years.

I would encourage people who are second home owners to sell. I want to see people buying their first properties. In areas such as mine in South Thanet—I know colleagues in the west country face similar problems, as does the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale—the holiday homes are often, by their very nature, smaller. Those who look at my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests will see that I am a chartered accountant and a chartered tax adviser. A number of people who have become widows and widowers have come through the door over the years and said, "I really ought to sell my second property on the coast." I have to tell them, "You can't do it, because you will face a huge capital gains tax charge. Sadly, your only option is to sit on it until you die and leave it to your family."

I reckon that there are hundreds of thousands of such properties of the right size and in the right place that are unused because of the CGT blockage. To unwind that would be the sensible thing to do. It would prevent some of the threats to our green spaces, because these are effectively brownfield properties. They are unused and often unloved, with an avocado suite that could benefit from being uplifted, but that is not being done because these properties are candied in aspic. I want them to be released to the market for those first-time buyers, and I hope that we are able to have that discussion.

Politically, the Opposition will say that this proposal will benefit second home owners who are cashing in on a second property, but we need to get beyond that. We need those smaller properties in the right places to be put on the market for first-time buyers so that we can have communities that are active and working in Thanet, the west country and the lakes, rather than second home ownership and holiday homes where very little real community happens. I hope that that can be fed into the Treasury in advance of the next Budget.

Perhaps it is time for bold moves. Yes, congratulations on a reduction in stamp duty—although I would rather it were permanent—but I think there are greater considerations, particularly in relation to retirement downsizing, that ought to be discussed more widely.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I rise to speak to new clauses 4 and 6, which I tabled, and to support new clauses 2 and 3, which were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

The housing crisis has been discussed at length today and at many other times in this place, and Members are well aware of the pressure that second and luxury home ownership is placing on communities where existing residents are struggling to buy their first home. In rural parts of Britain, including North Shropshire, our villages are at risk of turning into retirement villages and our tourist hotspots are almost becoming ghost towns at certain times of the year. That is having a hugely negative impact on rural skills and the rural economy, as both pupils and people of working age are in increasingly short supply.

The economic climate has changed, but house prices in rural Britain have risen fast in recent years. Figures from Hamptons, the estate agent, reveal that rural house prices rose by 14.2% in 2021, compared with just 6.8% in urban areas. The property website Property Road estimates that there are 132,000 fewer young homeowners in rural England than in 2010. I do not want to bore the Committee with facts and figures, but eight in 10 respondents to a Country Land and Business Association survey said that the lack of affordable housing had priced out first-time buyers in rural areas.

Although efforts to help first-time buyers in all areas of the country are welcome, the experience of the previous temporary stamp duty reduction in 2020 suggests that there is a risk of distorting the market and achieving the opposite. During that period, rural areas saw soaring house prices, with those trying to sell in Shropshire reporting intense competition and competitive bidding, unseen, for their home. That is all very well for those who were trying to sell, but it was bad news for anyone trying to buy a home at the same time and disastrous for anyone trying to get a foothold on the housing ladder.

Meanwhile, genuinely affordable housing—housing costing less than £250,000—remains in desperately short supply. Market prices have risen so much in recent years that it is putting intense pressure on social housing and the private rented sector, with social housing waiting lists spiralling and thousands of families being forced into temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation. We all know this is far from ideal for anyone who needs a place to call home, but it is totally unsuitable for families whose children need the security of a stable school and home environment. People who came here under the Ukrainian and Afghan refugee schemes, and whose family sponsorship has come to an end, are now the responsibility of their local authority, and they are also being forced to spend time in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

The potential for an accidental house price distortion makes it much harder for local authorities and housing associations to replace stock sold under the right to buy, because they are unable to retain 100% of the

proceeds. I tabled new clause 6 to require the Treasury to consider the impact of these measures on the housing market, and specifically on the availability of private rented and affordable housing, because people who are priced out of those sectors are adding to the ever-increasing waiting lists for social housing.

New clause 4 would require specific consideration of the housing market in rural areas in response to the recent trend of house price growth in these areas outpacing the house price growth in urban areas, which is exacerbating the issues we have seen across the country. We simply cannot ignore the housing crisis any longer. All policy should consider the possibility of unintended consequences and mitigate that risk. These reports would better inform policy, and I urge the Minister to consider their inclusion so that we do not cause an unintended problem.

I briefly turn to second homes, although I cannot improve on the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale. Suffice it to say that second home ownership is hollowing out villages in some parts of the country on weekdays and during the winter, and it is driving up house prices for everyone, meaning that many people cannot afford a first home. In a country with a housing shortage, the Government should strongly discourage empty second homes. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) made an excellent point on that issue.

I support new clauses 2 and 3, which would require the Chancellor to consider the impact of the Bill on the number of first and second home buyers, such that it can be amended if necessary, and specifically to consider the worst-affected areas, which are our national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

I broadly support any measure that encourages home ownership, but I fear that this temporary cut in duty, at a time when the Treasury can ill afford it, will be counterproductive for first-time buyers, particularly in rural Britain. New clauses 4 and 6 would allow the impacts to be fully understood, to confirm whether I am right and to make sure the policy is well informed.

Sir Christopher Chope: Happy new year, Sir Roger.

In speaking to my amendment (b) to amendment 1 and my new clause 7, I share with the Committee my dismay at the way in which the Government, with their amendments, are transforming this Bill, which originally introduced a permanent tax reduction. The Bill will now increase tax permanently by about £1 billion a year from April 2025.

On 17 October, the new Chancellor confirmed that the mini-Budget's provisions on stamp duty land tax were safe, yet in his autumn statement, one month later, he announced:

"I will sunset the measure".—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 846.]

That is an extraordinary use of language, because it does not fit the definition of a sunset clause set out on the UK Parliament website:

"A provision in a Bill that gives it an expiry date once it is passed into law. Sunset clauses are included in legislation when it is felt that Parliament should have the chance to decide on its merits again after a fixed period."

I assumed, wrongly, that by introducing a sunset clause, the Government would give this House an opportunity to reconsider the situation before the advent of that sunset period.

That is why I tabled new clause 7, which states:

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, three months before expiry of the temporary relief period, publish an assessment of the impacts of the temporary relief provided by this Act.”

That would meet the concerns raised by the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). New clause 7 continues:

“(2) This assessment must include an assessment of the impacts on—

- (a) the volume and value of housing transactions on the housing market,
- (b) any wider costs for the Government, property industry, housing market and/or homebuyers, and
- (c) tax revenues.

(3) The assessment must make a recommendation as to whether the temporary relief period should expire or whether the House of Commons should consult on extending it or making it permanent.” New clause 7 would be a proper sunset provision that enables this House to return to the issue before the change is made permanent, but the Government amendments do not embrace that at all.

How does this Bill fit with what the Prime Minister said on 4 January? In quite a long speech, his only reference to taxation was:

“as soon as we can, the Government will reduce the burden of taxation on working people.”

Today, six days after that speech, the Government are asking us to increase the burden of tax on working people with effect from April 2025.

We have also heard in the interim that the Government will forgo the receipt of about £1 billion from the sale of Channel 4, yet as recently as 18 July 2022, when responding to the consultation on that issue, the Government announced that now is the right time to pursue a change in ownership of Channel 4. Why, one might ask, is now the right time both to increase taxes and to abandon asset sales?

Stamp duty land tax is targeted at homeowners and those who aspire to home ownership. Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), I am opposed to stamp duty land tax because it is arbitrary, clunky and unfair in how it applies in different parts of our country.

For example, if someone lives in Christchurch and the average price of a house is £405,000, that does not mean that they are better off. It means they have to spend more money on the borrowing costs in order to buy an average house for themselves and their family. Someone living in the Minister’s constituency, where the average house price is only £200,000, would have lower borrowing costs and would not have to pay any stamp duty land tax.

3.30 pm

Victoria Atkins: This is precisely why the Government are so committed to levelling up. Although I know how beautiful my hon. Friend’s constituency is, having had the pleasure of visiting it, in my beautiful corner of England, we do not, sadly, have the transport links that other constituencies have. It is precisely this drive for levelling up, which I know Conservative Members are united on, which may help with some of the issues he sets out so eloquently.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to the Minister for that intervention. It comes down to how we define, “levelling up”. The point I am trying to make is that, if somebody is buying an average house in Christchurch, or in her constituency of Louth and Horncastle, it

should not make any difference in terms of taxation whether the house is going to cost £405,000 or £200,000. Why should the person buying a house in Christchurch who wants to become a teacher or an NHS employee in the area not only have the burden of having the higher house price—she has referred to some of those issues—but have to pay £10,000 in SDLT for the privilege of moving into the Christchurch constituency to purchase an average-priced house? I do not see any justice in that at all. In levelling up, we should be putting those two categories of person on the same level when it comes to their liability for paying transaction taxes.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet made the suggestion, which I have also made, that we should scrap SDLT. If we want to have a transaction tax, we should introduce one based on, for example, the size of a property, because that would be neutral; it would really be levelling up across the country. Obviously, it would be more popular with some people than with others, but it would certainly be very popular with my constituents and it would meet the criterion of levelling up.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It might be very popular in Christchurch, but it would be very unpopular in Wellingborough and it seems totally unfair to me.

Sir Christopher Chope: This is the challenge, because some people think that this would adversely affect them. When we were looking at whether we should change the domestic rating system, we always faced the problem of the people who were going to be worse off, who were always the losers and who were going to complain. I accept that, were this to be implemented in the way I am canvassing, it would create some losers who would be unpleasantly surprised. That leads me to my belief that SDLT and stamp duty should be abolished altogether. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] That is an issue on which we, as real Conservatives who believe in a homeownership democracy, should be able to agree—and it seems from that response that we can agree on it—rather than dividing again in trying to find an alternative to an already unsatisfactory tax.

Let us remind ourselves that, in the 1980s, when we had the beginnings of the property-owning democracy revolution, with more than 50% of people in the 25 to 34 age group being homeowners, we had a stamp duty regime where the maximum rate to purchase any house was 1%. Since this process started under the Blair Government and continued with the coalition—the Treasury is always seeing this as a cow to be milked for taxpayers’ benefit—the proportion of people able to afford to buy their homes has declined significantly. So the challenge I make to the Government, and I hope the Minister can respond to this, is: if we put stamp duty back to 1% as a maximum, what would that do to increase the number of transactions in the housing market, which, as others have said, is ostensibly the Government’s agenda?

On 23 September, HMRC’s policy paper “Stamp Duty Land Tax Reduction” set out the following policy objective:

“This measure is part of government’s commitment to support homeownership and promote mobility in the housing market, in turn supporting economic growth. Increased property transactions also add to residential investment and spending on durable goods.”

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

Unfortunately, that was withdrawn on 28 November. It would be interesting to know whether that policy objective has been retained by the Government even though the HMRC policy paper has been withdrawn. Another paper issued on 23 September was “The Growth Plan 2022”, which I thought was great, as did many of my constituents. Paragraph 3.30 of the plan stated that the changes to SDLT would

“take 200,000 homebuyers, including 60,000 first-time buyers, out of SDLT entirely.”

Today, however, we are discussing a proposal by the Government, by way of amendments to the Bill, that would put those 200,000 home buyers, 60,000 of them first-time buyers, back into SDLT. Do we really want to do that? Do we really think it will help to move the housing market, boost growth and help people to have the mobility to get to new jobs?

This is not just about people being able to move to a new job by moving house; we also need to think about the damage to the environment being done by the large number of people who are now, having no alternative, being forced to engage in long-distance commuting. Last week, I visited a school in my constituency. The teacher showing me around has been driving regularly from Wales to do a great teaching job in the Christchurch constituency. Fortunately, she is about to move into the constituency, but that is after many, many months of that long-distance commuting. That is highly undesirable. It is bad for the environment and bad for the people involved, because it means that they are sitting behind the wheel of a car for far too long during the working week.

Stamp duty land tax is targeted against homeowners and it will have an adverse effect on labour mobility. Yet the Prime Minister, in his speech on 4 January, was complaining—I agree with him on this—that a quarter of our country’s labour force is inactive and, in this Bill, he is introducing an additional tax on the very mobility that he should be espousing. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet has said, SDLT is a tax on downsizing: it makes it much more difficult for anyone to receive a significant return by selling a larger house and purchasing a smaller one.

My biggest complaint, though, is that the provision hits hardest those for whom homeownership is least affordable. The latest figures, produced by the House of Commons Library in December, show that, in Christchurch, the average house price is now 11.8 times earnings. The national average in England and Wales of eight times is bad enough, but why are we imposing that extra burden on those buying houses in places such as Christchurch? The latest figures from the 2021 census show that the dream of a homeownership democracy espoused by generations of Conservative politicians since Margaret Thatcher, and first raised in 1975, is not one of this Government’s priorities.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Hear, hear.

Sir Christopher Chope: I think it is very sad and embarrassing that His Majesty’s loyal Opposition should be crowing at that statement.

Mr Perkins: Just to clarify, I am not remotely crowing. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. This Government have hugely failed on allowing people to buy their own homes. It is a national disgrace. I support what he is saying; I am not remotely crowing.

Sir Christopher Chope: I accept that I used the wrong expression in suggesting that the hon. Gentleman was crowing. But may I set out the basis on which I have these concerns? In the Prime Minister’s speech on 4 January, there was not one mention of the word “housing”, let alone any mention of the expression “home ownership”. Why is that? We obviously have a real crisis in housing and home ownership on our hands. We are facing a potential fall in house prices this year—predicted by Oxford Economics to be about 12%, but who knows? Having stamp duty land tax, even at temporarily reduced levels, will mean that the burden of the reduction in house prices will be borne by those people trying to sell to a greater extent than would otherwise be necessary, because potential purchasers will have to budget for making SDLT payments to the Government.

You can tell, Mr Evans, that I am very concerned about the Bill. When I see that the Prime Minister has declared that the people’s priorities are the Government’s priorities and that we will rebuild trust in politics through action, all I can say is that I do not believe that the new measures in the Bill accord with the people’s priorities because I think those priorities are for a permanent reduction in stamp duty land tax and even, potentially, the abolition of that tax, rather than reintroducing it at a higher level in 2025.

When I was talking earlier today to a member of the Government’s Treasury team, I was told that one reason why my amendment (b) could not be accepted by the Government was that it had not been cleared by the Office for Budget Responsibility. I ask rhetorically, “Who is in charge?” Are we really saying that the Office for Budget Responsibility is able to forecast things to the extent of £1 billion here or £1 billion there? I do not think it can, and if that is the best that the Government can do in arguing against amendment (b), I hope they will think again about whether to accept it.

3.45 pm

We cannot carry on as we are now, where the average age of a first-time buyer is now 34 and the average house costs 5.5 times the earnings of a first-time buyer; 25 years ago, it cost only 2.1 times as much. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) on the Opposition Front Bench referred repeatedly to the Resolution Foundation reports on these issues, which draw our attention to the fact that young people are unable to get on to the housing ladder. The reports introduced quite an interesting statistic for me: 1.3 million young people who would have owned a home in 1989 are not able to own one today.

I do not know whether those 1.3 million young people would be more likely to vote Conservative if they were homeowners, but I suspect they probably would, and I think that is one reason the pressures against home ownership, which were begun very softly by the Blair Government, are still pursued by the Opposition parties. That is also why, instead of facing up to the need to address stamp duty land tax, the Opposition are now trying to divert attention on to those who own second homes.

On the question of second home owners, let us think about families. At the moment, if a husband and wife are married with children and they buy a second home, they are already penalised. If two adults are in a relationship with each other, but each one has a separate house that they occupy individually, and they then share at weekends or perhaps during the week, so that they have two homes between two people, they would not be caught by any of the regulations relating to second homes.

Let us think about the law of unintended consequences. Do we really want to introduce even more regulation that will probably have the perverse consequence of making more young people say, “Why should we get married? As soon as we do, instead of being able to have two homes as we currently can, we will only be able to have one.”

On that point I will close my remarks. This Bill presents a great opportunity to debate a such big issue; I hope the Government, if they are as radical as they say they are, will come forward with some proposals to abolish stamp duty land tax. I think that would be a very popular manifesto commitment.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): When this Bill was previously before the House, on 24 October last year—indeed, on the day we last changed Prime Minister, so it was under a different Treasury Minister—I asked the Treasury to analyse the potential harms caused by excessive second home ownership and holiday lets. I thank the Minister for her ongoing engagement on this issue, as well as the rest of the Treasury team. I have spoken to them on numerous occasions about the many complex taxation issues causing an imbalance in our housing market in constituencies such as mine, which I hope we can take steps to address in the coming months.

We know that when stamp duty was last reduced post pandemic, it generated a surge in short-term holiday lets and second home purchases. Indeed, 25% of purchases in my North Devon constituency during that period attracted the higher rate of stamp duty as an additional dwelling. However, we have no information on what proportion might have been long-term buy-to-let landlords. Alongside the many challenges in our North Devon housing market, we have seen a 67% decline in private rentals, with a surge in section 21s enabling landlords to take advantage of the tax inequalities between long and short-term rentals.

We desperately need to find a way to encourage buy-to-let landlords. The complexity of paying the 3% levy for an additional dwelling is, in many ways, a distraction from a Bill designed to help first-time buyers in particular on to the housing ladder. The removal of stamp duty saves thousands for anyone buying their first home—up to £425,000 at this time. When the numbers are fully analysed, in this legislation the maximum benefit to somebody buying an additional dwelling is just £2,500. We need to be just a bit realistic about whether that will be a large enough sum to motivate a change in behaviour in people who are buying additional properties—their second, third or fourth home.

For more than two years now, I have stood up in this House and asked for steps to be taken to tackle the housing crisis in North Devon. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill has now been amended to reflect the concerns of constituencies such as mine. Indeed, it is good to see Conservative-run councils in Devon and

Cornwall taking steps to adopt measures in that Bill to double council tax on second homeowners. It is disappointing that Lib Dem-run North Devon Council has not taken such steps, but I remain optimistic that it will.

I very much hope that the paper I have submitted to the Treasury on behalf of Conservative colleagues—it includes many suggested changes to the tax system to tackle the imbalances between long and short-term rentals, and to continue making it easier for local families to buy and rent in places where they grew up or where there are huge numbers of job vacancies for them—will pave the way to looking more closely into the matter. I hope that the Treasury team’s door will remain open to MPs to meet and tackle this issue.

Victoria Atkins: May I place on the record my personal appreciation of the intensive work that my hon. Friend has put into this issue on behalf of her constituents and the wider south-west? Many south-western MPs are concerned about this issue, including—dare I say it—hon. Members from the Whips Office, who cannot stand up and speak. I am extremely alive to the issues that she raises. I wonder whether she would do me the favour of coming to see me at the Treasury over the coming months so that we can discuss further the issues in her constituency and the interesting ideas she has put forward.

Selaine Saxby: Nothing would give me more pleasure than to go back and speak with the Minister about these matters. We all worry about why the NHS is struggling to recruit. I can quite definitively tell people here today that the public sector struggles to recruit in North Devon because of the housing crisis.

We on the Conservative Benches are keen to tackle this issue. Yesterday’s cross-party drop-in session was hugely helpful. We heard from the officials behind the legislation, as well as from the Minister. It is just a shame that Opposition Members did not turn up—not one of them. They have tabled a number of amendments to the Bill, but do we really need to put reviews into legislation? One cannot help but wonder whether such amendments are politically motivated rather than aimed at delivering real change to constituencies that urgently need their housing markets to be rebalanced.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is an honour and a delight to follow my hon. Friends the Members for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). May I say at the outset that I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch that you should be Sir Nigel, Mr Evans? If I call you Sir Nigel, will I have as much time to speak as my hon. Friend?

It is a pleasure to speak because, as the chair of the Back-Bench Treasury committee, I have done a lot of work on stamp duty policy, and I have had a slightly perverse interest in stamp duty for the last decade or so and written various policy papers and research reports on it. We all support raising the level of home ownership. In fact, rates of home ownership started to decline under the previous Labour Government. There is a home ownership gap of about 5 million people who want to own their own home but cannot. I will support all measures—well, pretty much all measures—to increase home ownership. Clearly, we are teetering on the brink

[Anthony Browne]

of recession and need to promote economic growth, so I very strongly support the broad thrust of the Bill in cutting stamp duty to help people get on to and up the property ladder and to stimulate economic growth. I have some reservations about the proposal being temporary and about it applying to second properties.

I will address some of the key themes of stamp duty policy. We have heard various calls today—not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch—to abolish stamp duty outright, and in fact, I have called for that before. But it is not just Conservative MPs who think that stamp duty should be abolished outright; the Institute for Fiscal Studies, on whose advisory council I sit, talked in its magisterial work on taxation policy—the Mirrlees review—about all the damage of stamp duty and called for it to be abolished.

Lord Macpherson, a former permanent secretary at the Treasury, gave evidence fairly recently to the Treasury Committee, on which I sit, about tax policy. He highlighted all the damage that stamp duty did to the economy, for many of the reasons that my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch and for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) set out earlier. Lord Macpherson certainly would not be sad to see its demise.

I want to raise a slightly more nuanced point than the outright abolition of stamp duty, which would lead to a big problem with revenue, as it raised £14 billion last year in total—about £4 billion for commercial property and £10 billion for residential. That would be a hole. My more nuanced argument is that people buying houses to live in are overtaxed, but people buying properties either as second homes or for investment are undertaxed. Exactly 10 years ago, in 2013, I wrote a paper arguing for a higher rate of stamp duty for people who are buying homes not to live in. Fundamentally, homes are for living in. Two years later, the Government introduced that policy. It is now the additional premium. I do not think the Government introduced it in the right way and there are all sorts of problems with it, but I will not go into detail on that now. The stamp duty regime at least recognises the difference between people buying properties for investment or as second homes as opposed to people buying properties to live in as their homes. That tilts the property market in favour of those buying homes to live in, which is welcome.

Tim Farron: I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman in his good, interesting speech. He said that it is possible for stamp duty purposes to distinguish between a second home and a first home. That means it would clearly be possible to distinguish between second homes and first homes for planning purposes, which would give local authorities the power to ensure that they protect a minimum number of homes for local families. I gave the Government the opportunity just before Christmas to vote for an amendment to do that—why does he think they did not do so?

Anthony Browne: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I must admit I do not know the reasons behind that, but it clearly is possible, at least from a taxation point of view, to distinguish between homes for investment and homes for living in. From a planning point of view, there are probably other considerations.

Tim Farron: It is political will, I would say.

Anthony Browne: There may be many reasons.

The capital gains tax regime already distinguishes between homes for investment purposes and homes for living in. People do not pay capital gains tax on the home they live in, but if they do not live in it, they do pay. The reason that people buying homes are overtaxed has been laid out by many colleagues, so I will not overlay that, but clearly we need labour mobility and for people to be able to live in appropriate housing. If we overtax housing, we end up with lots of people living in inappropriate houses, not least the home hoarders at the end of their working lives and the empty nesters whose kids have gone and who live in too big a house and do not want to move. That has a damaging impact on labour mobility, as people want to move around the country. It is the most economically damaging tax.

The reason I say that people buying second homes for whatever purpose or homes for investment are undertaxed is that stamp duty is a transaction tax. All other transaction taxes—we can argue about whether VAT or excise duty on petrol are transaction taxes—are flat-rated. People pay the same rate, whatever the value. We pay 20% VAT whether we are buying something for £10, £100 or £100,000. Stamp duty, however, is a progressive transaction tax, with a lower rate at the bottom end that progressively goes up, as it is designed now. That zero rate and lower rate for lower value properties is for social reasons. It is basically to help first-time buyers get on the property ladder, which is welcome, and to help people get up the property ladder. That is a valid social reason to have progressive stamp duty, but that reason does not apply to people buying second homes or investment properties. There is no reason to have a graduated stamp duty to help property investors get on to the property investment merry-go-round.

Sir Christopher Chope: Does my hon. Friend also agree that somebody in Christchurch who is having to buy an average priced house at the cost of £405,000—as compared with someone in Louth and Horncastle, who can buy the same house for £200,000—should not be taxed double, in a sense, in addition to having to pay a higher mortgage?

Anthony Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He proposed earlier that stamp duty should be based on the area of the property; I have some reservations about that for economic efficiency reasons. One of the considerations of taxation should be the ability to pay. If someone is buying a house for £400,000, clearly they will be able to pay a bit more tax than if they were buying a house for £200,000. But if the Government follow my proposal to get rid of stamp duty on residential properties altogether as an objective, his constituents will not have to pay any stamp duty whatsoever. They will pay the same stamp duty as the people buying houses in Louth.

4 pm

As I said before my hon. Friend's intervention, for people buying residential houses and flats as second properties or investments, there is no reason for a graduated stamp duty. We should have a flat-rate stamp duty whatever the value of what they are buying, just as if they are buying a luxury yacht, a watch or a car. They pay a flat rate whatever the value.

There is an economic justification for treating the taxation of houses differently depending on their use that does not apply to other products: constrained supply. The greater the demand for cars, the more are produced—you just carry on building them. But although we are trying to build 300,000 a year, house supply is constrained. That forces us to think, what is the ultimate purpose of housing? It is homes for people to live in. Other purposes are secondary. That should be at the forefront of Government policy. If we could build as many houses as anyone would want to buy, all those arguments would fall away, but that is not the case.

The Government could do other things on second properties. The Centre for Policy Studies recently suggested—and the Treasury Committee accepted after consultation with colleagues—having a 1% annual tax on non-residential property owners who do not live in the UK. If they can buy properties here, they pay an annual tax for owning them. It is difficult to see the economic rationale for encouraging international investment in the UK property market. That is a whole other debate, but the arguments do not really stack up. We have an incredibly generous taxation regime for international investors in UK properties when compared with almost any other country, including the United States and most European countries. We could afford to be less generous.

Ultimately, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Chancellor will wonder where all this money will come from. At the moment, out of the £10 billion of residential stamp duty a year, about half comes from the additional property tax—the 3% paid on second properties. They could increase that and decrease the amount of tax paid by people buying properties for homes. The Centre for Policy Studies and the think-tank Onward both made proposals on stamp duty reforms that were fiscally neutral. By ramping up the tax on second and investment properties and cutting away the tax on people buying homes to live in, we can basically scrap stamp duty for homebuyers in a fiscally neutral way for the Government. I urge the Treasury to look at those proposals.

The next point is on the Government's methodology for assessing revenues from stamp duty. Again, there is a long debate to be had about how the Treasury assesses the revenues it gets from tax changes. On stamp duty, it looks at the impact on the number of transactions: as transactional tax increases, the number of transactions goes down. It takes that into account for stamp duty but does not consider the impact of those reduced transactions on other tax revenues for the Treasury, such as VAT.

People pay VAT on the estate agent fees, all the sofas, the building work and everything else that goes into home moving, which my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch mentioned. That is a precisely known and calculable amount that could easily be fed into the calculations. I reckon that when someone buys a home, on average about half the tax paid is through stamp duty and half through VAT on all of the additional work that goes into home moving. If the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility included that calculation, they would come to a very different decision about the optimal rate of stamp duty and make it far lower.

There are other order effects, such as the impact on the labour market. The Treasury hates to think about other order effects. I will not go into the detail, but it is far easier to calculate them with more certainty and reliability for stamp duty than it is for other taxes. It is a direct consequence of stamp duty as opposed to a generic economic growth effect.

The Treasury should do a review of stamp duty policy overall and how it calculates the revenues from stamp duty, because I do not think the current methodology stacks up. We would end up with a very different stamp duty policy overall that was more tailored to the Government's objective of promoting economic growth while promoting home ownership.

On the amendments about reviews, I do not think it is the purpose of legislation generally to tell the Government to do reviews, which is what the Opposition spend an awful lot of time doing. If the Opposition want to get the Government to do things like reviews, they should win an election.

Victoria Atkins: It is a pleasure to rise after the stirring final sentence of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne). I thank Members around the Chamber for a really interesting and constructive discussion that has sometimes veered, dare I say it, into almost a philosophical debate about the very existence of stamp duty, markets, supply and demand and principles of economics. It has been a fascinating debate, and I thank all Members, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and for South Cambridgeshire, for putting forward their long-considered thinking on this particular tax. In the interests of frankness, I have to manage expectations and say at the Dispatch Box that we have no plans to abolish stamp duty land tax, precisely because it raises billions of pounds a year, but I suspect that will not stop my hon. Friends.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch asked a specific question about a flat rate of 1%. I had hoped to be able to answer it in this debate, but I am not able to, so I undertake to write to him. He and others across the Committee raised the very important issue of housing supply. This affects affordability in all our constituencies, including areas that have popular tourist destinations such as the constituencies of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, and also city centres. That is why, as part of our work over the last 12 years, since spring 2010 more than 800 households have been helped to purchase a home through Government-backed schemes including Help to Buy and the right to buy. We operate a range of relevant schemes that make home ownership more affordable, including the lifetime ISA, and those are important precisely for the reason that has been argued so cogently by Members: the housing market has at times raced ahead of local incomes and affordability.

Colleagues across the House raised the issue of building new properties, which has been a subject of debate when considering other pieces of legislation before the House. I hope Members will be pleased to hear that in 2019-20, almost 243,000 additional dwellings were delivered—that is a net figure—which was the highest in nearly 30 years, and the Government are on track to meet their commitment to deliver 1 million additional

[Victoria Atkins]

homes across this Parliament. Colleagues also raised the very important issue of the supply of new affordable housing, which is a priority for the Government. In the spending review of 2021, we confirmed £11.5 billion of funding for the affordable homes programme from 2021-22, which is the largest cash investment in affordable housing for a decade, providing up to 180,000 new homes across England.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet brought his expertise as a chartered accountant into the Chamber; he is on another matter of House business and apologises for not being able to be here now. He raised the issue of retirement downsizing. The point I will make—and I hope to repeat it to him in person—is that the measures set out in the Bill will also help those who are looking to downsize. If someone is moving from a property in, say, the second tranche of tax down to one that is zero-rated, they of course will be able to benefit from that. It will reduce the stamp duty charge for movers by up to £2,500.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire came up with a great many ideas, which I know he will continue to raise with me through his chairmanship of the Conservative Back-Bench Treasury committee. I take his point about other taxes being involved in the average purchase of a home, such as, we hope, when people are able to buy furniture and make the changes we all want to make when we purchase our next home. I hope that measures such as the energy-saving materials VAT exemption will help in some of those instances. However, I appreciate his point about the lever that stamp duty can apply.

Before I move on to the Opposition amendment, I want to reiterate that the Bill as it stands will mean that 43% of transactions—our constituents buying their homes—will not involve stamp duty. It will also mean that 98% of first-time buyers in several regions will pay no stamp duty. Again, I hope that addresses some of the issues raised.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) urges us to support Opposition amendment (a). To put it into context, there were about 1,025,000 residential transactions in the year 2020-21, of which around 237,000 related to additional property transactions, which includes not just second homes but buy-to-let properties. I will come in a moment to the significance of the rental market in this debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) set out so starkly, there are real issues in the housing and rental markets in particular parts of the country, and we want a national tax to help across England and Northern Ireland.

The Opposition amendment would remove purchases of additional property from the scope of the Bill and the temporary cut to stamp duty land tax, which we argue would have an impact on rental supply and, in turn, tenants. Through the 3% surcharge in the Bill, we are ensuring that those who purchase additional homes—in other words, both landlords and those purchasing second homes—will still pay stamp duty. Those buyers are not exempt from stamp duty; they will all continue to pay stamp duty, because the 3% surcharge will continue to apply to all of them. As I described, a sliver of properties within the £125,000 to £250,000 price range are affected.

Even with that sliver, the maximum saving possible for those purchasing additional properties is £2,500.

I want to put this amendment into the context of the private rental sector. The 4.4 million households in the rental sector remain a vital part of the housing market. Renting is the long-term housing reality for many. While we would very much like renting to be a stepping stone to people buying their own homes, we have to understand that, in certain parts of the country, the markets are so hot that for many people, including those people we would love to encourage to be first-time buyers, renting their home is the reality. We must therefore ensure that the measures we take do not imperil or endanger that market, particularly when households are struggling with the cost of living. Further constraints on rental supply will mean higher costs for tenants. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon set out the significant impact on and decline in the long-term rental market in her constituency. We understand from Zoopla data that rental prices in the country increased in August by nearly 12% year on year. We argue that accepting this amendment would make that situation worse.

We understand the impact of second homes on some of our most popular tourist destinations, such as the south-west. In fact, we are taking practical measures to address that.

Through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, we are setting a new council tax premium on second homes of up to 100% and strengthening the existing premium on empty homes of up to 300%. That means that someone with a second home could face an additional council tax bill of nearly £4,000.

4.15 pm

Tim Farron: To follow up on that, is it not right to say that people who have second homes pay additional council tax only if those homes are empty and unfurnished, so a very small percentage of those who have second homes will be affected? Does the Minister understand the evidence that the 2020 stamp duty cut fuelled a second home boom? On that basis, why has she done nothing to listen to rural communities such as mine about that and to mitigate it in some way by accepting my amendment or that of the Opposition?

Victoria Atkins: If I have understood the hon. Gentleman correctly, he has misunderstood the measures in the Bill, which introduces a premium on second homes of up to 100% and a strengthening of the existing premium on empty homes. I appreciate his point about empty homes, if people are moving or returning to their second homes, but that is not the scenario everywhere—indeed, in my constituency, I can think of examples where that is not the case. We are trying to use practical measures so that local communities can decide how to deal with it through council tax.

I was talking about complexity. We want to ensure that the system is as simple as possible for taxpayers, which is why we have the consistency of rate bands between the standard rate and the rate for additional dwellings.

Amendment (b), which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, seeks to extend the period from 31 March 2025 to 31 March 2028. It is important that the Government maintain a commitment to fiscal

responsibility and that requires difficult decisions, as I have set out. The Chancellor was clear about that in the autumn statement, and I hope that the ministerial team have been clear about that when we have spoken at the Dispatch Box. The Government will continue to take difficult decisions to get the public finances on a sound footing and to get debt falling in the medium term.

We therefore announced that the stamp duty cut will end in March 2025 as part of that commitment. It will remain in place until then to support the property market through what we all acknowledge are difficult times. We believe that we have struck the right balance between ensuring support for the jobs and businesses associated with the housing market and the Exchequer cost.

The remaining amendments tabled by hon. Members on both sides of the Committee refer to reports and reviews, if I may summarise them in that way. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire reiterated, it is a fundamental principle that we are loth to include reporting and reviewing requirements in primary legislation. In any event, we do not believe it to be necessary, because the Government already publish a wealth of data on those matters. For example, HMRC publishes data on property transactions and stamp duty land tax receipts, including data on the use of first-time buyers' relief. To help hon. Members to understand what that means for our constituents who are first-time buyers, the Bill will mean that they can access up to £8,750 in relief. It is a great shame that Opposition Members propose to vote against that relief.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities also publishes the English housing survey. Data on property prices, including at a local level, is published through the Land Registry. The Government published a summary of the measure's impacts, including on the Exchequer, in November's autumn statement. I hope that hon. Members who have asked for that data and those reviews will look at that wealth of information and draw their own conclusions.

I thank hon. Members for this debate, which I very much welcome, but I commend the Bill to the Committee. I particularly commend the Government amendments to enable first-time buyers in our constituencies to get on to the housing ladder, and to help other constituents move up the housing ladder and continue to thrive in our country in the next couple of years.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I put the Question, I should just say that I am anticipating three votes: two in Committee and one on Third Reading. The first vote will last for 10 minutes and the two subsequent ones will last for eight minutes each, so if I were you I really would not go anywhere after voting in the first Division.

Amendment proposed to amendment 1: (a), after "transaction" insert

"(except in relation to additional dwellings)".—(Abena Oppong-Asare.)

This amendment is intended to remove the relief from stamp duty land tax for second homes (see Amendment 15 to leave out subsection (3)).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 184, Noes 311.

Division No. 133]

[4.20 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Green, Sarah
Abrahams, Debbie	Greenwood, Lilian
Ali, Tahir	Greenwood, Margaret
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Griffith, Dame Nia
Amesbury, Mike	Gwynne, Andrew
Anderson, Fleur	Haigh, Louise
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Hamilton, Fabian
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Barker, Paula	Hanna, Claire
Begum, Apsana	Hardy, Emma
Betts, Mr Clive	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Blake, Olivia	Harris, Carolyn
Blomfield, Paul	Hayes, Helen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Healey, rh John
Brennan, Kevin	Hillier, Dame Meg
Brown, Ms Lyn	Hobhouse, Wera
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Bryant, Sir Chris	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Buck, Ms Karen	Hollern, Kate
Burgon, Richard	Hopkins, Rachel
Butler, Dawn	Howarth, rh Sir George
Byrne, Ian	Huq, Dr Rupa
Byrne, rh Liam	Hussain, Imran
Cadbury, Ruth	Jardine, Christine
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Jarvis, Dan
Carden, Dan	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Johnson, Kim
Champion, Sarah	Jones, Darren
Charalambous, Bambos	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Clark, Feryal	Jones, Ruth
Cooper, Daisy	Kane, Mike
Cooper, rh Yvette	Kendall, Liz
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Khan, Afzal
Coyle, Neil	Kinnock, Stephen
Creasy, Stella	Kyle, Peter
Cruddas, Jon	Lammy, rh Mr David
Cryer, John	Lavery, Ian
Cummins, Judith	Leadbeater, Kim
Cunningham, Alex	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Daby, Janet	Lightwood, Simon
Davey, rh Ed	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Davies, Geraint	Lucas, Caroline
Davies-Jones, Alex	Lynch, Holly
De Cordova, Marsha	Madders, Justin
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Mahmood, Shabana
Dixon, Samantha	Malhotra, Seema
Doughty, Stephen	Maskell, Rachael
Dowd, Peter	McCabe, Steve
Duffield, Rosie	McCarthy, Kerry
Eagle, Dame Angela	McDonald, Andy
Eagle, Maria	McDonnell, rh John
Eastwood, Colum	McMorrin, Anna
Edwards, Jonathan	Mearns, Ian
Efford, Clive	Miliband, rh Edward
Elliott, Julie	Mishra, Navendu
Eshalomi, Florence	Morden, Jessica
Esterson, Bill	Morgan, Helen
Evans, Chris	Morgan, Stephen
Farron, Tim	Morris, Grahame
Farry, Stephen	Murray, Ian
Fletcher, Colleen	Nandy, Lisa
Foord, Richard	Nichols, Charlotte
Fovargue, Yvonne	Norris, Alex
Foxcroft, Vicky	Olney, Sarah
Foy, Mary Kelly	Onwurah, Chi
Furniss, Gill	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Gardiner, Barry	Osamor, Kate
	Osborne, Kate
	Owatemi, Taiwo

Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes

Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
Webbe, Claudia
Western, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun

Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David

Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth

Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy

Paisley, Ian	Streeter, Sir Gary
Patel, rh Priti	Stride, rh Mel
Pawsey, Mark	Stuart, rh Graham
Penning, rh Sir Mike	Sturdy, Julian
Penrose, John	Sunderland, James
Percy, Andrew	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Philp, rh Chris	Syms, Sir Robert
Poulter, Dr Dan	Thomas, Derek
Pow, Rebecca	Throup, Maggie
Prentis, rh Victoria	Timpson, Edward
Pritchard, rh Mark	Tolhurst, Kelly
Pursglove, Tom	Tomlinson, Justin
Quin, rh Jeremy	Tomlinson, Michael
Quince, Will	Tracey, Craig
Redwood, rh John	Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob	Trott, Laura
Richardson, Angela	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Robertson, Mr Laurence	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Robinson, Gavin	Vickers, Martin
Robinson, Mary	Vickers, Matt
Ross, Douglas	Villiers, rh Theresa
Rowley, Lee	Walker, Sir Charles
Russell, Dean	Walker, Mr Robin
Sambrook, Gary	Warman, Matt (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Saxby, Selaine	Watling, Giles
Scully, Paul	Webb, Suzanne
Seely, Bob	Whittaker, Craig
Selous, Andrew	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Shannon, Jim	Wiggin, Sir Bill
Sharma, rh Sir Alok	Wild, James
Skidmore, rh Chris	Williams, Craig
Smith, Greg	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Smith, Henry	Wilson, rh Sammy
Smith, rh Julian	Wood, Mike
Smith, Royston	Wragg, Mr William
Solloway, Amanda	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Spencer, Dr Ben	Young, Jacob
Spencer, rh Mark	Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Stafford, Alexander	
Stephenson, rh Andrew	
Stevenson, Jane	
Stevenson, John	Tellers for the Noes:
Stewart, rh Bob	Julie Marson and
Stewart, Iain	Scott Mann

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendments made: 2, page 1, line 3, leave out “In section” and insert “Section”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 3, page 1, line 3, leave out “, for Table A substitute” and insert

“has effect as if for Table A there were substituted”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 4, page 1, line 13, leave out “In”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 5, page 1, line 14, leave out “, for” and insert

“has effect as if for”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 6, page 1, line 14, leave out “substitute” and insert “there were substituted”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 7, page 2, line 4, leave out first “In” and insert “Paragraph 2(3) of”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 8, page 2, line 4, leave out “, in paragraph 2(3), for Table A substitute” and insert “has effect as if for Table A there were substituted”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 9, page 2, line 10, leave out

“In Schedule 6ZA (relief for first-time buyers)”

and insert

“Schedule 6ZA (relief for first-time buyers) has effect as if”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 10, page 2, line 11, leave out “substitute” and insert “there were substituted”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 11, page 2, line 12, leave out “substitute” and insert “there were substituted”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1 (which provides for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to apply only until 31 March 2025).

Amendment 12, page 2, line 19, leave out subsection (6) and insert—

“(6) In a case where—

(a) as a result of section 44(4) of the Finance Act 2003 the effective date of a land transaction falls in the temporary relief period, and

(b) the contract concerned is completed by a conveyance after that period ends,

section 44(8) of that Act is not to apply in relation to that conveyance if the sole reason that (but for this subsection) it would have applied is that the modifications made by subsections (2) to (5) have no effect in relation to that conveyance.

(7) Section 44(10) of the Finance Act 2003 applies for the purposes of subsection (6).”—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

This amendment inserts transitional provision in connection with Amendments 1 to 9. It provides that transactions that straddle the end of the temporary period of reduced Stamp Duty Land Tax will get the benefit of the reduction.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: 13, page 2, line 22, leave out “(Reduction)” and insert “(Temporary Relief)”.—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

This amendment amends the short title of the Bill in consequence of Amendments 1 to 12 (which provide for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to only apply for a temporary period).

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 3

REVIEW: SECOND HOMES IN NATIONAL PARKS AND
AREAS OF NATURAL BEAUTY

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must publish an annual report on the impact of this Act on the number of second homes in National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty.”—
(*Tim Farron.*)

This new clause would require that an annual report is published on the impact of the Bill on the number of second or subsequent homes in National Parks and Areas of Natural Beauty.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 14, Noes 310.

Division No. 134]

[4.36 pm

AYES

Chamberlain, Wendy	Jardine, Christine
Cooper, Daisy	Lucas, Caroline
Davey, rh Ed	Morgan, Helen
Edwards, Jonathan	Olney, Sarah
Farron, Tim	Wilson, Munira
Farry, Stephen	
Foord, Richard	
Green, Sarah	
Hobhouse, Wera	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mr Alistair Carmichael and
Jamie Stone

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Burns, rh Conor
Afriyie, Adam	Butler, Rob
Aiken, Nickie	Cairns, rh Alun
Aldous, Peter	Campbell, Mr Gregory
Allan, Lucy	Carter, Andy
Anderson, Lee	Cartlidge, James
Anderson, Stuart	Cash, Sir William
Andrew, rh Stuart	Cates, Miriam
Ansell, Caroline	Caulfield, Maria
Argar, rh Edward	Chalk, Alex
Atherton, Sarah	Chishti, Rehman
Atkins, Victoria	Chope, Sir Christopher
Bacon, Gareth	Churchill, Jo
Bacon, Mr Richard	Clark, rh Greg
Bailey, Shaun	Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Baillie, Siobhan	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Baker, Duncan	Clarkson, Chris
Baker, Mr Steve	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Baldwin, Harriett	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Baron, Mr John	Colburn, Elliot
Baynes, Simon	Collins, Damian
Bell, Aaron	Costa, Alberto
Benton, Scott	Courts, Robert
Beresford, Sir Paul	Coutinho, Claire
Bhatti, Saqib	Crouch, Tracey
Blunt, Crispin	Daly, James
Bone, Mr Peter	Davies, rh David T. C.
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Davies, Gareth
Bowie, Andrew	Davies, Dr James
Bradley, Ben	Davies, Mims
Bradley, rh Karen	Davies, Philip
Brady, Sir Graham	Davison, Dehenna
Brereton, Jack	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Brine, Steve	Dines, Miss Sarah
Bristow, Paul	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Britcliffe, Sara	Docherty, Leo
Browne, Anthony	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Bruce, Fiona	Donelan, rh Michelle
Buchan, Felicity	Double, Steve
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Dowden, rh Oliver
Burghart, Alex	

Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid

Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia

Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane

Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Marcus Jones)
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:

Julie Marson and
 Scott Mann

Question accordingly negated.

4.48 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Order, 24 October).

The Chair put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Amendment made: 14, in the Title, after "Reduce" insert " , for a temporary period,".—(Victoria Atkins.)

This amendment amends the long title of the Bill in consequence of Amendments 1 to 12 (which provide for the relief from Stamp Duty Land Tax provided for by the Bill to only apply for a temporary period).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Question put forthwith (Order, 24 October) That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 308, Noes 170.

Division No. 135]

[4.50 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James

Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren

Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cheryl
Macleane, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel

Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie

Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Watling, Giles

Webb, Suzanne
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Scott Mann and
Julie Marson

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria

Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin

Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan

Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Sarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Mary Glendon and
 Gerald Jones

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Sport in Schools and Communities

5.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sport in schools and communities.

I am really pleased to open this general debate on this important topic. We will all agree that sport has a vital role to play in all of our lives, through its power to be a force for good that brings communities together and as an important tool in improving the health of the nation. The topic of today's debate brings together multiple areas of work from multiple Departments and arm's length bodies, which is why I am so pleased to be joined by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools, who will be closing this debate. The work of both of our Departments, as well as many others, contributes to the overall Government mission to support everyone, especially children and young people, to be able to enjoy sport and be more active. As a Government, we are fully committed to supporting sport in schools and communities.

I wish to take a moment briefly to reflect on the power that sport has to bring us together. Last year, we again saw so many unforgettable moments that transcend beyond just the single match or competition, such as the fantastic success of our Lionesses winning at Euro 2022. That inspirational tournament was a truly ground-breaking moment for the sport and has supercharged interest in the women's game.

We also hosted the Commonwealth games in Birmingham that saw more women's medals awarded for the first time and truly showcased the fantastic region of Birmingham and the west midlands. We saw success at the men's T20 world cup and at the rugby world cup. We also hosted a fantastic rugby league world cup tournament here in the UK, with victory for our fantastic wheelchair team. I was very lucky and fortunate enough to be there and see that fantastic victory in person.

The benefits of participating in sports and doing regular exercise are well known. Undertaking regular exercise helps mitigate a wide range of health conditions, both physical and mental, vitally easing the pressure on our NHS. For example, sport and physical activity directly prevents 150,000 cases of heart disease and stroke and 900,000 cases of diabetes per year.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I am delighted to see both my right hon. Friend and the Minister for Schools on the Front Bench. My only regret is that a relevant Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care is not here, as they also put money into the PE and sport premium. Can the Minister reassure us that the Department of Health and Social Care are as engaged in this agenda as are the Departments for Education and for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport?

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. I am happy to confirm that. One thing on which I am focused, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools agrees with me, is that we do work across Government, as there are benefits for all Departments in getting this area of work right.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister opened this debate by recognising all the brilliant English and British sporting achievements in 2022. I am sure that he will join me in congratulating the four Lionesses who were honoured in the new year's honours list, which was much deserved. I wish that it had been the whole squad, but we will leave it at that. He will recall that I led a Westminster Hall debate last November on girls and women's participation in sport following the Lionesses' success. He promised to work with the Department for Education on ensuring that every child gets at least two hours PE a week. I would welcome an update on those discussions. Perhaps the Minister might mention that in his wind-up.

Stuart Andrew: I will certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating those members of the team who were awarded honours in the new year's honours list. Indeed, since that Westminster Hall debate, both the Secretary of State for Education and I have met with members of the Lionesses team and gone through further details. We hope to make more statements certainly by April of this year, because we recognise the importance of the suggestions that she has made.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister has mentioned a number of great sporting moments over the past year. May I put it on record that one of the great sporting moments was the stance that he took over Qatar, and that many of us appreciated that stance?

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) mentioned the PE and sport premium for schools. I have seen the advantages that that brings to disadvantaged children in my community. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether the Government intend to continue funding that project? If he cannot confirm that now, will he write to me, because that project really does make a difference to those in local communities in my constituency of Eastleigh.

Stuart Andrew: I appreciate the kind words that my hon. Friend said at the start of his intervention. He is right to highlight the success of the PE and sport premium funding, which is exactly why the Government have doubled that funding. We are considering the arrangements at the moment for the academic year 2023-24, and I hope that we will be making an announcement as soon as possible.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a good way of promoting sport within the public sector and in public facilities is a joint use of facilities between schools and the wider community, so that, with the right maintenance and support staff, those facilities can be used at weekends and during the holidays?

Stuart Andrew: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our Departments are working on that; it is going well in some areas, but we need to see it improve right across the country so that those great facilities are available to as many people as possible.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab) *rose*—

Stuart Andrew: I will take one more intervention and then I really must crack on.

Kim Leadbeater: The Minister has made some excellent opening remarks and there have been some excellent interventions already. Less than half of all children currently meet the daily guidelines for sport and physical activity, but 54% of children would like to do more of it. I hope the Government will commit to giving PE and physical literacy the focus and time in the curriculum that it needs, with properly trained and resourced staff who can inspire pupils to embed sport and physical activity as lifelong habits and, in the long term, to save our NHS.

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Lady is right to identify that the earlier we get people involved in sport, the longer they will hopefully continue to participate and live healthier lives. That is why we are working on developing the sport strategy, as part of which I will be working with my colleagues across Government to ensure we are maximising every possible opportunity to get people into sport and physical activity.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Will the Minister give way once more?

Stuart Andrew: I will do once more, but I am conscious there is not much time for Back Benchers to speak.

James Sunderland: The active lives survey published recently showed that in Bracknell only 41% of children are classed as being active. We are not entirely sure why that is; we are working with schools to try to remedy the issue, and with the fantastic sporting facilities in schools locally I am confident that we will do so. One issue raised by teachers is that the annual sports premium is only ever announced late in the financial year. Will Minister please make sure that we get early notification of that funding so that schools, teachers and clubs can plan ahead for the forthcoming year?

Stuart Andrew: This is the moment where I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister is sitting by my side, so he can hear those messages and take them back to his Department. To be fair, he is already aware of those issues and will consider them when future announcements are made.

Sport also has the power to bring communities closer together through fostering social cohesion. It gives young people essential leadership and teamwork skills and has the power to tackle loneliness, reduce inequality, increase youth engagement and tackle youth violence. It is an essential part of a healthy and happy life. Research commissioned by Sport England shows that for every £1 invested in community sport there is a return of £4 in wider social economic value. That is why as a Government we are so committed to ensuring that everyone across the country has access to high-quality provision.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Stuart Andrew: One more time—I keep saying one more time.

Jamie Stone: The Minister is being very generous. I represent the most remote part of the UK mainland, and young people in Wick High School and Thurso High School find it very difficult to travel to Aberdeen,

Edinburgh and Perth to participate. It is tough on school finances and tough on family finances. I understand completely that sport is devolved, but I hope that the Government are going to look at some scheme to help parents and children in the most remote parts of England to access sport so that they are not disadvantaged because of inequality—and, since he mentioned cross-Government working, could he then share that best practice with the Scottish Government?

Stuart Andrew: Always happy to give advice to the Scottish Government. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight those points and that is exactly what we will focus on in the sport strategy. There are hard-to-reach areas, more rural areas and areas of deprivation in other parts of the country too, so that will be a focus of the strategy that we are currently developing.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way just one more time?

Stuart Andrew: I am just going to carry on a bit, because I am conscious that we do not have much time and many Members want to take part.

We know that there are significant disparities across the country, from Southall to Sunderland, and we are committed to tackling them. I make clear that it is my personal priority to do so. Through our arm's length body, Sport England, we invest more than £250 million of public and lottery funding annually. Over the past 12 months, 19.2% of Sport England's local-level investment has been for projects in indices of multiple deprivation or IMD 1 areas, providing direct support to organisations and communities in the areas that need it most.

Having the right facilities of the right quality is fundamental to a strong sporting community. That is why we are acting to deliver the facilities that every community needs, right across the UK. We are investing a total of £230 million between 2022 and 2025 in all four home nations. That includes an existing £18 million annual commitment in England, delivered via the Football Foundation in partnership with the Football Association and the Premier League. We hope that that investment will build or improve up to 8,000 facilities across the country, especially in the most deprived areas, and not just for football—40% of our investment will deliver facilities that support multiple sports. We are also investing £30 million, together with the Lawn Tennis Association, to renovate and repair thousands of public park tennis courts.

We are also working to ensure that major events have a significant and lasting impact on the communities in which they are held. During the summer, I was fortunate enough to visit the new facilities at Leigh Miners Rangers, which benefited from £350,000 as part of the rugby league world cup social impact programme. It is a thriving community hub that was galvanised and reinvigorated by that tournament. We recognise that we need to maintain progress, and, as I say, we will publish this year a new sports strategy that will set out how we will continue to support people, no matter who they are or where they are from, to enjoy the benefits of participating in sport.

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister clarify whether the strategy he is referring to will be the updated school sport and activity action plan, which has been an area

of concern, and whether there will be time for consultation before that plan is published so that voices can be heard as part of its development?

Stuart Andrew: The sport strategy that I am referring to is the wider, cross-Government one, but there will be the other report that the hon. Lady refers to. The Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb) will be able to give a bit more of an update about that in his closing remarks. Now that is dodging a question!

Ensuring that those from hard-to-reach communities get opportunities to play sport is really matters to me personally, and I look forward to working with Members across the House to make progress in this area.

Kim Leadbeater: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: One more time and then I must finish.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank the Minister, who is being extremely generous with his time. He makes some valid points about community facilities. Yesterday, the Government announced changes to the energy bill relief scheme. I am really pleased that they are committed to providing additional support to organisations such as libraries and museums, but can the Minister tell the House why sport and leisure centres were not included on that list? Swimming pools in particular face incredibly high energy bills. Many are threatened with closure or have already closed, including Batley baths and recreation centre in my constituency, which is, sadly, temporarily closed. Those are hubs in the community, so this is not just about physical wellbeing but about mental wellbeing, social cohesion and lots of other things besides. Can he confirm whether that will be looked at and whether the Government will be able to provide such facilities with the support they need?

Stuart Andrew: I am acutely aware of the concerns of many hon. Members about leisure centres and costs. Of course, the scheme that was announced initially has helped a great deal in that area, but to recognise the importance of the matter, I am holding a roundtable with some interested bodies in the coming weeks to look at it in more detail and see what else we can do.

As a Government, we are focused on how we can support our children and young people to become more active. Quite simply, sport and physical activity are a lifelong habit that needs to be carefully nurtured. We are committed to ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has access to and benefits from quality sporting opportunities. Dealing with this challenge has never been more important than when we are coming out of the pandemic. Some 2.2 million children—or 30%—are not meeting the chief medical officer's guidance on levels of activity. I was pleased to see in the latest active lives survey for children, which was released in December, that children's activity levels have recovered to pre-pandemic levels. There were particularly significant increases in the activity levels of teenage girls. Although that positive progress should be applauded, we know that more work needs to be done to ensure that every child realises the benefits of being active and playing sport.

[Stuart Andrew]

We are taking action to tackle that challenge. In partnership with colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, we continue to invest £320 million per year in the PE and sport premium to provide dedicated funding to primary schools to deliver high-quality PE provision. We also continue to fund the school games programme as a vital tool to encourage children to compete in competitive sport.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stuart Andrew: Before I finish, I will take one more intervention.

Damian Collins: I am grateful. I declare my interest as a trustee of the Sports Trust in Folkestone and Hythe, which delivers a lot of primary school sport activity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in encouraging best practice, it is important to look not just at levels of activity in and out of school, but at the improvement in academic attainment in schools that do a lot of sport? It has much wider benefits than just physical health, including academic attainment.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The benefits of physical activity are widespread, as I mentioned at the beginning. He is right to highlight that point, and we will make sure to consider it as we develop the strategy.

Last year, we saw how sport has the power to inspire. The fantastic success of the Lionesses marked a step change for women's sport in this country, and we are fully committed to ensuring that all girls have equal access to provision within schools and to looking at how PE can deliver that. As a Government, we are committed to publishing an update to the school sport and physical activity action plan this year, which will set out our ambitions and next steps to support more children to take part in sports.

In conclusion, I welcome this debate on such an important topic. As I have set out, we are already taking action, and as we look to publish our sports strategy later this year, and the updated school sport and physical activity action plan, we will set the blueprint for how the Government will continue to support more people to enjoy the benefits of sport and then take advantage of the many benefits that we know it brings for everybody.

5.21 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Happy new year to everybody. It is the first time I have spoken in the House this year. It is a pleasure to be here on behalf of the Opposition. I agreed with much of what the Minister said. Sport and physical activity are essential elements of a modern, healthy, successful society, and keeping active is vital for personal physical health and mental health and for the social development and wellbeing of young people. We know that physically active children are happier and have higher levels of academic achievement than their less physically active peers.

Sport and exercise bring people together and have the power to build healthier, happier and more connected communities. Sport is not just about the benefit to

individuals; it can be harnessed to tackle many of the important challenges we face as a society, whether it be loneliness, health inequalities or high rates of mental ill health. Getting people fit saves the NHS money and reduces pressure on public services. Sport can extend and save people's lives. It is not just about taking part in sport; it is about sharing the joy of it. Watching sporting events together brings the nation together.

Today's debate comes as we look back on a fantastic year for British sport. As we have heard, whether it was Wimbledon, the Commonwealth games, the rugby league world cup or the football World cup, we came together in support of our national sports stars. The Lionesses' stunning success at the women's Euros was a special highlight. We have given them our admiration and they give us inspiration. Our top athletes can be fantastic role models for our young people and ambassadors for their sports. With the right Government intervention and support, major events can help us build a lasting legacy and get more people involved in sport.

Today's debate also comes two days after the Public Accounts Committee published its report, "Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity". It found that the Government

"lacks a compelling vision for integrating physical activity into everyday life".

The report confirms what the National Audit Office report told us last year. We were promised a golden age of British sport after the 2012 London Olympics, but the Government have squandered that legacy. Adult participation in sport fell in the first three years following the 2012 games. Ministers abandoned plans to track the legacy of the 2012 games in 2016, so we cannot make any judgments about any legacy delivered from the £8.8 billion that was spent on the games.

Labour urged the Government not to repeat the same mistakes with the Birmingham Commonwealth games, but again, according to the Public Accounts Committee, the Government

"has no mechanisms in place to monitor the long-term participation legacy from the Commonwealth Games."

We cannot afford to keep making the same mistakes, so we look forward with eagerness to the publication of the Government's new sports strategy, but I have to ask where it is. We were told last summer that it would be published in the summer, alongside all the other Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport papers that were promised and delayed last summer, including the media Bill, the gambling White Paper and the White Paper on football governance. If we want to protect the clubs that sustain our communities, we need to get on with the recommendations of the fan-led review of football.

Kim Leadbeater: The shadow Minister is making some excellent points. He is right that time is pressing. We need action now. We will all have fantastic community sports clubs in our constituencies that are struggling because of the cost of living and energy bills. Grassroots sports clubs are at the heart of our communities. Does he agree that the Government must commit to provide them with the funding and support that they desperately need at this time?

Jeff Smith: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend anticipates my remarks. We need to support those grassroots sports clubs through the cost of living crisis and get on with

ensuring that the bigger professional football clubs have a framework that protects them and the communities that they support and thrive in.

Jonathan Gullis: Carol Shanahan, the co-owner of Port Vale football club, regularly raises with me how the funding model in a football pyramid works. If we moved to a model where 70% of the combined Premier League and English Football League TV rights went to the Premier League and 30% went to the rest, that would have a massively positive impact and enable grassroots clubs to see longer term investment. Does the shadow Minister agree that the Government should urge the EFL and the Premier League to do that?

Jeff Smith: I certainly agree that we need a better way of distributing finance down the pyramid. In her report, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) left it for the FA and the EFL to come up with a formula. That is the right thing to do at the moment, but they are taking their time. They need to come up with a formula that does what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) says and get money down the pyramid.

We are told that the sport strategy is delayed because of ministerial changes. I very much like the Minister; I hope he maintains his job despite the current ministerial merry-go-round in the Tory party. But if that is the problem, given the chaos in Government, I wonder if we will see the sport strategy before the next election. Once again, Tory party chaos gets in the way of Government action.

We need action. Currently, over a quarter of adults are classed as inactive, along with almost a third of children and young people. There are stark divides in the level of physical activity between different demographics and communities. The covid pandemic has not helped. There are now 1.3 million more inactive adults than before the pandemic. Worryingly, the people who are less active are those living in deprived areas, women, young people, over-75s, disabled people, those with long-term health conditions, and people from black, Asian, and other minority ethnic backgrounds. In many of those groups, activity levels have fallen more sharply since the pandemic. Those disparities start early. Some 35% of children in the least affluent families do fewer than 30 minutes of activity a day, compared with 22% of children from the most affluent families.

How do we tackle this issue? We need schools and community sports clubs to be able to step up and narrow the gaps, but in the last 10 years, state secondary schools in England have lost over 36,000 hours of PE from the curriculum. The national curriculum states that every young person is entitled to experience high-quality PE, but over the last decade school accountability has been increasingly focused on core academic subjects. PE is often neglected in favour of other subjects.

As we have heard, funding for PE and school sport is too often made available only on a short-term basis, with decisions coming at the last minute, leaving schools unable to plan for the long term. We are losing PE teachers: there are 2,700 fewer in England now than in 2011. By ending tax breaks for private schools, the next Labour Government will recruit thousands of new teachers, create a new entitlement to ongoing teacher training and reform the narrow progress measures that deprioritise physical education in the curriculum.

Children and young people's physical activity rates have now recovered to where they were before the pandemic, but that was not a great place. Fewer than half of children meet the chief medical officer's guidelines to take part in an average of 60 minutes or more of sport and physical activity a day. There is a physical activity gender gap: girls start being less active than boys from the age of five.

Labour believes that the Lionesses' victory last year should represent a turning point for women in sport, inspiring more girls to play football in particular and sport in general. According to Sport England, less than two thirds of all schools currently offer equal access to girls' football in PE lessons. Labour will introduce an equal access guarantee for school sport, instead of the current situation where girls can be taught "comparable" sporting activities, which reinforces traditional barriers and stereotypes for girls and women. We have to let children and young people explore a range of sports from a young age.

Kim Leadbeater: It is excellent to hear Labour's plans, but I go back to the point that we need action now. The Prime Minister said last year said that he

"would love to see all schools provide two hours of PE a week", that he would "tighten accountability" around the primary school PE and sport premium, and that he would ensure Ofsted looked at sport. Ultimately, unless we have healthy children, it does not matter how good they are at maths, science or anything else. That is why we have to value PE on the curriculum more than we do. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling for the Minister to ensure that the Government view PE on the curriculum as a priority?

Jeff Smith: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is an expert on these issues, and I agree with every word she said.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hard-working volunteers and community organisations that kept sporting activities happening as best they could through the pandemic and who do a fantastic job week in, week out, keeping our local sports clubs going. I also pay tribute to local authorities, which provide much of our sporting infrastructure. Without local authority sports facilities, many people would struggle to access sport, but local government has been the hardest hit part of the public sector over the last 10 years, and it shows. I remember the pain of having to close local leisure centres because of Government cuts in 2011. A high proportion of our local sport and leisure facilities are at the end of or beyond their operational life and in desperate need of renovation. Councils do not have the resources for this, and we need to give councils the ability to keep sport alive in our towns and cities.

Grassroots sport in our communities is now under more threat from the cost of living crisis. Soaring energy bills are hitting gyms, leisure centres and especially swimming pools. Operators are facing bills that are up to 200% higher this year compared with the last normal operating year, 2019, and costs are set to increase by another 240%. Even before the energy crisis took hold, Swim England warned in 2021 that nearly 2,000 pools could be lost by the end of the decade. One in four councils has potential plans to close leisure facilities, and over 40% need to make cuts to physical activity services. The District Councils' Network says that seven in 10 councils are considering scaling back their leisure services in response to these financial pressures.

Munira Wilson: I completely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about the strain on council finances. Councils often run swimming pools, but Hampton pool in my constituency—recently voted one of the country's top seven heated lidos—is totally community run, by a charitable trust. It is not run by the local authority, so it does not have that level of security, and given that it has been left out of the energy bills discount scheme update that was announced yesterday, it is under a lot of financial pressure. I welcome the fact that the Minister will hold a roundtable, but it is important to recognise that not all swimming pools are run by local authorities.

Jeff Smith: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. The announcement of the new energy bills discount scheme yesterday came as a massive disappointment to the sector. There is no mention of sport and leisure facilities, no acknowledgment in the scheme that certain services such as swimming pools are particularly energy-intensive—they are not on the list of energy-intensive sectors—and no offer of bespoke support. To quote Huw Edwards, the chief executive of ukactive, the new scheme

“will fail to give thousands of pools, leisure centres, and gyms the support they need to avoid further service restrictions, closures, and job losses.”

Ukactive says that 40% of council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centres or seeing a reduced service before the end of March this year, so the support that has been offered past that point will come too late for many.

I have to ask the Minister, what are the Government going to do to save these vital community assets? I look forward to the roundtable and hearing what he develops from that, but are they content to see pools and leisure centres close up and down the country? How does he plan to boost physical activity rates and sporting participation when the Government's lack of support will lead to closures and price rises? It is not just councils that are feeling the pinch. Over a quarter of adults across the UK think they will need to cut back on their own sport and physical activity because of rising costs, so will the sports strategy, whenever we see it, contain plans to save our leisure facilities?

A decade on from the 2012 Olympics, despite the success of our brilliant athletes and the best efforts of our community volunteers, physical activity is flatlining, school sport is declining and facilities are under threat. The Government have failed to make the best of sport as a vital element to prevent ill health and boost the economy. Those failures will cost us all more in the long run, piling pressure on public services. The Government should use this debate as an opportunity to set out what they will do differently to promote PE in schools, address the inequalities in opportunity and participation, ensure we have the pools, gyms and leisure centres we need and to build a proper legacy for the money we have spent and the brilliance of the sporting heroes who inspire us. It is time for the Government to raise their game.

5.35 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I refer the House to my various sport-related entries on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. When David Cameron rang me in May 2015 to ask me to be his Sports Minister, I asked if I could have school sport

in the portfolio. When he said no, because he had already appointed that Minister—who, for the record, turned out to be an excellent Minister—I replied, “Well, I have already failed.” While I do not believe that I failed as Sports Minister, I was never going to succeed in getting the absolute best results in children's activity because I did not have responsibility for the part that introduces children to sport and physical activity in the first place.

That remains the case for ministerial responsibilities today—we have two excellent Ministers on the Front Bench, so this is no criticism of them—as was noted in the Public Accounts Committee report published over the weekend. I will be honest: it was a tough read. I am very proud of the sports strategy, published in 2015, which aimed to rejuvenate flatlining participation. While it did do that to some extent, it was perhaps not to the level we would have all hoped. As the Committee notes, part of that is due to the lack of delivery in other Departments, not DCMS. It also notes that the one cross-departmental group that tried to ensure progress of delivery ceased after I left in 2018. I encourage the Government to revive these important checks as part of the new sports strategy, which I am sure will be a welcome refresher of the now seven-year old strategy.

School sport underpins long-term success in the nation's physical and mental wellbeing. We need a bold and ambitious plan that starts at reception and builds appropriately and consistently throughout formal education. With a son in year 2, I have never had more insight into the challenges teachers face in delivering the curriculum along with the additional demands we in this place put on them. However, the needs of the curriculum and the benefits of physical exercise complement each other, not compete against each other. Schools with good PE outputs often have good educational attainment levels. Statistics show that physical health improves mental health, concentration levels, happiness, behaviour, confidence and resilience.

The challenge is, how does sport fit into the school day, and how is it funded? I hope the Minister can deal with the latter point today and pledge to confirm the funding for school sport for the next academic year at the earliest opportunity. If we want decent provision, it is essential that it is planned well in advance. Our children need activities that give them a thirst for movement. They want and need variety that is not always about competition. Planned expenditure is vital for this and, in turn, will enable school day planning. I share the Youth Sport Trust's view that PE should be a core subject, but also that wraparound care could be more active. We often cite the difference between state and private provision. Facilities is obviously a point of difference, but so is the type of after-school offering. This has to be funded, so let us fund it. It is not misspent public money, for it will save the taxpayer in the long run by mitigating the poor physical and mental health that costs the NHS so much.

Although I have referenced the need to provide non-competitive sport, it would be remiss of me not to mention the success of the Lionesses and their subsequent letter to, as it turns out, both the former and current Prime Ministers about the delivery of football to girls. Currently, only 67% of schools offer football equally to girls and boys. Not every girl wants to play football—this girl did, although I was not allowed to—but how would

they know if they were not even being offered it? Without an introduction in school, few will independently seek out clubs, so the pipeline of talent is blocked before it really starts.

The FA has three asks with which I totally agree: a minimum of two hours of PE a week, Ofsted inspections of school sport, and long-term funding for PE and school sport—Ministers have already heard interventions from hon. Members on that point. Without that, we will continue to see only a trickle of progress, rather than the flow that should follow such an almighty national team success. This point also applies to women's rugby and cricket.

To turn briefly from education to health, we need to grip the social prescribing revolution and use physical activity more. There are excellent examples of link workers signposting people to physical activity, which does not have to be sweaty but could be walking or joining the local ramblers. It is good for people's physical and mental health, and for tackling loneliness, for which the Sports Minister also has responsibility.

To give an example, a friend has just been diagnosed with early osteoarthritis. The doctor's response was to suggest calcium, which she cannot take because of the post-breast cancer pills that she takes. No one has suggested that she should do strength training or low-impact exercise such as walking or tai chi, which are proven to support bone strength. I could speak about the social prescribing of physical activity for ages, but since neither Minister present is responsible for the public health through physical activity budget or policy, I may well put in for another debate. It is yet another example of the PAC's point about disjointed policymaking on sport.

On community sport—I appreciate that I am rushing now—there is much to celebrate in our communities. Active Kent & Medway continues to fund sporting initiatives and projects across my constituency, as well as the rest of the county. Medway Council continues to fund free swimming for under-16s and over-60s. At the other end of the constituency, I recently had the pleasure of opening a brand new bike pump track in Snodland. We have many committed volunteers around the constituency who provide some form of activity, competitive or otherwise, for my constituents week in, week out.

All those facilities and initiatives will help to drive up participation across communities in Kent and Medway, and to improve physical and mental wellbeing, but they need more support, as well as that recognition and celebration. We need planning, however, to be more conscious of the need to integrate physical health and wellbeing into its thinking—something that I know the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care also believes in. We build large estates without giving any thought to integrating physical and mental health, or we build an estate next to a woodland and then put a road through the middle that makes it entirely inaccessible to people. We have to think more about that.

As other hon. Members have, I will briefly raise financial support for leisure trusts and facilities, such as swimming pools, although I appreciate that falls outside the remit of either Minister. Such community facilities use a significant amount of energy. Many are still feeling the after-effects of covid-19 and are now being affected by the rise in the cost of living. I would therefore be grateful if the Sports Minister could clarify what discussions he has had, and whether he can bring forward

the roundtable that he suggested might happen in a couple of weeks. These are now urgent asks from those facilities.

I stand by my opening comments: the Sports Minister can do only so much to get the nation fit and healthy, because success is reliant on other Departments delivering better school and community sport. I accept that my sports strategy is outdated; it did what it needed to do at the time, but it certainly requires a bold, ambitious refresh. Given that I am sure it is being worked on at pace, I look forward to seeing it published soon and I hope that what it sets out will improve the physical health and wellbeing of the nation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I call the next speaker, this debate needs to finish at 7 o'clock and I need to get the wind-ups in as well, so my advice is to speak for a maximum of six minutes. I would rather not set a time limit, so colleagues should be conscious of each other.

5.44 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I entirely agree with what she said about the problem of how many of the things covered by DCMS, as I know from sitting on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, also fall under other Departments and they therefore do not get the action they sometimes need. That is a problem for DCMS that the Government need to look at across the piece.

I am very pleased to be able to take part in today's debate about the importance of access to sport in schools, and the importance of sport not just in already established communities, but in creating new communities. I am a big believer in the power of sport to bring people together, and also in the health benefits of regular exercise, both mental and physical. It is so important that children have access to sport in school—to a range of sport—and that that access is equitable and fair, whether for children who want to go on to compete at the highest level, to do such things in their spare time for fun or to do so as part of their school curriculum.

For a start, getting involved in sport and playing sport has incredible health benefits. That does not mean people going out and setting records; it means people going out on their own or with friends to keep fit. These regular sessions are so important in keeping people healthy. Whether it is the Saturday park run with family, Sunday netball or Monday night football, having such an opportunity and getting people out with friends or with clubs is so important.

Access to sports is also really positive not just in engaging local communities, but in creating them. It is such a good way for people to connect with others who have similar interests, in a supportive environment and where people can learn from each other, make friends and get to know others in their local community. They might have been dragged there by a friend who did not want to go on their own, or perhaps they were inspired by someone they saw doing sport on TV.

That brings me to my next point. As has been mentioned by a number of speakers, the Lionesses had an incredible win this summer, bringing football home. The feeling

[Julie Elliott]

the country got from such a victory was not that it was a remarkable miracle, but that it was the result of the hard work of many people over years and years. It is the result of incredible leaders in the game such as Baroness Sue Campbell at the FA, Barbara Slater at the BBC and Alex Scott on TV. It is also the result of volunteer coaches up and down the country going out at weekends to give girls the chance to play, and having to fight for pitch space, resources and attention. We must not forget the huge commitment and sacrifices that family members make in supporting our young people. This was shown most recently so clearly by Sunderland's own Jill Scott, who said in a recent visit back to her youth side of Boldon girls, near Sunderland, that she does not think she would actually have gone on to play for England without the support of her coach. It is people such as her coach, Paul—we must pay tribute to them—who do so much work to give opportunities to young people outside the school setting.

That brings me to two further points. First, so many leisure centres and sporting facilities that such teams rely on are under threat from rising energy costs, as many people have mentioned, and there are so many at risk of shutting. I would be interested to know what more the Government are going to do to support this vital sector. Secondly, there is still massive inequality in access to sports for boys and girls. According to the FA, only 67% of schools offer football equally to boys and girls, which is just up from the 63% when the letter was published in the summer, but this drops to around 41% in secondary school. I have to say that things have improved massively since I was at secondary school in the 1970s, when girls were not allowed to play football and when the sports we played depended on the likes and dislikes of the sports teacher. Things have improved, but not enough. How are we supposed to inspire the next generation of Lionesses if our girls simply do not have access to the same opportunities as boys? There is so much lost potential.

After their win in the Euros final, the Lionesses wrote to the current Prime Minister and the previous Prime Minister, saying that

“we see this as only the beginning...We want every young girl in the nation to be able to play football at school...This is something that we all experienced growing up. We were often stopped from playing. So we made our own teams, we travelled across the country and despite the odds, we just kept playing football.”

They said they wanted their legacy to inspire a nation, and they have inspired a nation, but this is a big opportunity to make a huge difference. I want to echo their calls for change. I want to ask the Government what they are doing to heed these calls and properly invest in girls' sport to level the playing field not just in football, but in all sports. It is what the Lionesses deserve, and it is what our young girls deserve.

5.49 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who spoke about inspiration. I want to talk a bit about the value of PE and sport in schools, before turning to a few issues in my constituency.

There has been a change in culture. Like the hon. Lady, I recognise that there has been some improvement since I was at school. In the 1980s, sport seemed to be

all about competition: those who could be brilliant at sport got the support, and those who could not, like me, did not get that support and were not that interested, and the sport teachers were not that interested in them. Indeed, my sports and PE teachers might be slightly horrified to see me speaking in this debate, but as schools Minister I saw how sport can inspire children in all sorts of schools and settings to achieve and engage, whether, in my constituency, at the Aspire alternative provision academy—where they have a fantastic partnership with our local professional rugby side, the Warriors, which I will of course mention—or at the amazing Perryfields pupil referral unit. I was delighted to see that the head of the unit very deservedly featured in the recent new year's honours. At break times at the unit, all the teachers and staff go out and play football with all the pupils, helping them to engage and feel accepted.

We have seen some welcome improvements in recent years in terms of activity and sport, some from the Government, some from outside and from the teaching sector. The Daily Mile, for instance, is particularly popular in primary schools; it is great for young minds, getting people out and active and helping children to concentrate in class.

The Minister mentioned the doubling of the sports premium, which was of course very welcome, but I join in the many calls we have heard for more consistency, transparency and clarity in that funding. In a recent meeting of the Worcestershire Association of School Business Management, one of the burning issues they raised with me was the very short notice they had to implement the funding that comes for the PE premium. They said that if they had greater certainty they would be able to do so much more. The holiday activities and food programme has been a brilliant intervention to support both activity and healthy eating, but the demand I consistently heard from the sector, which I echo for my right hon. Friend the Minister—my predecessor and successor on the Front Bench—is for consistency and clarity in funding.

I held a meeting today, thanks to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), in which the point was made that the problem is not necessarily the scale of funding for sport in schools, but rather the timing and certainty, to enable schools and the people who work on sport to make their plans. With that in mind, I urge the Minister to bring forward the school sport and activity action plan, which has been promised since 2019. I know from my time in the Department that it was a priority that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) was working on, and I hope the Minister can reassure us that it will be coming forward soon and he will set out plans for a multi-year funding settlement.

I want to touch on the importance of schools being able to work with local professional sports clubs. During my time at the Department we had a fantastic visit to Blackpool, where we saw the value of sports mentoring by Blackpool FC for children in alternative provision. We heard today from Alan Watkinson, the PE teacher who helped inspire Mo Farah—we may hear more on this from the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston—and his suggestion of a national network to drive forward the approach to sport is worth exploring.

Sports and PE activity can also make a contribution to attendance and children's engagement in schools. It is no secret that my predecessor as Chair of the Select

Committee, and now a Minister in the Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), was passionate about bringing back in the ghost children—making sure we can get children back into school. It is logical that children who might not perhaps be able to engage with academic subjects will engage better if they have the opportunities that come from sport. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) said, physical activity often complements academic performance. Used in the right way, sport can boost the confidence of children in school, and be an aid to concentration and an inspiration to those children.

I want to touch briefly on the situation in Worcester, where we are extremely fortunate to have a huge range in the community and professional sporting offer, with rugby union and cricket right at the top of that. There is, of course, football—we have the wonderful Worcester City FC—fantastic hockey, basketball and netball facilities and a university that is trying to put itself at the forefront of inclusive sport, looking at what we can do with wheelchair sport and so on, which can be a brilliant inspiration to children of all abilities and with all needs. We also have the headquarters of the Royal Life Saving Society. I join the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) in her call for more help for community swimming pools, because it is so important for children to have the opportunity to learn life-saving skills as well as basic swimming skills.

With the sports Minister in his place, I want to wrap up with a final plea—I cannot resist—on the plight of the Worcester Warriors, which I have addressed many times before. I will not detain the House for long about that, but I remind him to keep doing everything that he can to secure the future of professional rugby in Worcester at Sixways, because it does so much to support community sport and community inspiration for sport, including in our schools.

5.55 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) and other colleagues. I think there will be a fair amount of consensus in this debate. Sport in our communities and in schools has had a renewed focus through the pandemic and after it, with sport and physical activity being so important for mental and physical wellbeing, which is critical to all of us and to our communities. I emphasise the point made in an intervention about the importance of health and of the Department of Health and Social Care team being actively and prominently part of the debate and strategy. It is disappointing that a Minister from the DHSC is not in the Chamber.

I thank organisations from my constituency, where there are a lot of grassroots sports and football clubs, including Bedfont Sports, the Eagles, CB Hounslow United and Hanworth Villa FC. I also thank our PE teachers. We do not always talk about the interface of confidence in physical activity in school building confidence to take part in physical activity outside school. Indeed, it can also work the other way around.

My own story is that when I was growing up I had friends at school involved in the local athletics club. Athletics and sport were not a big thing in my family; I suspect that is common in families who have not had a tradition of sport. However, I started going to Feltham

athletics club, the same place where Mo Farah trained—I was there a number of years before him. The first time that I went to an athletics meeting, I did not realise that people were going to play sport and have a competition—I went to the first athletics meeting thinking that it would be a meeting and that we would all be sitting around. As it was, because nobody else had really turned up, I had to take part in everything for Hounslow. That was probably the only time in my life when I would have ever won—I did win—medals and trophies for taking part in javelin and shot put. It was one of those things where you do not know what you do not know until you have the confidence to take part and somebody walks through that journey with you.

Kim Leadbeater: My hon. Friend makes a really valid point, and I think that other hon. Members have said likewise. Can we all take this opportunity to pay tribute to key people within society, including the PE teachers and sports coaches who are working day in and day out? They can often be the only person a young person feels comfortable working with and speaking to, and they are often the inspiration that gets them through some difficult times.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. She has reminded me of the story of a young boy who was pretty much suicidal after the impact that the lockdown had had on his mental health, and of the support and camaraderie that his local football club gave him, including the coaches, who became in loco parentis. I also acknowledge the point made by the hon. Member for Worcester about the link between physical activity and wellbeing and educational attainment. That area really needs to be highlighted as well as the purpose for having a sports strategy at all.

I want to talk about the Schools Active Movement and its role in effectively utilising PE and sport to enhance the lives and development of young people. I thank the hon. Member for the meeting that we had today with Alan Watkinson, who was a co-founder of the Schools Active Movement and who also runs Sport Impact in Hounslow. There are a number of serious challenges that affect young people for which physical activity is part of the solution: childhood obesity, deteriorating mental health, deteriorating physical literacy—not a term we use enough—and the growing gap in children's physical and mental wellbeing between affluent and deprived areas.

The Schools Active Movement, through school sports partnerships and their equivalents, has had huge success in supporting schools, but it faces significant challenges. It talks about the sector having different pots of funding. That is helpful and important, but the lack of an overall coherent strategy is having a significant impact on effectiveness in achieving the best outcomes for young people. Local organisations have to spend too much time and resource fighting to access funding, and ensuring it is spent strategically and effectively. Schools, and particularly those without an active school sports partnership, are struggling to know what, strategically, to spend the funding on.

The lack of a coherent strategy on infrastructure and the year-to-year funding announcement is seriously affecting the ability to attract trained staff and to plan ahead. I heard one example of somebody who was trained and

[Seema Malhotra]

playing a really important part in local school sports. They could not, with the cost of living crisis, cope with the lack of certainty and left their role to become a postman—a really sad result. On the impact that can be achieved locally, Sport Impact supports schools to take a strategic approach. Its training has built teachers' confidence to teach sport. From almost 50% of teachers lacking the confidence to teach PE, more than 50% are now highly confident and none are lacking confidence.

Finally, to mention the asks that have been shared with me, one is the urgent need to maintain present infrastructure to protect the value of games organisers and the national network, and with confidence about funding. The second is to work together on planning for the future, consulting on the updated school sport and activity action plan, and a central role for a national network, like the Schools Active Movement, to play its part within an updated school sports strategy.

6.2 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): This is an area I am particularly passionate about. If, when I was younger, my ability had only matched my enthusiasm, I would have had a career in sport and would not be stood here now.

We are very fortunate to have two of our most effective and best Ministers here, who can make things happen, so to be helpful—the Whips know how helpful I am—I have a shopping list. Get your pens ready! At this stage, the Whips had probably better cover their ears, because my first ever rebellion was successful. It was on the sports premium.

The former Labour Government introduced the sports premium at the time when they had secured the Olympics. The £150 million a year funding was under very real threat. Before the Labour Government had introduced it, only two out of five school children were regularly active. By the end of the programme, it was still two out of five. It therefore seemed obvious that it had not moved the dial. What the Government had not appreciated, however, was the impact on the other three out of five children who had been doing absolutely nothing before. They were still not doing enough, but they were now certainly doing more than nothing. Rightly, the Government made a U-turn, not only securing the £150 million but doubling it to £300 million. That has now gone up to £320 million. I join everyone who is encouraging a long-term commitment to see that in place. It is important because we know that only 42.2% of young people are active for 60 minutes or more a day. It is frightening to think—heaven knows!—how little, if anything at all, 22.7% are doing.

For schools, part of the problem is a lack of PE teachers. The previous speaker, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), highlighted a lack of confidence, so I welcome the changes to the initial teacher training. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools, because my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and I raised in a recent Westminster Hall debate an offer from the Professional Footballers' Association, which supports thousands of ex-footballers—male and female—in looking at their next career. It is keen to encourage teaching as

one route and is offering to support some of the associated costs. To the Minister's credit, he met us very, very quickly and his team are working with the PFA. Hopefully, that will lead to an increase in people who have confidence and knowledge, in PE and in other areas of teaching.

I also want to see school facilities being opened up. That was my big ask when I raised the matter with the Prime Minister during the negotiations in our latest leadership "X Factor" contest last year. There are some fantastic sports facilities in all our communities, but some of them are under lock and key or, if they can be accessed, come at a huge cost that prices out volunteers willing to give up their time. When I was younger, people—or maybe it was just my parents—thought nothing of sending their children 16 miles away for the day without having them report back, but I am a parent now and people are understandably very conscientious about keeping sight of their children and making sure that they play in safe areas. Gardens are one third smaller than in the 1960s, so we need every last good, safe facility to be open.

Frankly, any group that can provide constructive activities, which predominantly means sport, should have access to school facilities. It should be free, because as taxpayers we have already paid for it. In planning new schools, we should look to integrate sports facilities that would benefit from dual use, particularly those that have specific design needs. It is very difficult for gymnastics clubs to find buildings with sufficient rooms and parking, and the same goes for athletics tracks and many other sports facilities.

We should encourage sports camps. In my constituency, the Draycott sports camp regularly attracts more than 250 children—slightly more girls than boys—during school holidays. It is incredibly popular, not just with children but with parents fretting about what on earth to do with their children during the holidays. Mark Draycott, who set the business up and is also a teacher, benefited from a favourable deal with the school that made it open and accessible, and from having the skillset to engage those who are not involved in competitive sport—it is a fun sports camp. He has helped to shape some of the early thinking around the holiday activities scheme, which I want to see continuing to be expanded. I pay tribute to St Andrews Parish Council and Haydon Wick Parish Council, which topped up the four hours provided through the Government scheme to ensure that all children on free school meals had a full day of access.

I turn to communities. I put on record my thanks, which I am sure all hon. Members will echo, to the thousands of volunteers and professional staff who provide the opportunities for people to get involved. We all know of them through social media. I know that we all believe everything that is on social media: yesterday I saw a picture of a drenched child and his parents, who were saying, "Thank you so much for making these opportunities in all weathers." I pay personal tribute to Roy Heather, a long-standing and much-respected volunteer at Swindon Supermarine football club, who sadly we lost last year. He was a true gentleman and typified everything that is good about the voluntary sports sector.

I know that there is an appetite for more in the area. I host an annual summer activities fair in front of my office, where lots of different teams, clubs and organisations,

but predominantly sports clubs, come forward and say to parents, “I know you have to entertain your children for six weeks—this is what we can do to help with that burden.” Hundreds of parents and children come along and sign up for different activities. I encourage all colleagues to do something similar.

I turn to planning. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) said, we need to ensure that there is sufficient usable space. In Swindon, where we have had loads of new housing developments, we make sure that that is a given. Green, usable lungs are incredibly popular.

We need to make sure that sports facilities promised are delivered. In Tadpole Garden Village, perhaps unsurprisingly, the developers are doing that last, not at the beginning. All play parks need to be accessible; as part of the disability commitments, we are going to make that happen. I pay tribute to Becky Maddern and Mums on a Mission for supporting me. As I say, let us look at sports with particular design needs and make sure that the right facilities are put in place. On leisure centres, I echo hon. Members’ comments about support with energy costs: it is really important that we do so and that we share best practice. There are lots of success stories where we are empowering sports groups and community groups to take ownership of facilities so that they can secure grants or charitable status and benefit from volunteers and their extra enthusiasm and motivation. We should champion that.

Finally, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for pushing forward the fan-led review. We need to make sure that its recommendations happen and that we preserve what we are so good at in this country.

6.9 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) for giving me a mention in his speech, and for the ideas that he contributed about engaging sportspeople in teaching. The premise on which our meeting with the Minister was based, for me, was the issue of male role models in teaching. I thank the Minister for his time, and I hope we can take that discussion forward.

I am pleased to be able to speak about the importance of schools. I am a self-confessed sports fanatic, or was until work and children got in the way of a life which, as a young person, I spent largely on a hockey pitch or in a gym. I therefore value the role that sport plays in people’s development, and their education in particular. I think it is too often undervalued by Governments of all stripes, given its benefits to health and wellbeing. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who is no longer in the Chamber, mentioned the benefits to academic achievement, which are well researched and, I think, well understood.

Sport, particularly team games, encourages the social development of young people, and indeed teamwork is becoming more and more important in the workplace. All who have engaged in sport understand the highs and lows it can bring and the character, growth and resilience that come from that—the ability to deal with life. Sport builds discipline and determination, which is hugely important, and any funding that is spent on it is an

investment in the development of independent, resilient, competitive young people who will be assets to our economy in the future. There are also massive health benefits, and I think the Department of Health and Social Care should spend much more time, energy and investment on sport as a preventive measure.

As we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), this starts in our schools, which are the access point for so many young people. It is important to recognise that there is a great deal of work to be done. I want to focus some of my comments on the facilities mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon, behind school gates and so often locked away. Many communities do not have the basic sports facilities that they need. Research conducted by the Football Association has shown that 150,000 matches are called off every season because the pitches are not good enough to play on, and that the quality of one in three grassroots pitches is not high enough. I am pleased that the Government have sought to address that with funding for grassroots football facilities, and I look forward to the development of that project. In fact, there is significant funding for football, but sadly that is not true of other sports. I declare my interest as a hockey player.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman was right to make that important point about the huge benefits of sport in boosting the confidence and increasing the ambition of children and young people. As for the point that he has just made, does he agree that many grassroots football clubs are prevented from progressing because their pitches and other facilities are not good enough, although the young people and their teams may be excellent?

Ben Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Not just pitches but other facilities such as clubhouses provide a social space, and investment in them makes a great difference in leading people to come back every week to engage in sport, as well as attracting volunteers.

As a hockey player, I despair when I see AstroTurf pitches, in particular, fall into disrepair. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport needs to do some work on its understanding of what hockey pitches are publicly available and what their purpose is. When I asked, pre-covid, about the availability of hockey pitches in my constituency, the Department came back with a big list of 5G football pitches, on which hockey cannot be played—although that did not seem to be understood. In fact, no hockey pitches are available in my constituency, much to the frustration of North Notts hockey club, which is currently homeless. There does not seem to be the necessary understanding of the sport or the problem. Can the Department ensure that we have Football Foundation funding for multi-sport pitches that are genuinely multi-sport, and that some can be used for hockey as well?

One way in which to increase the number of sports facilities across the country would be ensuring that schools are able to open their facilities for public use. Nearly 45% of state-funded schools do not have that public access, which is a huge missed opportunity when it comes to grassroots sport. I know the Government are seeking to address the problem, but that seems to have been going on for a long time, and the situation

[Ben Bradley]

has become worse post covid. I could give numerous examples, in Mansfield and across Nottinghamshire, of pressures on school budgets leading to the closure of sports facilities to the community.

As I said earlier, North Notts hockey club is currently homeless. In fact it has been homeless for 18 months, because the school pitch that it used to use is no longer available. I understand that schools want to prioritise education, given their limited funding, and cannot be expected to subsidise a leisure centre, and I think the community understands it as well—we all have sympathy for those schools—but the outcome is that football, basketball, hockey and other local classes and clubs are now without facilities. Those facilities are shut, just like 45% of other facilities, every night and every weekend. The nearest hockey pitch is 30-plus minutes away. For a club the size of North Notts, that is not viable, and it is really struggling. That cannot be good enough. I have tried to find solutions in recent months. I have even offered to fund things, and brokered discussions to no avail. The school will not act on this, although I am still trying, and the district council's leisure trust will not run it. It remains shut, to the detriment of communities.

If we want to almost double the number of community sports facilities available nationally, the simplest way is surely not to build new ones but to ensure that the ones that already exist are open and available for use outside those hours. My right hon. Friend the sports Minister mentioned the strategy to fund and focus on hard-to-reach areas. This is a hard-to-reach area, and this is something that could be done.

I do not want to repeat what colleagues have said, as I am conscious of the time, but I reiterate the call for support for district council leisure centres, particularly swimming pools. That is a huge challenge, and I know that the Minister is committed to making some changes. I also stress the importance of the PE premium. An early, long-term decision on that would be hugely welcome, because an annual one-year settlement creates a hand-to-mouth existence for schools that do not know where they are going to be in September. We would not want or accept that for core school funding and we do not want or accept it for sport either, because sport should be part of the core curriculum. It can boost academic outcomes, and it can boost the Government's overall aims in education. This should not be an either/or.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount to be gained from improving access, including equal access for girls, for those with disabilities—Mansfield is the home of powerchair football, a fantastic sport that is well worth going to watch—and particularly for disadvantaged communities, which often have the least access to high-quality provision and facilities. Sport provides a massive opportunity to learn and develop. It makes for more rounded, resilient and independent young people. It is an investment in our young people, but it is always undervalued. I hope that the Government will recognise some of the themes and challenges that have been raised today and act on them in the coming months.

6.16 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), and hugely reassuring to see two very

competent Ministers on the Front Bench listening to every word we say. It is also a pleasure to follow all the other excellent speeches that have gone before.

I am delighted to be called to speak in this debate because throughout my school days sport was a crucial outlet for a young boy, then a teenager, who was dyslexic and found academic study truly onerous and at times terrifying. I was fortunate to be educated in the private sector, where time was both granted and available for sport. In addition, we had the sports fields and support staff to ensure that a range of activities could be provided. It is my view that where the private sector leads successfully, the public sector should follow or certainly learn. Sport must not be a privilege; it must be available to all.

On that note, what has always baffled me is why the school day in this country ends at 3 pm. Too often, children return to empty homes or roam the streets aimlessly until their parents get home. Surely this mid-afternoon gap could easily be taken up by sport, especially in spring and summer terms. It is regrettable that both political parties have been guilty of selling off their playing fields over the years. Thankfully, since November 2016 schools have had to seek the consent of the Secretary of State to do so, and there is rightly a strong presumption against any sale.

Sport at school, for every pupil, is a gift that keeps on giving. Away from the two modern scourges of social media and the mobile phone, friendships are cemented, working as a team is understood, youthful exuberance is channelled, discipline is instilled, skills are gained and courage is tested—for it does take courage to fall on a loose rugby ball with the opposition bearing down on you. Crucially, one learns to win magnanimously and to lose gracefully. These are building blocks for life, quite apart from keeping fit. It is extraordinary that while PE is compulsory in the national curriculum, the Education Act 2002 prohibits the Secretary of State from prescribing an amount of time to any sport, although Ofsted recommends a minimum of two hours a week. That is just over one football match a week. I do not think that is nearly enough, personally.

I commend the many parents who selflessly give of their time to take their children to out-of-school activities. Unfortunately, many children do not have that sort of support. All too often, they end up doing virtually no physical activity at all. It is regrettable, but inevitable, that obesity among the young has risen, leading to a serious lack of self-esteem and the risk of being bullied. Well organised sport in school helps to tackle obesity and to improve behaviour, attendance, mental health and, as we have heard, academic achievement.

I fully accept that extending the school day and supporting sports such as cricket, rugby and football, and more, would need more funding, and I appreciate that a range of financial initiatives have gone a long way towards achieving this, but sports education, though compulsory, is given only two hours a week, when it should be a core subject like maths, English and science.

I can think of no better investment in the young than teaching them so many of the basics of life. The disciplines required on the sports field, whatever the sport, are no different from those required off the sports field. I was fortunate to learn the significance of physical fitness and good health at school. Once adopted, it stays with us for life.

6.20 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Whether it be football, cricket or rugby, sport has been a key driver of social and community development in Lancashire. We have fantastic grassroots clubs, boxing facilities and tennis courts in my constituency of Hyndburn and Haslingden, and I have been working closely with schools and community clubs since I was elected in 2019. There are a few general issues I believe we need to address to further help schools and communities provide sporting opportunities.

The first is space, and that applies both to schools and to grassroots clubs. In a 2019 Department for Education survey, half of educational establishments said that the key barrier to providing more physical activity is space and facilities. I see this in my constituency, with schools such as The Hollins in Baxenden needing dedicated sports hall provision so that they do not have to travel elsewhere. The Hollins is eagerly awaiting an announcement on the next round of funding for the school rebuilding programme, as it is currently having to hold GCSE exams in the sports hall, meaning that classes of children have to sit in the changing rooms because they are unable to do anything during that period.

If we are to tackle childhood obesity, surely it starts by instilling a love of sport at school. In an era in which more than 80% of 10 to 15-year-olds have their own smartphone and more than 40% have their own games console, we are fighting an uphill battle. We also need to ensure our community clubs are fit for purpose and have the facilities they need.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): My hon. Friend is correct to highlight the importance of capital investment in new facilities. In Blackpool, we will benefit from a new £6.5 million sports facility at Revoe, thanks to Blackpool football club and the towns fund. Does she agree that this will not only deliver regeneration but help to achieve other levelling-up outcomes such as improved health and wellbeing?

Sara Britcliffe: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I believe the Government's focus on sport and grassroots clubs is key to the levelling-up agenda.

It is vital that we ensure local authorities are prioritising green spaces for grassroots sport, and it is equally vital that local authorities inform grassroots clubs of relevant grant funding pots for which they may be eligible. These clubs often rely on dedicated volunteers who simply do not have the time or resources to navigate the complicated system of grants, loans and awards.

Hyndburn is a shining example of how the Government, local leaders and communities can work together to improve the sports offering. To that end, we have seen a £1 million investment in Accrington Stanley Community Trust, which will provide pitches and facilities to grassroots clubs long into the future. We have also seen the community ownership fund allow for the reopening of Clayton community centre, which houses Clayton boxing club, fitness classes and dancing. There has been a £450,000 investment in Hyndburn Leisure to reduce health inequalities, as well as separate investment in our tennis courts.

I wish, briefly, to touch on professional sport, which is key. Hyndburn has a fantastic community club in Accrington Stanley FC, which competes in the third tier of English football. The club gives thousands of year 3 children free team shirts every year, instilling in children a love of their local club and of football. It also provides great joy to many supporters who go to the games week in, week out to socialise with their friends and watch sport. It is essential that we safeguard community assets such as Accrington Stanley.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear me plug the fan-led review. I believe that the measures it sets out will help to promote sustainability in the English football pyramid and that the review's implementation would see more clubs such as Accrington Stanley orientating towards their fans and investing in their communities. I will leave my comments on the main point of the fan-led review, but let me say that I welcome the Minister's engagement in that and his continued support throughout.

6.25 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is sad that sometimes these types of debates are not the ones that make the news headlines, as they should do; this debate shows great consensus across the House on the importance of this issue. I concur with a large amount of the comments that have been made, but let me add my two pennies' worth.

In my brief time as the Minister for school standards, I was delighted to have the physical education and sports premium under my brief. One thing I instructed the officials that I worked with about was the importance of getting beyond the one-year funding settlement that always comes late in the academic year, meaning that teachers have already got curriculums planned and people recruited. It is essential that we not only announce such funding well before the Easter break—that is the very least we should do—but start to move towards a three-year to five-year funding agreement.

The Department for Education has done that extremely successfully with the holiday activities and food programme, which has been a real success in local areas such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, where we have the Hubb Foundation, led by the co-owner of Port Vale football club, Carol Shanahan, and one of its former professional footballers, Adam Yates. It has been serving more than 500,000 school meals to those on free school meals and providing thousands of opportunities each school holiday break to young people, particularly disadvantaged people. It engages with the schools to make sure that the young people on the pupil premium or on free school meals are the ones going to the clubs. It helps by using registers to find out what the engagement levels are.

I completely agree with my hon. Friends the Members for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) about school buildings sitting empty and idly by in our communities, despite being the beating heart of many of them. I was a teacher and I always found it shocking that a building that has the required safeguarding, security, kitchens and sporting facilities remains closed for six or seven weeks during the summer holiday—that is simply not right and we must do much more on this. Surely with small amounts of funding going into schools, we could make those facilities available

[Jonathan Gullis]

at a cost whereby, working with volunteers, they can deliver or maintain things. There would be a hugely beneficial impact.

Let me give an example. The Government's town deal funding for Kidsgrove of £17.6 million meant that we invested nearly £250,000 in the King's Church of England Academy Kidsgrove, a secondary school, to put in FIFA-standard 3G Astro pitches. We had an agreement that the community would have access to those facilities in the evenings and at weekends. Not only is that generating income for the school; it has created a new job in the process, and it has meant that hundreds of people from across the local area are now descending on Kidsgrove, as the sporting facility sits right next door to Kidsgrove sports centre. As part of the town deal funding, it got nearly £4 million to reopen what is a vital community facility. That is creating a sports hub in an area where, sadly, childhood obesity is at about 28%, according to the latest figures I saw.

Those facilities are great for the local community and we are grateful for the Government funding. This is an example of how it can be spread across the local area. I want to thank Councillor Simon Tagg, the leader of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council; the Kidsgrove sports centre community group, which is ably led by Mark Clews and others, including Dave Rigby, Ray and Councillor Gill Burnett; and Councillor Paul Waring, who is now the leader of Kidsgrove Town Council and has put money from the town council budget into the sports centre to make sure that the facility thrives.

Of course, as the sports Minister has heard already, leisure centres, particularly those with swimming pools, have to be included in any support for energy usage. I do not want this fantastic community facility, which was refurbished and reopened at the end of last summer, to have to temporarily or, God forbid, permanently close because of energy prices that are not its fault. They are not anyone's fault, other than Vladimir Putin and his vile campaign against the people of Ukraine. We need to make sure that we re-encompass those facilities, so I implore my right hon. Friend to speak with Ministers in the Treasury and in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to include those facilities in the support for energy usage. I will gladly work with any colleague across the House to continue that campaign and have our voices heard.

We are also looking at facilities within our local communities. I have mentioned the Kidsgrove Sports Centre and the 3G astroturf pitch at the King's School, but the Kidsgrove town deal meant that we installed a pump track such as the one my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) mentioned. The pump track was a new concept to me, but it has been my biggest success to date. Funding of £100,000 has created one of the largest such tracks in the UK. It was built by local contractor Clark & Kent, which has professional BMX bikers and former Team GB Olympians such as Kyle Evans working for it. This facility, which is free for the community to use, is on an old abandoned site at Newchapel Rec, which had some mud tracks built by the local community. People from as far away as Scotland and Cornwall have been emailing me to say what a great facility it is. Again, that is great for our local community.

When the Levelling Up Parks Fund was announced by the Government, I thought that a mistake had been made because Stoke-on-Trent was not included. I have got used to hearing Stoke-on-Trent being announced as somewhere receiving funding from this Government. So I am going to let the sports Minister lobby his colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and tell them that they must have made a mistake, that we are going to have a round 2 and that Stoke-on-Trent is going to get, I hope, around half a million pounds. I want to have a pump track revolution across my local area to make sure that we install more in places such as Middleport Park, building on the work by the Middleport Matters Community Trust, led by Vicki Gwynne and her amazing team, and building a facility not only to get people physically active, but engaged in learning softer skills, which are so important. We need to ensure that the BMX track in Norton and Ball Green is brought back into use, which councillors Dave Evans, Carl Edwards and local community champion Jenny Taylor have been long calling for. These projects are very important.

I cannot end my remarks without mentioning Port Vale football club's tremendous day out at Wembley, albeit at the expense of my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley): we thrashed them at Wembley to get promoted to League One, thanks to Carol and Kevin Shanahan's revolution of that football club. There is a massive engagement now in football. Stoke-on-Trent North is home to Stoke-on-Trent Ladies in Smallthorne, Port Vale Women and Milton United football club, which has ladies and girls teams as well. A revolution is taking place in Stoke-on-Trent to get young people, particularly girls, invested in sport.

I agree that PE must become a core compulsory part of the curriculum. Two hours is the bare minimum that should happen. We need to make sure that Ofsted is properly inspecting that and that we have the right people going in to teach it. Teachers in primary schools are overworked already. We need to give them the support that they need to focus on the curriculum and use the expertise of sports stars—retired and perhaps amateur. Perhaps we could get Phil “The Power” Taylor out and about in schools around Stoke-on-Trent, which is his home. Let us make sure that that can thrive. For me, sport was a life saver—quite literally. I have openly talked about my own mental health struggles, having attempted twice to take my own life. Having a sports team and a fantastic sports coach in Mr McCollin at Princethorpe College taught me discipline and structure. He brought me into a community, which was that team. He taught me those soft skills, although I accept that I do not display them very well in this Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker. My mother would like to see them more.

If we are to truly educate not just bright minds, but great people, sport has an important role to play and I hope that we can go further. I welcome the Minister's announcement of an incoming sports strategy. I hope that the Minister for Schools will be announcing very shortly that PE and sports premium and working towards a multi-year settlement further on.

6.33 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, if by chance you had been at the Cricket Asylum at Sowerby Bridge at 2 pm on Sunday, you

would have witnessed an epic quarter-final between the Northern Star Sixers and King Cross under-11s. I will not go into the result, but it benefited one of my children. What was heart-warming was the conversation that I had with the coaches of King Cross. King Cross is a cricket team based in the centre of Halifax. The HX1 postcode of Halifax had three teams going back over the 100 years. For various reasons, those three teams have disappeared. The centre of Halifax has a diverse population of people of different backgrounds and heritages, which is something to be celebrated, and a large south Asian population have made it their home. In 2018, Calderdale College began to run cricket lessons to see whether anybody there would be interested. Some young kids from the HX1 area, who had never played cricket before and never been offered the opportunity to get cricket coaching, went along.

Those cricket lessons continued at Calderdale College and enthused those young people, many from a disadvantaged background, with the idea that, “Yes, this is something we love.” Over time, the cricket club developed and in 2022 there was a public advertisement saying, “Please come to King Cross rugby club in the centre of Halifax, because we’re thinking about starting a cricket team.” Some 90 kids turned up from the HX1 postcode, from King Cross, and King Cross cricket club was born. That same cricket club plays in the indoor cricket league that my son plays in. It has five teams and young people who are a credit to their parents and to what the club is doing. It has devoted people from within the community, parents and families, there supporting those teams.

Those young kids have a purpose, they love their cricket and they are achieving something. Obviously, the starting point was Calderdale College, but that hub has thrived because of community. The three clubs that disappeared have been replaced by a new club that has taken over a facility, has not asked the state to be the answer to every prayer or asked for a huge handout, but has done it for itself. Cricket is now back and thriving in the centre of Halifax and those are the lessons we must learn.

I will confine my remarks in the time I have to community, rather than schools, which many of my colleagues have already talked about. We are utterly complacent in this debate about where we are with community sport. We often talk in generalities in this place, thanking everybody for what they do, and that is all very well, but we have a major problem with participatory sport in the community.

I will take football as an example. Anywhere in the country, I could go and find hundreds of under-10s, under-11s and under-12s teams; I would not be able to move for teams at that level, and people are committed to those teams. By the age of 14 or 15, participation has dropped off a cliff. In Huddersfield, where I was brought up—although I am the proud MP for Bury North—in the under-11 age group there are 90 cricket teams. For under-17s and under-18s there are only six. Something significant is happening and I still do not know what.

We can all say, “Oh, the kids have got lots of other things to do,” but they are not doing any other physical activity. In the old cliché, the old man that I am might say, “They are sitting in their bedrooms watching social media,” but something happens—[*Interruption.*] I am an old man. Something happens to the initial flames

that were set, the things that were making young kids play sport at that age. For the sports I am talking about, it causes participation to jump off a cliff.

Another thing we should take from this debate is what it says about us as a society. I will give an example. Bradley Mills cricket club in Huddersfield was formed in 1875. It survived two world wars and the great depression, and thrived in a disadvantaged area. It was central to the community over 100 years. Somehow, in the 1990s, the society that 50 years earlier had seen that club as part of the heart of the community and of the links that bound people together disappeared, and people could not be bothered anymore. That club, which offered an outlet for young people in that area of Huddersfield, disappeared.

When I was young, my dad played football in the Huddersfield league. The best team in that league, every year, was Brackenhall. Brackenhall is a disadvantaged area of Huddersfield, and the club gave an outlet to young people who had challenges in their lives. There were no state hand-outs, just local people in that area supporting a club. That club has now come to an end.

I could point to numerous other examples, as I am sure other colleagues could, of clubs, especially in working-class areas, that are vanishing before our eyes. When we go to middle-class areas and see 100 or 150 young kids playing cricket on a Friday night, we kid ourselves that cricket is thriving. I nearly want to cry when I go and watch Radcliffe cricket club, which is in the Bury South constituency—[*Interruption.*] I will bring my remarks to an end, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I just want to make this point. Radcliffe cricket club was where the great Gary Sobers played. Looking back at pictures of Radcliffe cricket club from the 1940s and 1950s, it was a wonderful place at the heart of its community and encouraged community and physical participation. It now struggles to raise one team, let alone anything else. So as we congratulate ourselves and expect the state to suddenly put in a lot of money to make everything all right, there are some fundamental questions about why community sports that thrived over 100 years are now dying in many areas.

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

6.40 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I thank Members from across the House for their powerful and impassioned contributions to this good-spirited debate. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to conclude the debate as shadow schools Minister knowing that sport has a key role to play in ensuring that every child in our country succeeds and thrives, no matter their background or where they are from.

Those on both Front Benches kicked off the debate by making powerful and insightful comments. The Minister with responsibility for sport, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), spoke about the many health benefits of sport and rightly praised the success of the Lionesses last year as an inspiration to us all. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), spoke about how sport can save lives, save the NHS and save public money. Yet the Government’s legacy on investing in sport has been limited, and the publication of relevant strategies remains long overdue.

[Stephen Morgan]

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) brought her usual expertise and guidance on these issues. I put on the record my thanks to her for her tireless work on the fan-led review. I know that Pompey fans are grateful for her efforts and I very much look forward to working with her as she continues that work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) spoke about how sport brings people together, and about the importance of equal access to sports and local facilities in communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) spoke about how confidence in sport leads to confidence in life.

As a number of Members have said, we do not have to look back any further than the Lionesses' fantastic victory in the Euros last summer to see the massive impact that sport can have on our nation's schools and communities. Not only can it boost the morale of the nation, but it can inspire millions to believe that they can achieve whatever they want if they put their minds to it. As we have heard, sport brings people and communities together, boosts mental health and physical wellbeing, provides employment and opportunities to many, and, for Britain, can be the means by which our nation's traditions, culture and brilliance are broadcast to the world.

We should not forget the many grassroots organisations that do so much to boost sports participation across the country, as a number of Members have said. Last week, I visited Pompey in the Community, which does tremendous work using the power of football to bring people together, working alongside local schools to transform the lives of children in my city.

Jonathan Gullis: I suspect that a lot of Labour Front Benchers will be in Stoke-on-Trent ahead of the upcoming local elections and afterwards, so the hon. Gentleman should be aware that there is a great company called Bee Active in Tunstall. If he wishes to visit, I will happily visit alongside him, but if he wishes to avoid the Twitter trials of being caught and photographed with me, I would more than accept that. Bee Active is a fantastic contributor across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. It is a fine company that delivers the quality PE and sports premium that we urgently need.

Stephen Morgan: I am actually in Stoke next week, so perhaps we could meet up and visit that project—I would be delighted to do so; perhaps for reasons other than what the hon. Gentleman might expect.

Last season across Portsmouth and the surrounding areas, more than 35,000 directly benefited from Pompey in the Community programmes providing sporting opportunities to many who would otherwise not receive them. Nor should we forget the fantastic efforts of PE teachers and school support staff, who go above and beyond to build up young people's confidence and encourage them to get active. Unfortunately, as we have heard, many such schools, grassroots organisations and leisure facilities now face major challenges from the cost of living crisis. Energy costs are increasingly eating up budgets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington said. With more and more people struggling to pay for services, such as gyms and swimming pools,

we sadly have already seen some sporting facilities shutting down, as my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) raised during the debate.

As has been pointed out by others in the debate, the 2012 London Olympics were meant to leave a legacy of increased sports involvement in schools and communities across the country, but according to a new report by the Public Accounts Committee, those promised benefits have failed to occur, with adult participation in sports actually falling in the first three years following the games. The report concludes that the Government "lacks a compelling vision for integrating physical activity into everyday life",

and the problem is not just with adult participation. According to official Department for Education statistics, the number of PE teachers has fallen by 3,000 in the past decade, while the number of hours taught has fallen by more than 36,000. That equates to an 11% fall in the hours of PE taught. That is why a Labour Government would boost the number of PE hours taught by hiring 6,500 more teachers and reforming the Government's narrow progress measures, which can lead to physical education being cut out of the curriculum.

Tracey Crouch: Will the hon. Member give way?

Stephen Morgan: I will make some progress. Labour would also capitalise on the momentum behind women's sport following the Lionesses' inspiring Euros victory and introduce an equal access guarantee for school sport, so that boys and girls have access to the same sports at school, rather than comparable sporting activities, which reinforces traditional access barriers for girls and women.

In conclusion, from Lewis Hamilton to Beth Mead, Andy Murray and many others, British athletes have delivered previously unthinkable success in recent years. These athletes are role models for our children and ambassadors for their professions, inspiring millions to take up sport and pursue their dreams. However, a decade on from the 2012 Olympics, the leadership of our athletes has been let down by the Conservative Government, with participation flatlining, sport in schools declining and school facilities forgotten. While our nation's athletes continue to flourish, the Government's performances increasingly flatter to deceive. Hopefully this debate provides the Government with a much-needed team talk to spark them into life to provide the vision for boosting sports participation across the country that we so desperately need.

6.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): This has been an excellent debate with some excellent speeches by my hon. Friends and by Opposition Members, including the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). May I start by paying tribute to the sports Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for the important stand that he took in Qatar during the World cup? My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) made that point, too. I have to say that when I saw my right hon. Friend there, I found it extremely moving. I pay tribute, as the whole House does, to his courage in standing tall.

Sport has a vital role to play in all our lives, and there is an important role for schools to imbue a lifelong love of playing sport and taking part in regular physical exercise. It is clear from hearing Members from all parts of the House speak today that we share a commitment to ensuring that more children take part in PE and sport. I have to say to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) that we are exceeding our target for recruiting PE teachers. Last year, we exceeded that target by 143%. We recruited 1,521 teacher trainees in PE, far exceeding the target of 980 trainees. We have exceeded the target for PE teacher trainees for at least the past 10 years.

School is where many children and young people first have the chance to participate in sport. High-quality PE and sport in all schools is important to ensuring that every child and young person has the opportunity to take part in a range of sports. It can equip them to continue that engagement into their later lives, as a way of staying fit and active and enjoying the wider benefits that sport brings. That is why physical education is a compulsory subject within the national curriculum from key stage 1 to key stage 4. The PE national curriculum aims to ensure that all pupils develop the competence to excel in a broad range of sport and physical activities, exercise for sustained periods of time and engage in competitive sport and activities leading to healthy active lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) highlighted the important link between competitive sport and young people's confidence, resilience and determination. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch)—the former Sports Minister—made an excellent contribution, demonstrating her experience and passion for sport. She also made an important link between sport and wider cognitive benefits. She is right that sport supports other aspects of school life, including improved attainment, mental wellbeing and personal development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) made the important point about the link between schools with high levels of sport and academic attainment. For example, at the Northampton School for Boys, which has high levels of academic achievement, as well as providing an excellent PE curriculum for key stages 3 and 4 that exceeds two hours per week, it has made PE compulsory for all sixth-form students. In its timetable, Northampton School for Boys offers a variety of sport in winter, including rugby, health and fitness, basketball, hockey and swimming. In the summer, students take part in athletics, cricket, tennis and softball.

In addition to the PE curriculum, the school provides impressive extracurricular sport where children can attend sports clubs before and after school, during lunchtime and at weekends. There are 76 clubs meeting every week during the winter and 54 during the summer. The school has inter-house competitions in addition to the PE curriculum and extracurricular sport. There are typically 50 competitions a year at that school, in which every year group and form class is included. The school ensures that 100% of its student body is represented in at least two competitions annually.

A number of Members raised the issue of two hours of sport a week. Schools are free to organise and deliver a PE curriculum that suits the needs of all their pupils. The Department does not set curriculum time requirements for any subject, but we know that many schools already

provide a minimum of two hours of PE and sport to pupils each week. I will look at how to support all schools to do so, supplemented by a good range of extracurricular opportunities.

The DFE school workforce census data for the 2021-22 academic year indicates that PE and sport account for around 8% of all teaching hours in secondary state-funded schools. A rather old 2015 Youth Sport Trust survey found that the average number of minutes of PE per week in state secondary schools was just under two hours, at 118 minutes for key stage 3 and 114 minutes for key stage 4.

The Government continue to fund the primary PE and sport premium, referred to on a number of occasions during the debate. With an additional £320 million of funding to primary schools confirmed for the current academic year, that now totals over £2 billion since 2013. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey said, we doubled that figure from £160 million several years ago. The PE and sport premium supports primary schools, special schools and hospital schools to make additional and sustainable improvements to the quality of PE, school sport and physical activity that they provide. The Government are considering arrangements for the primary PE and sport premium for the 2023-24 academic year and beyond. That funding will be announced as soon as possible.

I note the exaltations from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for early notice to enable better planning. I also note the passionate advocacy for early notice by my predecessor—I should say my other predecessor—my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis).

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield raised the issue of the shortage of community facilities. The Government are seeking to address the lack of quality space for grassroots support through our multi-sport grassroots facilities programme. The Government have committed to delivering the facilities that every community needs. We are investing £205 million between 2022 and 2025 on top of an existing £18 million annual commitment in England as a step towards that ambition. A mixture of projects were selected for their ability to deliver improved facilities. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that £43 million has already been provided in 2021-22 to improve grass and artificial pitches, changing rooms and floodlights, to make a real difference to communities across the country.

Jonathan Gullis: I just want to make a brief point on community facilities. My frustration in the experience with Kidsgrove Sports Centre was that because we wanted to refurbish an existing building, Sport England was willing only to put in about £150,000. Had we tried to find a new site, we could have got £12 million for a brand-new facility; but we managed to build one for £7 million. Will the Minister engage with the sports Minister about how Sport England could be smarter in using taxpayers' money more wisely to invest in community facilities and refurbish where we can, rather than spending more money by building new ones?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it has been noted by myself and the sports Minister.

The sports Minister outlined the £230 million to build or improve community sports facilities. Alongside those community facilities, facilities on school sites

[Nick Gibb]

represent an important resource for pupils and their families. Schools use their playing fields and gyms to introduce pupils to a range of sports and physical activities through their PE lessons and a variety of structured extracurricular activities.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) made an important point about the wider use of school facilities. The Department is building on the new funding for sports facilities by providing additional support to schools to open their sports facilities outside the core school day, at weekends and in holidays. Phase 3 of the opening school facilities programme aims to connect schools to national and local sporting organisations that can offer children and young people more opportunities to access extracurricular activities.

Ben Bradley: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's engagement on this subject recently with my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon and me. He mentions funding for opening up grassroots facilities, which is gratefully received and often important. In the case of North Notts Hockey Club, which I raised earlier, all that is needed is a padlock with a code on it so that they can let themselves in. It is outside, and they are insured. This is about getting schools to want to open up these facilities to communities. They can do it. Will he consider what direction he might be able to give to help that happen?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I was influenced by the meeting we had recently with my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon about how we can engage new people to teach PE in our schools. He also makes an important point about how we can use taxpayers' money cost-effectively to widen the availability of community facilities.

The Government also support physical activity and sport outside the school term, through the £200 million-a-year holiday activities and food programme. All local authorities in England are delivering that programme. Taking place in schools and community venues across the country, the programme provides disadvantaged pupils and their families with enriching activities including sport, as well as with healthy food.

We have heard how the brilliant Lionesses are aiming to inspire a generation to take up football. We want all girls to participate in sport, and that is why the Department for Education is funding SLQ Sports Leaders to deliver the "Your Time" programme, which gives girls aged eight to 16 access to competitive sport and leadership opportunities. Almost 1,000 girls have already enrolled in the programme's second year to train as sports leaders and lead events and competitions for their peers. They are supported in their online training by inspirational sportswomen including England netball player Layla Guscoth and World Triathlon Series winner and Commonwealth games champion Jodie Stimpson.

The latest annual data from the Active Lives Children and Young People survey, released in December, has been very encouraging. The data shows that the proportion of children who are active has increased by 2.6% compared with the last academic year, bringing activity levels back in line with those seen pre-pandemic. That will be due to the efforts of schools, families and communities. There is still further to go, and schools have a central role to play—in particular, in ensuring that pupils benefit from high-quality PE lessons taught by confident and knowledgeable teachers. I join the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and the shadow sports Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), in paying tribute to the work and commitment of PE teachers.

The Government published their cross-Government school sport and activity action plan in July 2019, and we have committed to publish an update to the plan this year, to align with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's new sport strategy. The update will provide details on further action to help all pupils play a wide range of sport, both in PE lessons and through extracurricular activity. This is a Government who are committed to sport in our schools, and I thank all Members for taking part in this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered sport in schools and communities.

PETITION

No. 52 Barrhead circular route

7 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I rise to present a petition that declares opposition to the proposed withdrawal by McGill's Buses of the No. 52 Barrhead circular service.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares opposition to the proposed withdrawal by McGill's Buses of the N052 Barrhead Circular service, notes that the N052 Barrhead Circular service provides transport to local schools, access to shops and supermarkets, local community facilities including library, leisure and GP services, as well as other local amenities; further notes that it is a lifeline for the isolated, disabled, elderly and those who do not own a car; and further notes that the withdrawal of this service will adversely impact upon those who can least manage without this bus route, making them less able to connect with family, services, education and community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage McGill's to review this decision with a view to continued delivery of the N052 Barrhead Circular, appreciating its importance to the local community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002791]

Strangford Lough: Tidal Wave Energy

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

7.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is indeed a pleasure to speak in the Adjournment debate—only this time not as one who asks for an intervention, but as one initiating the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim Shannon: For once, I can give way—to my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) first.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important Adjournment debate. As he travels from his home to his office along the Portaferry Road, he will know of not only the picturesque beauty of Strangford lough, but the energy there that could and should be captured. But is my hon. Friend prepared for the tidal wave and potential tsunami of interventions that may come in this debate?

Jim Shannon: I like to think I am well prepared for most things. Whenever those interventions come, I will be happy to give way.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned intervening, and it is a great pleasure to intervene on him. Does he not intend to intervene on the Minister at the end?

Jim Shannon: I will probably see how the debate goes; there may perchance be an opportunity.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I will allow the hon. Gentleman to carry on, but I just wanted to let him know, as a good friend to me and to many in this House, that although I have only seen the title of this debate—I have yet to hear the content—he has my full and absolute support for whatever he wishes to have.

Jim Shannon: That is the sort of support I am always looking for. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and the other Members for their interventions too.

I am pleased to introduce a matter that is of some interest to myself and, I suspect, should also be of some interest to those across the west coast of Scotland, England and Wales. For us in Northern Ireland, and specifically the constituency of Strangford, to have the opportunity to be involved in tidal energy would be a key development.

I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this Adjournment debate. I know that the Minister will be aware of the energy crisis we are in, but I will give a bit of background. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who is always very kind; his response was very helpful in the debate we had in Westminster Hall, and this debate carries on from that. I am aware that some of the current crisis is due to the war in Ukraine, and we all

understand the difficulties that has caused to supply and price. I just make these comments to introduce the debate on tidal wave energy for Strangford lough.

I know that every representative in this House will share my experience of people ringing up for referrals to food banks and, increasingly, people asking for help with gas and electricity. While I welcome the help for households, which is months behind in delivery in Northern Ireland, by the way, I have real concern that every energy payment arriving in people's accounts may be used for other things.

To give a bit of background to why this debate is important, someone in Northern Ireland who pays for their gas can top up by only £49 at a time, which means 12 individual trips plus booking a taxi. Added together, that underlines why Parliament is debating tidal energy in Strangford tonight and why we must make the long-term consideration of our secure energy supply a priority.

My office was fortunate to have a wonderful conversation with Professor Roger Falconer, emeritus professor of water and environmental engineering at the Hydro-environmental Research Centre of Cardiff University. He helped us by clearly putting forward some relevant information, so the conversation was illuminating and incredibly informative. He powerfully underlined that, if we invest long term in our facilities, our energy security can be home-sourced through the wonderful natural resources that God has blessed this country with. I have long believed that, so it is nothing new—I have always supported the idea of tidal wave energy in Strangford lough—yet the professor succinctly showed that the potential that I wish to highlight in Strangford and the Province applies UK-wide, including on the west coast of Scotland, England and Wales. It can be a clean energy solution, which we all know is the end goal.

As I have said in the House previously, we can depend on the sun rising and setting, so we can depend on the tides. The tidal potential of Strangford lough is incredible, as it is on the entire west coast of the United Kingdom. I am pleased to see that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is present, because he always brings knowledge to such debates. I am sure that he will intervene at some stage and give us his thoughts on the way forward for the islands.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Go on then—the hon. Gentleman knows that we have a shared interest. Does he agree that, essentially, the exciting prospect of tidal power is that it offers an opportunity to get a baseload of renewable energy, not just because of the predictability, but because when it ebbs somewhere, it flows somewhere else? It does not suffer from the intermittency of other renewables.

Jim Shannon: How wise and true those words are. The right hon. Gentleman sets the scene for what I will say next.

Wind turbines are popping up as a quick fix. Undoubtedly, when the wind is blowing, that is tremendous, but we cannot tell in advance when the wind will be blowing. We can pinpoint the tide for decades in advance, however, as the right hon. Gentleman said. The ebb and flow of the tides at the mouth of Strangford lough is stronger than many on the west coast of Scotland and certainly the best in the Province. Professor Falconer highlighted in a lovely way that the highest energy use in

[*Jim Shannon*]

Wales comes at half time when the England and Wales rugby teams meet. His view is that the peak tidal time could determine match times to subsequently make use of energy usage planning, which is imperative.

For that to happen, however, the Government must decide to invest, and that is my call today. They should invest not simply in Strangford's potential, to which the title of the debate refers, but in the UK-wide tidal potential to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. The ability to plan decades in the future is attractive in any policy, which is why I once again draw the Minister's attention to the need for long-term investment in a clean, sustainable energy source that is not affected by goings on around the world.

There are two types of tidal energy: tidal turbines or streams, and tidal ranges. With a current of more than 2.5 metres per second, Strangford lough has obvious potential for a tidal stream, which is why there was a trial there with the 2008 SeaGen project. I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly then, as were some of my hon. Friends, and a member of Ards Borough Council. It was an incredibly successful pilot scheme, but it never seemed to go anywhere. Energy prices have risen, however, which makes the scheme more possible and acceptable.

The trial was commissioned by Marine Current Turbines, a subsidiary of British tidal energy company Siemens. It was an investment at that time of some £12 million. The project involved the installation of two 600 kW turbines producing 150 kW of electricity to the grid in July 2008. SeaGen generated electricity at its maximum capacity for the first time in December 2008. Without doubt, the scheme has produced 5 GWh of tidal power since its commissioning, which is equivalent to the annual power consumption of 1,500 households.

I am given to believe that the mouth of Strangford lough, with the ebb and flow of the tides in the narrows, could reliably hold up to 20 turbines. I am not saying that it should hold 20 turbines, but it could do so because of the flow of the tides there. That is enough energy for half the households in Northern Ireland to be cleanly supplied, and it is worth looking at. Indeed, I believe it cannot be ignored as the potential is truly enormous.

We know that wind turbines are easy to install once planning is passed, but they provide very moderate energy, and the density of water means that tidal energy is infinitely preferable. In my opinion, the tide in Strangford lough must take its place in the long-term provision of energy, and for this it needs investment. We need money put not simply into short-term wind turbines, but into engineering in the sea that can and will meet needs in the long term.

The second type of energy is tidal range, with a dam being built in tidal lagoons and suchlike. One example is the west Somerset lagoon, which has been strategically located on the southern coast of the Bristol channel basin between Minehead and Watchet to take advantage of the world's second highest tidal range. It can generate the maximum energy possible while minimising the environmental, economic and visual disturbance, in that it provides coastal protection against storms and sea level rises, and has other environmental protections.

The West Somerset lagoon can generate 6.5 TWh per year of energy, which is equivalent to the energy needs of over 2 million medium consumption homes, according to Ofgem. Again, this shows what can be done, and if it can be done there, I believe it can be done elsewhere. Such a scheme could deliver continuous power with tidal phasing as well. This could, with short-term storage added to the scheme, deliver firm, continuous power. Here we have something that has been proven to be successful in the West Somerset lagoon, that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland believes to be successful in his constituency and that I believe could be extremely successful in Strangford lough in my own constituency.

It is my considered opinion that tidal range and tidal streams complement each other, and we should look holistically at our tidal regions to determine the best use of tides in such areas. To this end, my ask to the Minister—as he knows from the debate we had in Westminster Hall, but I will ask him again—is to consider putting in place a tidal taskforce to adequately evaluate not only our potential, but how we can practically begin the process of harnessing this power in co-ordination with marine conservation. We can do it, and it has been proven it can be done, and if it can be done in Strangford lough, I believe we can deliver the green energy that can supply many homes across Northern Ireland—not just in my constituency of Strangford, but indeed across the whole Province.

Talking about this in the House is necessary, but setting up a stand-alone dedicated taskforce to deal with this is just as vital as the funding stream that needs to be given to projects including Strangford lough and wider UK concerns. While tidal streams can be built quickly and the energy produced quickly—and this is tremendous for Strangford lough—the potential of the tidal range in Strangford lough and other areas will take greater planning and long-term strategy. Now more than ever, we have the wake-up call that we must fix this in the short term, but also invest in the long term. The time for planning the new Hinkley C was 10 years ago, and I do not want to wait 10 years for this House to be looking back and asking why we did not invest in tidal range, which has the potential to provide the same amount of energy output in a much safer way.

While the cost of tidal energy may be similar to other massive energy products, such as Hinkley, its safety is much greater. Indeed, for long-term investment, the life span of a project such as the one I am suggesting to the Minister is double that of Hinkley at 120 years, with the turbines being replaced after 60 years. I know that long-term investment is needed, but I believe that our children will thank us for it, as they will have sustainable energy for generations to come. I honestly do believe that now is the time to make this investment. I am aware, as I am sure the Minister will be, that there is international interest in Strangford lough, with Canadian companies looking into this possibility. Now is the time for this House to show willingness to put investment and commitment where our mouth is, and to invest in long-term projects with a guaranteed return.

I want to pay special thanks to the Queen's University biology station at Portaferry, which is much involved in this idea. I met it way back in the summer to discuss it. It has many pilot schemes for energising and taking advantage of the ebb and flow of the narrows in the

water of Strangford lough. It has many ideas, but we keep coming back to the SeaGen pilot scheme of 2008. Its findings clearly show that the project is financially sustainable.

There is also interest in this matter from Minister Gordon Lyons at the Department for the Economy. He understands the issue and has been keen to move it forward, and his civil servants have been actively involved. There is some concern that when it comes to money from Westminster, Scotland and Wales seem to have had some advantage while Northern Ireland has not. There is now an opportunity to ensure that Strangford lough and its tidal wave energy are financially supported.

I know that if Strangford lough were eligible for the second round of tidal energy and tidal lagoons, the project would not be delivered in my time in this House, but we have to start somewhere and tonight is a good time to start. The longevity of the project would be a legacy, not of Jim Shannon because Jim Shannon does not count—

Hon. Members: No!

Jim Shannon: What does matter and what does count is the people of Strangford—my constituents. That is the point I want to make. The legacy will be for them—for all the households in Strangford and all the people across Northern Ireland—so it is very important. This will be inspired, perhaps, by a Government and a Minister who are determined to look at the long term and invest in clean, renewable energy that is as dependable as the sun rising and setting, and which can be planned for decades in advance. I said that at the beginning of the debate and I say it again.

To continue to ignore this potential would, I believe, be tantamount to ignoring our obligation to future generations, who will be repaying the billions of pounds we give for energy assistance this year alone—and we thank Government for that—and who would much prefer to pay off something that their children can benefit from. Now is the time, and I am asking the Minister to respond with a UK-wide, Government-guided and funded investment plan incorporating Strangford lough and other potential areas as a matter of urgency.

I extended this intervention to the Minister previously and, as he knows, I will do so again now: I invite him to come to Northern Ireland. He said he would endeavour to put that in his diary for this year, and I again invite him to come to Strangford. We will visit the Queen's University Belfast biology station and meet some of the people there, and I hope they will convince him and help this debate progress from an Adjournment debate on 10 January 2023 to something more. Not only will that benefit us in Strangford; it will benefit everyone down the whole west coast of Scotland, England and Wales as well.

With that, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your time and look forward to hearing from the Minister. I thank Members for their interventions, and I look forward to delivering for the people of Strangford; they really are the best people in the whole world.

7.19 pm

The Minister for Energy and Climate (Graham Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As I look around the Chamber, I am taken

back to that Westminster Hall debate to which he referred; it feels like the gang is back together. This is an important debate, and I am pleased to see that he continues to be a champion for his constituents on the subject. I also see colleagues who were at that debate, including the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who led it.

I will touch on energy support, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. After Putin's barbarous invasion of Ukraine, we saw people's energy bills soaring, and they were forced to turn their minds to the meter before turning up the thermostat in their homes. In that context, the Government were and are determined to do all they can to help the people of this country, including those in Northern Ireland.

In December, I was delighted to announce that all households in Northern Ireland would receive a single, one-off £600 payment to help with their energy bills. Payments will start this month. The funding has been provided to the energy suppliers to go out to those families. I hear the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the practicalities of that. In a market for which we are not normally responsible, we were determined to find a way to reach them, and we did that. I pay tribute to my officials who put in an astonishing amount of work to stand that up and get it going. That payment comes on top of the package of unprecedented assistance with energy bills that the UK Government have already provided, including the energy price guarantee, which has reduced the energy costs of every family, and the energy bills discount scheme, which has reduced them for every business in Northern Ireland as well.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted, we are here not just to think about the short term and this winter, but to look to next winter and all the winters to come, as we seek to build a secure energy supply that drives up growth, drives down bills and meets our net zero ambitions. The best way to do that is by investing in affordable, reliable, clean energy, because energy security and net zero go hand in hand.

The Government take their net zero commitment absolutely seriously. If we are to accelerate away from fossil fuels, rolling out renewable energy is fundamental. That is why, in last year's British energy security strategy, we reaffirmed our commitment to renewables. That means making the absolute most of the opportunities that our geology and geography afford us to deploy transformative technologies, as the hon. Gentleman highlighted. Of course, tidal is an element of that. Tidal stream energy is a home-grown industry with considerable promise to deliver affordable, clean, secure energy for households and businesses across the country. I could not be more proud of the fact that we are leading the world in deploying offshore wind, which is another technology. Off the coast of my Beverley and Holderness constituency, there is the biggest wind farm in the world, joining the second, third and fourth largest windfarms in the world, with all of them generating energy from the high winds of the North sea.

Of course, with Britain being Britain, the weather can change from windy and sunny to still and cloudy in seconds. Even when that happens, we can still rely on the tides, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said. Tidal energy provides an opportunity to boost the resilience and diversity of our renewable energy system. It is an area where, with a raft of brilliant developers designing

[Graham Stuart]

and building tidal stream devices in the UK, we currently lead the world. As he rightly said, let us not blow the opportunity that that provides us.

We have Europe's foremost tidal and wave energy testing centre in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland: the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney. We also have new marine energy hubs developing across the country, from Morlais on Anglesey to the Perpetuus Tidal Energy Centre on the Isle of Wight in England. Thanks in large part to £175 million in innovation funding for wave and tidal power research provided by successive Governments, as of last August our waters were home to half the world's total deployment. Thanks to the extensive support afforded by the renewables obligation mechanism, in 2018 we were able to build the largest tidal stream generating array in the world in the fast-moving waters of the Pentland firth.

The Government remain open to considering well-developed proposals for harnessing the tidal range energy in the bays and estuaries around our coastlines, including, as the hon. Gentleman said, up and down the west coast. That includes barrage schemes and other alternatives. Any such proposal would need to demonstrate strong evidence of value for money in the context of other low-carbon technologies, as well as details of its associated energy system benefits and environmental impact mitigation strategies, before the Government could take a view on its potential or on the funding models appropriate for exploration. Revised criteria for a well-developed proposal will be published in the energy national policy statement which is coming out very soon.

Jim Shannon: In the last portion of my contribution, I referred to a Canadian company—I understand the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is aware of it, too—which is keen to harness the tidal water movement of the narrows. I am a great believer that when we move forward, we can have partnerships between Government and independent companies to deliver that. Companies are in the business of making money and the Government are in the business of producing green energy, which I think they want to promote. Is that one of those things where the Minister could be instrumental in being positive and helpful?

Graham Stuart: That leads me naturally on to our system. What we try to do across all technologies, places and companies is to create an architecture that is fair, transparent and predictable—as much as that is possible. It therefore does not depend on me being sold on any particular company or solution, but allows, through decent mechanisms, the best to rise to the top. That is very much our aim.

Much of the success of tidal stream to date is down to contracts for difference, which the Government have produced and which I am delighted about. This is our flagship mechanism for supporting the cost-effective delivery of renewable energy, ensuring that the nation's tidal stream innovators have the opportunity to bring down the costs of the technology and learn the lessons from being the first in the world to deploy it at scale. I am sure that Members were, like me, delighted that last year the Government established a ringfenced budget of £20 million for tidal stream developments in pot 2 of

the fourth contracts for difference allocation round. This saw four tidal stream projects win contracts totalling 40 MW at a strike price of £178.54 per MWh. To put that into perspective, only 36 MW of tidal stream was deployed worldwide between 2010 and 2020. This is the first time that tidal stream power has been procured at this scale.

Mr Carmichael: I was beyond delighted. I am on the record as having congratulated the Government many times on the commitment in AR4. We are seeing not just public money going into tidal stream, but private finance, and that really is the proof of the pudding. What we need now, though—I think the Minister knows where I am going with this—is a commitment to continue that in AR5. He has seen already what is possible with that ringfenced pot, but we need to keep it going.

Graham Stuart: Further information—we released some information before Christmas—for AR5 will come out shortly ahead of the launch of AR5, which of course has now been moved on to an annual basis, giving further confidence, I hope, to the market.

The energy transition must involve each and every part of our United Kingdom. As an integral part of the UK, that of course means Northern Ireland where, energy being a devolved matter, contracts for difference do not actually operate. However, in the Northern Ireland energy strategy, Northern Ireland set out a path to net zero energy and to meet 70% of electricity consumption from a diverse mix of renewable sources by 2030. The Government are committed to supporting Northern Ireland to succeed in that. If we are to get it right, places like Strangford lough will be critical.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford and all those involved for their support in making the pilot project a success. Strangford lough is a world first: a commercial-scale tidal energy project that by September 2012 had produced 5 GWh of tidal power since its commissioning in 2008—equivalent to the annual power consumption of 1,500 households.

Strangford shows that tidal can work; it was a major demonstrator in that sense. It shows that it is safe, too: I am delighted that Strangford lough has had no major impact on marine life, for instance. That is why we have provided it with £5.2 million of funding, in addition to £500,000 from Northern Ireland Electricity under its Smart scheme. In 2011, the project qualified to benefit from the marine renewables deployment fund, after passing the UK Government's operating performance criteria.

It is not just Strangford lough; we continue to invest in renewable energy across Northern Ireland. Through UK Research and Innovation, we have provided Artemis Technologies with £33 million from the Strength in Places fund to drive the decarbonisation of maritime transport. Last year, Wrightbus secured an £11.2 million investment from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to develop a low-cost hydrogen fuel cell technology and create a hydrogen centre of excellence—all part of a £54 million package.

In conclusion, it is clear that this Government are taking action on all elements of energy in Northern Ireland. We are bringing energy bills down right now, and we are harnessing the power of clean, secure, affordable energy to build an economy that is fit for the

future. That includes a sound track record of supporting the tidal stream industry, where we are on the cusp of commercialisation. With excellent export potential, we are ready to lead the world, and I am confident that the tidal stream industry will continue to develop across every corner of the United Kingdom as we work together to bring green growth to each one of our countries.

In the seconds that remain, I want to go back to the questions that the hon. Gentleman asked. One was about the tidal taskforce, which I am happy to discuss further with him. Having a taskforce for everything is not necessarily the right thing; I want to make sure that

we have the right architecture. We will see what happens with the CfDs and make an announcement in due course, but assuming that we get the broad architecture right, given the state of tidal stream—I will leave leadership for the moment—I am hopeful for the future.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a visit. I would be delighted to accept, in due course—

7.31 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 10 January 2023

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Lifeboat Services: Search and Rescue

9.30 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I am from Yorkshire, so I consider it oppressively hot in here; if people wish to remove their jackets, they are free to do so. I call Kevin Foster to move the motion.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of lifeboat services to search and rescue.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful to my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate, and of course to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who did the legwork on the application to secure it.

It is worth giving some context at the debate's start. Search and rescue provision in the UK is delivered through an amalgam of Government Departments, emergency services and various SAR charities and voluntary organisations. UK SAR is arranged through the UK SAR Strategic Committee, an interdepartmental body chaired by the Department for Transport, hence our being joined by a DFT Minister and his shadow. His Majesty's Coastguard provides a response and co-ordination service for air and sea-based SAR in the UK. HM Coastguard has existed since 1822, and of course celebrated its bicentenary last year. The coastguard co-ordinates air and sea-based SAR through its nine operation centres around the UK. They are in Shetland, Aberdeen, Humber, Dover, Fareham, Falmouth, Milford Haven, Holyhead, Belfast and Stornoway. In addition, the London coastguard, which is co-located with the Port of London authority, looks after SAR on the River Thames. HM Coastguard has its national maritime operations centre in Fareham in Hampshire.

Lifeboats are not the only part of SAR at sea; many organisations, including the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, commercial vessels in the vicinity of an incident and HM Coastguard's helicopters, play their part, but in this debate, I will focus on the lifeboat service. The classic image of the lifeboat service is one of heroism, and of its crews fighting through rough seas to save lives. The courage of those involved, and their commitment to saving those in peril on the sea, are the anchor that holds the crew together during a rescue mission while, in the words of the famous hymn,

"the breakers roar and the reef is near".

No debate such as this should pass without mention of how that legendary bravery was demonstrated on 19 December 1981, when the Penlee lifeboat headed out into atrocious conditions to try to save the lives of eight people in peril. Tragically, all eight lifeboat crew were lost that night. It was the last time the Royal National Lifeboat Institution lost a whole crew in one incident—a record that I am sure we hope will stand for many years to come.

It is of course the RNLI that most people will think of when they hear a reference to lifeboats. It was founded as the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck in 1824. In 1854, it changed its name to what we know it as today. Its main base is in Poole, Dorset. It has 238 lifeboat stations, and an active fleet of 431 lifeboats, which range from large, all-weather lifeboats to smaller inshore vessels.

The impact of the RNLI's work cannot be overestimated. Its operations have saved over 143,900 lives since 1824, and it is not just men who have been the heroes: Grace Darling became one of the Victorian era's most celebrated heroines when, on 7 September 1838, she risked her life to rescue the stranded survivors of the wrecked steamship *Forfarshire*. Today, around 95% of the RNLI team are volunteers; they are around 5,600 crew members, 3,700 shore crew, including station management, 82 lifeguards, and 23,000 fundraisers. The scale of the RNLI's contribution to search and rescue is immense. In 2021 alone, there were 8,868 lifeboat launches, 84 of which were in at least force 8 conditions, and 1,022 crew assemblies—a total of 9,890 taskings. That resulted in 12,903 people being aided, and 296 lives being saved.

The RNLI's work is about not just reacting when things go wrong, but reducing the need for search and rescue by educating and advising on dangers. RNLI water safety teams reached more than 27 million people in 2021 with essential messaging, undoubtedly saving more lives and keeping families together.

We should bear in mind that lifeboat services are not just about the RNLI—a subject that is close to the heart of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes. In addition to the RNLI, a number of voluntary organisations provide independent lifeboats for the purpose of saving lives on the water. There are more than 50 independent lifeboat organisations around the UK, and independent lifeboats operate in coastal areas—for example, the Hope Cove lifeboat in south Devon—and on inland waters, rivers and lakes, while some organisations operate independent lifeboats alongside other search and rescue services, such as mud rescue. The majority of those independent lifeboats are equipped, maintained and operated in accordance with the rescue boat code.

Independent lifeboat organisations vary greatly in size, crew numbers, rescue numbers and types of rescue boat used. Crews range from the 12 crew members at Port William Inshore Rescue Service in Dumfries and Galloway to the around 260 crew members at Community Rescue Service, which operates across Northern Ireland; and call-outs range from the five call-outs in 2021 for the Sea Palling independent lifeboat in Norfolk to more than 120 for the Hamble lifeboat in Hampshire. The rescue boats involved range from small RIBs—rigid inflatable boats—to large all-weather lifeboats, which are comparable to the boats that many people associate with the RNLI.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I thank him for doing so. He is making important points about independent lifeboats, but also about the support services. We have independent lifeboats at Freshwater, Sandown and Shanklin in the Isle of Wight, which do wonderful work, on top of the RNLI stations at Bembridge, Cowes and Yarmouth. Not only that, but our inshore lifeboat centre in East

[Bob Seely]

Cowes keeps half the nation's fleet of RNLI boats in good condition. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to those services?

Kevin Foster: I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend list the amazing support that the Isle of Wight provides. It does not just save lives and help those in peril on the sea around the Island—as he knows, some of those waters famously present obstacles and risks to passing shipping, and it is worth paying tribute to the many Islanders over the years who have put their life at risk trying to save those in peril near the Island—but makes a wider contribution to the service. As he says, lifeboat services are not just about the team who go out on the boat; they are about the support network that enables the lifeboat teams to go out. It is great to be able to pay it the tribute that he just did.

Independent lifeboats are not a new invention, and the first independent lifeboat station was formed in Formby, Lancashire, in 1776. Although many independent lifeboat stations were RNLI stations when they were established, others have been set up in response to specific incidents. For example—I see colleagues from Northern Ireland in the Chamber—Foyle Search and Rescue was set up by local people in 1993 in response to the alarmingly high number of drownings in the River Foyle, 30 in 18 months. It has since adopted a role in suicide prevention and supporting families in the city more widely. That shows the diversity in the types of work that such organisations can take on, and the contribution that such services can make.

It is right that we remember the contribution that those organisations make, and how their work is supported by the National Independent Lifeboat Association, a new charity founded last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes. All independent lifeboats in Great Britain and Northern Ireland were invited to join the association, and it has 30 members from England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Jersey.

During my preparations for the debate, it was made clear to me that the RNLI is proud of its independence and the fact that it can operate free from requirements of the type that Government funding would bring. I was advised of that in the knowledge that such debates can sometimes involve the subject of whether the service offered by the RNLI should be publicly funded, rather than our having the current funding arrangements, which are based on voluntary giving.

It might seem strange to some, but this service is not lobbying for Government funding. That position recalls the fact that, a decade ago, a former Prime Minister described his vision of creating a big society—a concept in which individuals come together to tackle an issue or make a difference, rather than the state setting up structures to intervene that might often be less effective or efficient. There are often debates about how that concept can be defined in real life, but in many ways lifeboat services reflect that idea, from the crews who volunteer their time to train, and who are ready to answer the call of duty, to fundraising teams in communities who raise the resources needed to support operations, to the many community members who do their bit by simply dropping a few coins into a collection box when they buy a pint, visit the local shop or walk past one of

the many collection boxes across coastal communities. Also included are people who, when thinking about the legacy they want to leave, tell their solicitor to include the lifeboat service in their will. This shows how society comes together to help others in need, and to provide a unique service that we can all benefit from, but hope never to need.

Those who regularly hear me speak know that I will not miss an opportunity to highlight the work being done in south Devon, and I will start with the Torbay RNLI lifeboat station. It was established in Brixham in 1866 and has occupied the same premises since 1872. It was established after a fleet of merchant ships were caught in hurricane-strength winds in Torbay in January 1866, causing the loss of about 40 ships and nearly 100 lives. Today, the lifeboat station has 35 crew members, including those who are shore-based. The station operates two lifeboats that reflect the diversity of the rescues that the station may be called on to perform: a Severn class all-weather lifeboat and a D-class inshore lifeboat. The crew members are volunteers who mostly have day jobs.

In 2022, Torbay RNLI lifeboat station responded to 111 shouts. The station is supported by the Torbay Lifeboat Fundraisers, who work throughout the year to raise the funds needed to support the lifeboat. The group has over 200 volunteer members, and it organises a range of events and activities to raise money. I thank everyone in Torbay who supports them; the crew would not be ready to save lives without their contribution.

I pay tribute to the team at the National Coastwatch Institution in Torbay, who also play a part in search and rescue operations in south Devon. NCI watchkeepers, who are volunteers, provide eyes and ears along the coast, monitoring radio channels and providing a listening watch in poor visibility. When people get into trouble, NCI watchkeepers can alert His Majesty's Coastguard and direct the appropriate rescue teams, including lifeboats, to the casualty. The NCI station at Torbay is one of over 50 such stations located around England and Wales. Located at Daddyhole plain, it is the first purpose-built NCI watch station. In January 2012, the station was given declared facility status, meaning that the station was not only fully operational, but fully recognised in search and rescue operations as having the same status as RNLI lifeboat stations. That shows the benefit of partnerships between organisations that save lives.

Lifeboats are as vital to search and rescue operations today as they were in the era when horses drew the boat to the launching point and the crew pulled on the oars against the high sea to reach a vessel in distress. Direct funding is not sought, but I am interested to learn from the Minister how he sees the future for our lifeboats, and on a couple of other points.

First, some independent lifeboats are not fully declared HM Coastguard rescue facilities, often because of the complex process that must be undertaken to become such a facility. Does the Minister see an opportunity to simplify the process, without compromising standards? Secondly, independent lifeboats are not represented on the UK SAR operators group, but hope to join the group later this year. Will he provide an update on that? Finally, how does he see the work of lifeboats and their contribution to search and rescue fitting into wider efforts to improve safety at sea?

The debate is a good opportunity to highlight the contribution of lifeboat services to UK search and rescue. As we speak, crews across the UK stand ready to

answer the call to save those in peril; they are ready to face whatever dangers that may bring. They are some of the best of our nation, and I end with a simple message to them: thank you.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): There appear to be eight people seeking to catch my eye. I want to get to the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 10.30 am, so there are 45 minutes to be divided by eight speakers. I will not introduce a formal time limit at this stage, but please could people be mindful of others, and stick to about five minutes? If necessary, I will introduce a time limit. I call Jamie Stone.

9.44 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on a characteristically erudite and well-informed speech. I first want to mention the RNLI in my constituency. I have sailed out on the Thurso lifeboat—and did not sink it. The waters in the north of Scotland are treacherous, and subject to very strong tides, changeable winds and fog. My grandfather, alas, put his warship HMS Goldfinch on the rocks in 1915 in a very thick fog, and was not given command of a destroyer again. That proves how treacherous the waters are.

The work that the lifeboat crews undertake is varied. The hon. Member for Torbay touched on some of the big, dramatic stuff, but we have little stuff as well. For instance, in August the Wick lifeboat—the Wick station was put there in 1848—was called out to rescue a lady on a paddleboard. She had sailed out from the beach at Reiss, north of Wick, and, thank goodness, was rescued. It was a small rescue, but so important to the family, and to the people of Caithness.

More locally, we have the East Sutherland Rescue Association, which I have often spoken about to the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). It is crewed by volunteers and is based at Dornoch in the Dornoch firth. It was founded in 1981 to cover a lack of facilities to rescue people, and it uses Dornoch or Embo beaches. It was called out not long ago to rescue some sheep off the village of Nigg, which got stranded as the tide rose. That might seem semi-laughable, but would a crofter or a farmer want to see their animals slowly drown? No, I do not think so. That shows how much the crews do for the local area.

I want to praise Lord Cadogan, who has given substantial amounts of money to the East Sutherland Rescue Association. He owns land in Sutherland and, out of the goodness of his heart, has seen to it that it is adequately financed and was able to build a new facility, so that it could maintain and launch its boats. I want to put that on the record in *Hansard*, because I am grateful to him, as is the whole community. I have touched on the treacherous waters of the north of Scotland, and the splendid work done by the RNLI and its volunteers, and how close it is to all our hearts. The hon. Member for Torbay thanked them, and I thank them, too. They do fantastic work.

Thinking ahead, as global warming carries on, and as the ice pack in the Arctic gets thinner and retreats, the north-east route from Europe, round the top of Norway and along the north coast of Russia, to markets in the far east, which we can use in the summer months, becomes more and more important. Scapa Flow is in the constituency of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). Before the first world war, Scapa Flow was set up as a natural anchorage for the grand fleet, so that it could defend the United Kingdom. I believe that there is scope for Scapa Flow to once again feature as a shelter anchorage for vessels about to undertake the long journey over the north of the continents of Europe and Asia.

My point is this: in future we will need lifeboat services just as much as we need them today. They are here for a very long time to come—here for keeps. Man can do many things, but man cannot alter the weather and or change dangerous circumstances, so this is a blatant plug. Lifeboat services have long done a great job. They are doing a great job now, and there is a great future for them. We must support them and back them to the hilt.

9.49 am

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this important debate, and I thank him for the opportunity to highlight the invaluable contribution of the volunteer crews of Conwy and Llandudno RNLI lifeboat stations in my constituency of Aberconwy.

We have become accustomed to seeing on the news images of lifeboat crews along the channel coast bringing asylum seekers and refugees safely ashore. Given that they volunteer their time to fulfil the RNLI's mission of saving lives at sea, it is right that these crews are commended for their service and courage. However, as a supporter of the RNLI, I share the concern of the crew I have spoken to that the constant images from the channel overshadow the huge range of search and rescue call-outs or "shouts", as they are known to the crews, with which lifeboat volunteers are tasked. These include rescuing paddleboarders and swimmers in distress, searching for divers, assisting broken-down vessels and undertaking lengthy searches, sometimes lasting days, for missing boats. Maintaining the operational capability to safely conduct the myriad requirements involves lengthy and intensive training, not just for the crews at sea but for the shore crews, whose service is indispensable to lifeboat operations.

The professionalism and commitment of our lifeboat crews was exemplified in January 2021, when the crews from Conwy and Llandudno joined the search for the Nicola Faith, a fishing vessel that was lost with all hands, and which had set sail from Conwy. For over 48 hours, the crew of Llandudno's all-weather Shannon-class lifeboat, the Williams F Yates, searched hundreds of square miles, often in freezing conditions. The entire station was mobilised in support of the search, with boat crews swapping once the inevitable fatigue set in and the lifeboat needed to be refuelled ashore. The crewmen and women were nearly all volunteers, with many of them forgoing paid work. The whole community rallied in support, with members of the public bringing cakes and other refreshments to the station to keep up morale.

[Robin Millar]

Tragically, the Nicola Faith could not be located, but the search for its crew demonstrated another key point: lifeboat stations are the focus of a team effort that involves communities, fundraising committees, shore crew, the boat crew and their families. The work of the shore crews, and the intense training they undertake, is often overlooked but it is indispensable to lifeboat operations. No lifeboat launch, whether of a D-class inshore lifeboat or an all-weather lifeboat, would be possible without a highly trained shore crew, often working in adverse conditions. When Shannon lifeboats are launched from a launch-and-recovery system, a team of between eight and 12 people is required to launch and recover the boat safely.

I want to recognise the enormous sense of pride that volunteers have in their commitment to saving lives at sea. In fact, just before Christmas, Conwy lifeboat station's volunteer crew member Paddy Byrnes was recognised for 30 years of service. There are also four men—Keith Charlton, Nigel Forest, Robin Holden and David Roberts—who recently reached an impressive 40 years of service at Llandudno station, and four more are approaching this milestone. I would like to congratulate those crewmen and thank them for their decades of invaluable and selfless service—a tremendous achievement that should not go unnoticed.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): As the hon. Member is congratulating his own local personnel, will he join me in congratulating the management team, the fundraisers and all those associated with the Portrush lifeboat station, which celebrates 100 years next year? In the same year, the RNLI will celebrate 200 years. This is an excellent achievement by many lifeboat associations across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Robin Millar: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I completely endorse what he says. In fact, I would like to recognise the work of the fundraising committee chairman in my own constituency, who has persevered in the work, despite facing personal challenges.

Finally, it is vital that we extend our appreciation to the families of lifeboat crews. As mentioned, crew members can spend significant time away from their families when training and attending “shouts”. When their pagers sound on stormy nights—in the winter, in the dark—it is difficult to appreciate the apprehension felt by loved ones who remain ashore about the safety of the crew members at sea. Without the support of families and loved ones, lifeboat stations simply could not operate. To the families of the crews of Llandudno and Conwy lifeboat stations, thank you.

9.54 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Davies, for chairing the debate and for giving me a chance to participate. I thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for setting the scene so well, and hon. Members for contributing to the debate.

Lifeboats and their services are imperative for safety in coastal communities, which is the key issue for me. The hon. Member for Torbay represents a coastal area that is similar to my constituency of Strangford, and we follow each other in debates more often than not—either

him before me or me before him. The neighbouring constituency of North Down also has coastal areas with lifeboats, and people rely on the local stations.

It is great to be here to give them the praise they truly deserve and to thank them for their work and efforts.

Thousands of people along the coastline of Northern Ireland depend on the services of the RNLI for their protection and safety. During the summer, thousands of families and young people partake in coastal sports such as sailing, surfing and pier jumping. I used to do that myself off Ballywalter harbour, although that is not a very wise thing to do—always ensure the tide is in or there is big trouble. In addition, people go out in canoes and boats to fish, including from the fishing village of Portavogie. There are caravan parks at Millisle and my home village of Ballywalter, where I was brought up. They lie very close to where I live on the edge of Strangford lough. I am aware of the sheer number of water sports undertaken in this area.

The RNLI charity provides a 24-hour search and rescue service around the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Across the entire UK, there are 238 lifeboat stations, 46 of them in Northern Ireland. There are also 240 lifeguard units on beaches, which gives an idea of the magnitude of the issue. I found this figure incredible: since the RNLI was founded in 1824, its lifeboat crews have saved more than 142,700 lives. That is an enormous figure.

We are fortunate to have a lifeboat station in Portaferry in my constituency, and I visited the station just before the summer. Portaferry is one of seven RNLI lifeboat stations operating a lifeboat funded by viewers of the BBC TV programme “Blue Peter”. Some of us can cast our minds back to that, although others cannot go back that far. The station was established due to increased pleasure boating in Strangford lough, after Cloughey lifeboat station closed. Most recently, in November, the Portaferry lifeboat station came to the aid of two kayakers who got into difficulty near St Patrick's rock in Strangford lough, and who faced weather conditions of wind force 8 to 10. Since the station opened in 1980, there have been 850 launches, rescuing 600 people and saving the lives of 100 people. That is just my lifeboat station in Portaferry. Thank you to all lifeboat crews, past and present, for their commitment.

Last year, I attended the parliamentary launch of the National Independent Lifeboat Association. I think the hon. Member for Torbay sponsored that event. It is important to pay thanks to those independent lifeguards and life-saving organisations who risk their lives in dangerous seas to help save others.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, welcome the representation provided by the National Independent Lifeboat Association for smaller lifeboat operators, which might otherwise be overlooked?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. We have all said how much we appreciate that. The hon. Member for Torbay said that in his introduction. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) will recognise the independent ones in his contribution. I am thinking of the Foyle rescue team, about which we have spoken. We understand the commitment that those volunteers give. When I visited Portaferry before the summer, I was greatly impressed by their commitment and by the fact that they were there every time they were needed.

There are 46 independent lifeboat organisations that operate along the coastline and on inland waterways across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Those independent lifeboats are run primarily, if not entirely, by volunteers, and funded by local donations. The invaluable service they provide has saved the lives of so many and, in conjunction with the RNLI, they continue with those dedicated efforts day in and day out to save people. They are an asset to our communities. We would be completely lost without them, and many lives would sadly be lost as well. I am not the only who was moved by adverts on TV for RNLI showing a lady leave her house over Christmas to go and save people. We see how important these crews are when we recognise what they do.

To conclude, there are many ways in which we can support institutions such as the RNLI. It is possible to become a volunteer or a member, and even train to become assistance personnel. There are many things that people can do, including fundraising and donating money to ensure the RNLI staff have the best equipment available to fulfil their duties and be able to perform with the correct number of staff.

I sincerely thank the RNLI Portaferry team for all their dedication and work in my constituency. I also thank the lifeboat teams across Northern Ireland and the whole of the UK for the work they do, as our coastal communities would literally be lost without them. I live in a coastal community and understand what it means to have the RNLI, and I thank them very much.

9.59 am

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing today's important debate. The constituency that I represent, Moray, is proud and privileged to have both an RNLI facility at Buckie and an independent lifeboat support, the Moray Inshore Rescue Organisation, at Findhorn. I shall touch on both in today's debate.

Let me begin, as others have, by paying tribute to the remarkable work of our search and rescue services in Scotland. As others have said, across our British coastline, the RNLI and its army of volunteers have served our great nation since 1824. It is a charity that is close to my heart and the hearts of many of my constituents in Moray. Being mainly staffed by volunteers, the RNLI relies heavily on the good will of British people to fund its rescue services. Thanks to the efforts and generosity of people across the country, there are over 230 operational lifeboat stations, which respond on average to 24 call-outs every day. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, that support has saved over 143,000 lives since the RNLI's inception.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does the hon. Member agree that one of the best ways we can demonstrate our support is, as he is doing, to maximise and highlight the issue, including in the local media, and to supply all independent and RNLI lifeboats with the best possible equipment for saving lives?

Douglas Ross: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments. There is a very good publicity system around the RNLI in Buckie. In fact, the sub-editor

of the local paper is a member of the RNLI at Buckie, which always gets good front-page coverage in the *Banffshire Advertiser* and other papers. The point on equipment is well made, and the Minister will have heard it.

The coastal communities that I represent across Moray simply could not imagine not having the support of the brave men and women who dedicate their lives to rescuing those in peril at sea. The RNLI and our independent lifeboats across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom deserve our full support, and it is vital and fitting that we have a platform in Parliament today to give them that recognition.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member's constituency faces mine across the Moray firth, which is named after his constituency, but it really should be named after mine—but that is not the point. In an emergency, it is a fact that the lifeboats in the hon. Member's constituency can, if necessary, go out in the Moray firth and help out the communities in my constituency. I highlight the inter-connected nature of the service all over Scotland and the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross: I agree with almost everything the hon. Gentleman said, but calling it the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross firth, rather than the Moray firth, might be a bit long-winded for some—but his points are absolutely right.

Let me focus on Moray and Buckie. Lifeboats have been launching into the waters of the Moray firth from Buckie for over 145 years, and crews and volunteers there have rightly been honoured with numerous awards. I have mentioned the late, great Adam Robertson in this Chamber in the past. He was a Moray Council employee with whom I worked closely in my time as a Moray councillor, but he dedicated his voluntary work throughout his life to RNLI Buckie, and his family has continued that trend since his sad death. Most recently, Anne Scott, RNLI Buckie's lifeboat operations manager, received a special award that recognised her 20 years of professional service. Anne retired from the RNLI in 2021, and immediately after retirement became a volunteer. That shows the dedication of those who support our lifeboat services. It is absolutely right that Anne was given that award. When Anne received the award, RNLI Buckie's Davie Grant said:

"We call Anne the lady who launches"

because she "hits the big button" as the lifeboats speed out to save people. Pillars such as Anne and Adam demonstrate not only the timeless contribution of the RNLI to rescue services and the support given by those volunteers, but the overwhelming contribution of lifeboat services to our local coastal communities.

Let me quickly move on to independent lifeboat services. Last year, I was honoured and delighted to support my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) in his launch of the National Independent Lifeboat Association, which is a new charity that will assist the UK's independent lifeboats in ensuring the preservation of life on the water. I am proud that one of its founding members is the Moray Inshore Rescue Organisation, which is in my constituency. Based at Findhorn, it is, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, one of 46 established independent lifeboat services manned by unpaid volunteers, and does not receive any funding

[*Douglas Ross*]

from the RNLI. First formed in July 2005, it is a proud recipient of the Queen's award for voluntary service and does outstanding work from its base at Findhorn.

At the launch, MIRO's chairman, John Low, said:

"We are a small organisation working locally with larger organisations, such as UK Coastguard, RNLI, police and fire services, to provide vital lifesaving services. It makes sense to join the new National Independent Lifeboat Association to collaborate and share practice with colleagues in similar small organisations around the country. We also hope that in the future there will be financial benefits such as accessing funding and services such as insurance and training."

Those are important, which is why MIRO and others have joined the collaborative approach suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes. It is right that we have the opportunity in Parliament today to highlight that and, as others have done, to thank both those in the RNLI and our independent lifeboat services for the amazing work they do, day in, day out.

10.6 am

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am delighted to take part in this debate for the second year in a row. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend and neighbour, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for securing this debate. We are of one heart and one mind when it comes to our coastline and making sure that we protect all those who are on the coastline or at sea, as well as supporting and promoting the important work that our UK search and rescue organisations do across the country.

I am always surprised that we call this a debate, because it is not really a debate. It is a moment for us to congratulate, recognise and thank those who put themselves in harm's way to save others, to look after them and to promote the important work that, across the country, is often overlooked. I declare my interest, as I am the founder of the National Independent Lifeboat Association, which many Members have kindly mentioned.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in setting up the charity. I wish to inform him that my own independent lifeboat association in Ferryside will be joining the organisation soon. I also take the opportunity to thank it for all the work they undertake in the Carmarthen bay area.

Anthony Mangnall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is particularly welcome news that his independent lifeboat is joining the organisation. As has been said, there are more than 50 independent lifeboat stations and 30 have joined the association. We would like it to be a full complement, so that every independent lifeboat station across the country has the recognition that it needs. Hon. Members across the Chamber have made a point about the important work of the RNLI. It is essential that we recognise the important apolitical nature of the RNLI and the fact that it does not ask for Government funding. The hundreds of RNLI lifeboat stations do fantastic work by raising their own money and through bequests, as well as by working with volunteers, who do an extraordinary job. The tales of their heroism are what make many of our coastal communities aware of the work of those lifeboat stations, which are part of the fabric of our community.

We are aware of the scale of UK search and rescue, which covers 2 million square miles of air, land and sea of and brings together multiple Government Departments. It brings together air ambulances, the National Coastwatch Institution, the RNLI and NILA. In my constituency, I am fortunate to have Torbay RNLI station, which is based in Brixham, Dart RNLI, which is in Dartmouth, and Salcombe RNLI which, unsurprisingly, is in Salcombe. The three stations cover more than 80 miles of coastline and have saved countless lives over the years.

The RNLI's fantastic model has worked since 1824, saving an estimated 143,000 lives. Its work is unbelievably essential and, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, it will only increase over the coming years. We need to ensure that that model is recognised, supported and promoted wherever we go. We also have to be extremely clear that volunteers often work day jobs as well and that their employers need to be thanked for allowing them to take on the work.

I came to the position of founder of NILA because I have an independent lifeboat station in my constituency, in Hope Cove. Far from trying to compete with the RNLI, it works in co-operation with it; they work together to help people in danger at sea. It became clear to me that many of the independent lifeboat stations were not getting the attention or awareness that other UK search and rescue organisations to which people were donating were attracting, and that we should try and do something to promote them.

The result was that we formed NILA by contacting the 50 independent lifeboat stations and having a conversation about how we could secure greater recognition for their work and ensure that we were not taking away any funding abilities from them. Each independent lifeboat station is still self-funded, but we are able to ensure that they have access to the rescue boat code, the Department for Transport, the Home Office if necessary, best practices, and training procedures; they can also buy equipment collectively if necessary.

The whole purpose was not to hurt or harm those services, but to make their operations easier. I am really pleased to say that, since we had the idea, we have managed to create it. We have had the association registered with the Charity Commission. It has been in regular conversations with the Department for Transport, which has given it recognition. It has a chairman, Neil Dalton, and a vice chairman, Sean McCarry. The secretary is Wayne Monks and the treasurer is David Harvey. Together, they are creating the management structure that is going to be able to deliver for the independent lifeboat stations, not just now, but in future years, and to protect those independent lifeboat stations that do such fantastic work.

I will explain what we are asking for and what we would like to hear from the Minister. The first thing we ask for, as has been mentioned, is recognition through the rescue boat code. We understand that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is going through the process of reviewing the rescue boat code, so we would like to ask whether it can engage with independent lifeboats to ensure that, when the rescue boat code is revamped and rewritten, that is done so in conjunction with independent lifeboats and that they are using it to make sure it is most effective.

Secondly, we would like some clarification over VAT relief and fuel duty. I know that there is guidance out there. It is not simple; it needs to be simplified for the RNLI and independent lifeboats. The third thing is official recognition for NILA. We are waiting—the application has gone in through UK search and rescue. I would be grateful for an update on how quickly that will happen. The fourth point—I have got two more points and then I will sit down—is about support for the campaign to promote independent lifeboats and raise public awareness. There is continued support from MCA for NILA to join UKSAR's operators group. Lastly, I call for the reintroduction of the rescue boat grant fund, which is specifically for the independents. A £5 million fund was launched. It finished in 2020. That fund was essential in helping those independent lifeboats. It was not a huge amount of money, but it made all the difference to those independent lifeboat stations.

I will end with this. We are very lucky across our coastal communities and in our inshore areas. We owe those people a debt of gratitude and of thanks. I hope we can hold an annual event in Parliament to promote the work of the RNLI and NILA.

10.12 am

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing this terribly important debate.

One of the first things I did when I moved to my constituency of Clacton many years ago was to join the local lifeboat service at Walton-on-the-Naze as a volunteer. I had this theory—probably a mistaken one—that, as a keen yachtsman and a user of water all my life, it would be nice to see friends when I got into trouble.

There is no doubt in this Chamber that the contribution of the RNLI is great, and the people at Clacton and Walton-on-the-Naze lifeboat stations are an amazing bunch of people, who deserve all the support we can give them. However, sadly, a young man named Sujal Sahu lost his life in Clacton this summer when visiting my constituency. The RNLI was brilliant in its efforts and it must not be let down. The service in Walton-on-the-Naze, in my patch, is reducing at the moment; the boat is being changed. The resources are being spread out across the constituency, but the service needs further support to help prevent loss of life.

That brings me to my main point, which is about prevention. As an avid yachtsman—I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on water safety—it is abundantly clear that we must educate people on the dangers of water. There are two piers in my constituency: Clacton pier and Walton pier. Near these obstructions on the beach are sand scoops—areas where the tidal current rushes past faster. People who come to the coast and do not know about coastal dangers can walk into such areas and find themselves, on a wonderful, hot summer's day, suddenly in a very dangerous situation indeed; the sand beneath their feet has gone, the tide is running, and if they do not know how to swim or how to behave in water, they are at incredible risk.

In the summer, I held a water safety event—I invited schools to the beach so that pupils could learn how to behave safely around potentially dangerous water—but the issue prevails all year round; we heard about the

recent sad case in Solihull. If we truly wish to support those who get into danger around water, we must support water safety education.

10.15 am

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for securing the debate, not least because it gives me the opportunity to wax lyrical about my constituency, and its proud record of supporting the search and rescue services. My constituency is right on the border with Titchfield, where the search and rescue HQ, which he mentioned earlier, is located. The helicopters take off from my very own Gosport constituency—at Daedalus, where the Maritime and Coastguard Agency does a lot of its training.

Today I will talk specifically about the wonderful Gosport and Fareham Inshore Rescue Service—an independent lifeboat and inshore rescue service that was founded in 1969, so has been around for a really long time. It is a declared facility to the UK coastguard, providing emergency lifeboat cover to the eastern Solent and Portsmouth harbour. Those who know the area will know that that is an incredibly busy stretch of water—certainly the busiest on the south coast, if not one of the busiest in the UK. There are Navy vessels coming out of Portsmouth, cruise ships and freighters coming out of Southampton, a significant number of yachts, personal water craft, dinghies, and a whole range of stand up paddle boarders and kite surfers; it is pretty crowded out there in the summer months. GAFIRS provides an essential service to civilian safety, and I simply cannot stress its value enough.

GAFIRS responded to 135 incidents in 2022, making the year its busiest in 12 years and third busiest in the last 29. In those 135 incidents, it assisted 171 people, eight of whom were “life at risk”, including marine emergencies and first aid assistance on shore. Of the incidents, 126 were HM Coastguard taskings.

GAFIRS is managed and delivered solely by a tremendous team of volunteers. We have heard all about the incredible volunteers that support the service and make it flourish. Our volunteers are of a variety of ages and come from a whole swathe of professions. They operate 24/7, 365 days a year. To put that in context, 61 of the coastguard incidents in 2022 were weekend duty day taskings, with the crew on standby at the station or afloat on patrol, but 65 were out-of-hour pager callouts—33 daytime, 14 evening and 18 night-time. Volunteers are giving their time, day and night, often at unsociable or typically non-working hours. Of course, it is a commitment not just by the volunteers, but by their families, who should not be forgotten, as they support these great sacrifices.

Like all the other independent lifeboat services, GAFIRS relies solely on donations and receives no Government funding at all, which is why I could be found in the sea on new year's day, alongside hundreds of my constituents in fancy dress. I was not in fancy dress myself, but my youngest son was dressed as a 6-foot tall banana and could easily be seen from any drone; he is a shy, retiring soul! GAFIRS is remarkable and very well valued by local people, which is why people are prepared to go into the sea on new year's day dressed in a variety of different costumes.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks passionately about the work of the inshore volunteer lifeboat services. Does she agree that inland lifeboat services such as the Severn Area Rescue Association—which works incredibly hard at times of flooding along the River Severn, as far as Bewdley and Stourport—do just as good a job with just as many personal sacrifices in terms of time and effort as any others?

Dame Caroline Dinanage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The water gives us so much enjoyment and pleasure but can be a dangerous place. There are challenges up and down the country, inland and at sea, that volunteers rise to every single day.

The response time of GAFIRS is incredible. For all 135 incidents, the average time from being alerted to being in attendance or standing down was just over 16 minutes. The volunteers are, quite simply, local heroes; lives would be lost without them. They do not only respond to a variety of incidents; my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) spoke about the importance of training people to understand the dangers, and our volunteers actively promote water safety. In 2022, they provided 29 sea safety education talks to 1,194 local children and 100 teachers and leaders.

Before I sit down, I want to take the opportunity to thank the National Coastwatch Institution, which operates out of Fort Blockhouse and Lee-on-the-Solent. It provides eyes along the coast and is an invaluable service to local people. I am extraordinarily proud to have it and GAFIRS in my community, and I want to put on the record my enormous thanks and gratitude to them for everything they do.

10.20 am

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a privilege to take part in this debate, and our thanks are due to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for making that possible.

We all come to an awareness of volunteer lifeboat crews in different ways. In my case, it was as a schoolboy growing up in Swansea. I remember in the 1950s visiting the Mumbles lifeboat and noting its unusual name. It was called the William Gammon, and it was in later years that I learned the reason for that. It was named after a particularly heroic coxswain of a previous lifeboat—a man who had been awarded a bronze and a gold medal for incredibly brave rescues in 1941 and 1944, but lost his life, together with seven colleagues in his crew, in the great disaster of 23 April 1947, when a former Liberty ship, the SS Samtampa, broke up off Sker Point off the coast of south Wales.

I remember going to the reference library on a research project and looking at the *South Wales Evening Post* report of that disaster. The headline—I think I am right in rendering it—said: “One terrible tragedy after another in the channel”. It showed the upturned lifeboat and the wrecked ship. That image has never left me. It is a tradition of which everybody who volunteers to serve in lifeboats is all too aware.

In those days, one had to go back to the newspapers to try to relive the experiences and heroism of the lifeboat crews, but today we have modern media. If colleagues on both sides of the Chamber take away only one thought from my brief contribution, it should be

this: I urge them to go online and have a look at a BBC documentary called “Cruel Sea”. They can find it on YouTube. It was made in 2006 to mark the 25th anniversary of another disaster—the loss of the Penlee lifeboat. It is a quite extraordinary piece of television; they will never forget it, and I advise them to have a box of Kleenex tissues by their side. I have seen it several times, and I always find it hard to maintain my composure.

The documentary is about the way in which that crew and its coxswain, the late Trevelyan Richards, went out to try to rescue eight people on a vessel, the Union Star, whose engines had failed and was drifting toward the rocks. It contains the actual recordings of the messages that went back from the Penlee lifeboat to the command station, which tried to communicate with the boat. At one point—this was watched by a helicopter crew who were powerless to intervene but saw everything—the crew had managed to get four of the eight people off the ship. The waves were 60 foot high. The Penlee lifeboat was lifted up and actually came down on the deck of the ship it was trying to save the crew from, before being washed off. The crew went back one last time to try to get the last four people, and at that point they were lost.

The thought that remains with me is the calmness of the voice of Trevelyan Richards in moments of extreme peril, right up to the point at which the radio goes silent and we just hear the command station calling, “Penlee lifeboat, Penlee lifeboat, come in.” Of course, it never could. It is an unforgettable programme. It is a great tradition that, to this day, comes down to independent lifeboats such as Solent Rescue, which operates from Lepe in my constituency, and to RNLI stations such as RNLI Calshot. It operates with a 112-foot tower at Calshot Spit, with the aid of the National Coastwatch Institution, spotting the people who get into difficulties in the Solent. Frankly, these are the finest people we will ever know. I do not think I can say anything further than that.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I thank all Back-Bench speakers for their discipline and self-restraint, which is much appreciated.

10.25 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for bringing forward this important debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee, of which I am a former Member, along with you, Mr Davies, and the hon. Member for Torbay.

The hon. Member for Torbay started the debate extremely powerfully with a lot of good points. There will be a huge amount of consensus, which is unusual, particularly from the SNP in this place. I will detail that particularly when I get to the speech made by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). The hon. Member for Torbay rightly said that search and rescue is carried out by a number of governmental and independent organisations and agencies. He also mentioned the Penlee lifeboat, which lost all eight of its crew in 1981. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) has just powerfully described that incident, and I will come to that when I sum up his contribution. The hon. Member for Torbay mentioned that there were nearly 10,000 taskings last year, and made an important

point about preventive work through education and training. He rightly highlighted the excellent work of his own local lifeboat in Torbay.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) was absolutely right to mention how treacherous the waters can be off the north-west coast of Scotland. He also made what may appear to be a lighter point about the sheep rescue and how important it would have been to the crofter—and no doubt to the sheep themselves. That put me in mind of another rescue; I think it was the Skye lifeboat that helped to refloat some stranded dolphins last summer. It is not just humans that the RNLI supports.

The hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) made many better points than he made in the independence debate just weeks ago. I did not catch their names, but he made a good point about four volunteers who have served for 40 years with the lifeboat service. I add my thanks and gratitude. That makes the wider point that many who serve in the RNLI have done so for a long time, and that must be recognised. He also mentioned the Nicola Faith tragedy, in which three lives were sadly lost.

It would not be a Westminster Hall debate without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He mentioned coastal activities, including sailing and surfing. The one I was interested in was pier jumping. He confessed that he partook in that activity himself. It is not clear whether that was last week or some time ago, so we are unsure whether his pier-jumping speedos have been retired. Now that I have loaded up that image, I will come to the hon. Member for Moray. It is very rare—in fact, probably unique—that I agree with every word that he said.

Jim Shannon: I think the hon. Gentleman can finish now.

Gavin Newlands: I should probably sit down at that, yes. I will not put that on my leaflets, obviously.

The hon. Member for Moray brought up the National Independent Lifeboat Association, which I very much support. That leads me on nicely to the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). I thank him for his work in setting up that organisation. He was right to say that this debate is essentially a moment of consensus when we can thank all those who volunteer and put their lives at risk on our behalf to save those in distress at sea. He also made the point that they do it all by raising their own money. I add my thanks and gratitude to all those who fundraise for, and donate to, the RNLI, making possible all its excellent work, which we have all spoken about.

That brings me on to the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), who said he was a proud yachtsman and talked about how he shared water safety training with a local school. He, too, reiterated the vital importance of such training for youngsters in school at all ages. As he said, one only has to reflect on the tragedy in Solihull in recent weeks to realise that we must do more in that regard.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) spoke about the impact on the volunteers—the risk they take and the unsocial hours—but also about the impact on the families, which is something we do

not always mention, so that was a very welcome point. She also mentioned her new year's day dip. Rather her than me.

The last speaker, whose constituency I have forgotten—

Sir Julian Lewis: New Forest East.

Gavin Newlands: Of course; I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reminder. He spoke about the Mumbles lifeboat. I visited Mumbles on a rugby tour over 20 years ago, when a number of us had to be rescued that night—albeit thankfully from the Mumbles mile and not, it must be said, at sea.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned—quite rightly and powerfully, as I said earlier—the Penlee disaster. We should all go online and watch “Cruel Sea”, the documentary he highlighted, which I was unaware of. I will certainly go away and look at it, and I thank him for telling us about it. Hopefully it is on iPlayer.

Sir Julian Lewis: It is on YouTube.

Gavin Newlands: So it is there for all of us. In the spirit of consensus, I would like to pay particular tribute to lifeboat services in the south of England at this moment, amidst the record small boat crossings. I will not repeat all the statistics that the hon. Member for Torbay helpfully set out at the start, but the numbers are simply huge. Obviously, there are 238 lifeboat stations and 240 lifeguard units. As has been said, the RNLI was founded nearly 200 years ago, and in that time it has saved nearly 143,000 lives. In 2021, it saved 296 people. An average of 35 people are helped every day by RNLI crews.

I want to highlight a couple of people, if I may, who were decorated in the King's new year's honours list. An MBE was awarded to Dupre Strutt, a mechanic at the RNLI Kirkwall lifeboat station and a retired area lifesaving manager for Scotland. Dupre was part of the fabric of Kirkwall lifeboat station and had followed in his father's footsteps, having grown up in the station. Since joining in 1983, Dupre has given 39 years of service to the RNLI, during which time he has been directly involved in over 300 rescues, saving over 60 lives.

Similarly, a volunteer mechanic and lifeboat operations manager at Kirkcudbright lifeboat station, William “John” Collins, has been awarded at a BEM for his dedication to the RNLI and the community in the town. He joined the station in 1991 as a mechanic, a role in which he continues to this day, alongside his duties as LOM. Outside of the RNLI, John is employed as the local school bus driver. During the pandemic, he extended that role to deliver essential food supplies around the area.

Of course, Scotland, with its long coastline and 790 islands, has a long tradition of life on the seas and, of course, facing the dangers that can be inherent in that, whether that is winter storms off the Atlantic, fishing boats in distress or leisure craft running into trouble, often with inexperienced people at the helm. Scotland is absolutely indebted to the RNLI, so if I may, and so that I do not miss any out, I will list the stations. They are, from the south-west: Portpatrick, Stranraer, Girvan, Troon, Largs—I will give the list to *Hansard*, so do not worry if I rush through it—Arran,

[Gavin Newlands]

Campbeltown, Tighnabruaich, Helensburgh, Islay, Oban, Tobermory, Mallaig, Barra, Kyle of Lochalsh, Portree, Leverburgh, Stornoway, Lochinver, Thurso, Wick, Longhope, Stromness, Kirkwall, Aith, Lerwick, Invergordon, Kessock, Buckie, Macduff, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Aberdeen, Stonehaven, Montrose, Arbroath, Broughty Ferry, Anstruther, Kinghorn, Queensferry, North Berwick, Dunbar and Eyemouth—and I nearly mentioned Berwick-upon-Tweed, but that is only half-Scottish, so I shall leave it out.

We are also indebted to the independent and inshore rescue services, including at Dornoch, as well as the Glasgow Humane Society, Loch Lomond, Nith and the Moray Inshore Rescue Organisation, which I am delighted the hon. Member for Moray mentioned. Obviously, a lot of assistance, or co-ordination, goes to the RNLI through the Coastguard Agency. The coastguard is also 200 years old.

I want to make one point as I conclude, although I do not want to stray too far from consensus. I want to talk about the channel, but briefly, as I appreciate that my speaking time is nearly up. Last year, a record 45,000 people succeeded in crossing the channel, and we know there have been tragedies and a huge number of rescues there. We have always called for and maintained that there should be a safe and legal route so that the coastguard and the RNLI are not put in the position of having each day to save lives in the busiest shipping lane in the world.

Some of the rhetoric deployed has been deplorable, and Nigel Farage compared the work of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and of the RNLI to

“a taxi service for illegal trafficking gangs”.

On the back of that, the RNLI received the most donations in its history in response to a single event—more than £200,000.

We can all castigate such rhetoric, which is deployed by some, but I want to finish on a note of consensus. I say thank you to all who are involved in the RNLI and those who co-ordinate our search and rescue services. In particular, I pay tribute to all those who sadly lost their lives in attempting to rescue others on our behalf.

10.36 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who represents a beautiful part of the world, for his excellent speech. My researcher indicated that 52 awards for gallantry have gone to the hon. Gentleman's RNLI station alone.

I shall be following the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who advocated for the National Independent Lifeboat Association, and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), in that we are not really having a debate, because there is consensus. The only note of division I think I heard was in the intervention from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). Perhaps we need a separate debate on what we call that firch; the

name Inverness strait might help to sort this out. [Interruption.] I see I have caused complete division across the Chamber.

Next year, it will be 200 years since William Hillary's vision of saving souls at sea became a reality, and on 19 December 2022 the Minister and I were at the Dispatch Box for the Second Reading of the Seafarers' Wages Bill. Today, we have heard the story of the Penlee lifeboat disaster, which was eloquently told by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), and on 19 December, the 41st anniversary of the disaster, we were able to have recorded in *Hansard* our thanks to the crews who went out that night in 1981.

The RNLI was formed to save souls at sea and the institution's priorities were

“the preservation of human life...assistance to vessels in distress...the preservation of vessels and property...the prevention of plunder and depredations in case of shipwreck...succour and support of those persons who may be rescued...the bestowing of suitable rewards on those who rescue the lives of others”.

I want the debate to recognise those people as well and to be an acknowledgement of those who risk their lives to save those in peril on the sea.

As shadow maritime Minister, I know only too well the sacrifices made by our seafarers, which we saw during the pandemic. However, professional seafarers are not the only people our lifeboats serve to protect. We have seen the small boats in the English channel, which, as has been mentioned, is the busiest shipping lane in the world. We have seen children, women, families and individuals being plucked from the seas by the RNLI and others, and we have heard testimony from those who are tasked by the coastguard to perform their rescue missions without prejudice and without judgment.

There is nobody who is illegal. If people are in peril on the sea, we rescue them—no ifs, no buts. I thank those people for their service and for their determination to save everyone and anyone who gets into difficulty around UK and Irish shores. This is such a vital lifesaving service—so selfless—that, as has been mentioned, it is almost unbelievable that the RNLI receives no money from Government and is funded primarily by donations.

My best man was rescued from a cliff by the RNLI, when he was a child and on holiday. We have been friends for 30 years, and he has fundraised for the RNLI all his life, even being in a landlocked constituency. Imagine how the course of my life might have changed, had that rescue gone wrong, so I, too, pay personal tribute to the RNLI.

As I was preparing this speech last night, I noticed that at 6 pm lifeboats were launched from Hartlepool and Ramsgate. At 9.40 pm there was an incident that led to Tynemouth launching a rescue mission, with another one launching from Falmouth at 11 pm. Remarkable bravery takes place every day and every night. Since 1824 the RNLI has saved almost 143,000 lives. I go back to the original mission statement of Sir William Hillary, when he conceived the idea of the RNLI. I should add that the use of the word “men” is of its time, and not reflective of the nature of the RNLI, who for generations have had women launching lifeboats and working alongside crew to ensure that boats could set sail efficiently and speedily. More recently, they have crewed the boats and acted as shore crew. Now, the RNLI has more than 300 women crew and a third of

their lifeguards are female, preventing accidents before they happen with good safety advice and keen stewardship of the shore.

Sir William said that at the heart of this institution would be

“a large body of men...in constant readiness to risk their own lives for the preservation of those whom they have never known or seen, perhaps of another nation, merely because they are fellow creatures in extreme peril.”

Every lifeboat volunteer—whether they be a fundraiser, a coxswain or at the helm—exemplifies that mission statement, and I would like to thank them for their service and their contribution to search and rescue.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The words just quoted by the Opposition Front-Bencher, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), were very moving. I thank him for his contribution, and all hon. Members for theirs; in particular, I thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for bringing this debate to the House, and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who has done so much work on this issue, which is extremely important. The debate highlights the role of our dedicated lifeboat services, which seek to rescue any persons in distress or difficulty around the coast of the United Kingdom.

It is good to reflect a little on the Penlee lifeboat disaster, which the Opposition Front-Bencher brought up, and which we both mentioned on the 41st anniversary of the death of those men, just a few weeks ago.

During these challenging times, it is extremely important that we continue to support our lifesaving services, and recognise their contribution to search and rescue across the United Kingdom search and rescue region. I thank the hon. Member for Totnes for his dedication to the subject, and for his sterling efforts over the last few years to establish an association for independent lifeboats—those that operate at sea and inland—across the United Kingdom. As a result of hon. Members’ actions, for the first time, our independent lifeboats have the opportunity to form an association, which will support their operations. The contribution of our voluntary search and rescue services is often not considered until they are called into action to save lives, so I am grateful to hon. Members for raising the subject today. The point made by several hon. Members, about whether this type of debate could take place regularly, was particularly interesting.

I thank all those who fundraise for and support these charitable organisations in the way that hon. Members have described. That fundraising is absolutely vital; millions of pounds are raised every year. We have heard stories from many hon. Members about the impact of the RNLI on their families or their own life. I pay tribute to my great-uncle, John Clough, who left his entire estate to the RNLI when he passed away a few years ago. I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the volunteers in our maritime search and rescue services, who have continued to provide lifesaving operations, often in the most challenging of conditions. I especially thank our brave volunteers in independent lifeboats, as well as those who volunteer for the RNLI and His Majesty’s Coastguard, who risk their life to save others

at sea and around our coastline. The UK has one of the best water safety records in the world in large part because of their personal commitment and skill. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, the need for search and rescue will always be there, and we need ensure search and rescue services are maintained. The conditions in which teams deploy are often challenging and potentially life-threatening, as hon. Members can imagine. I know all Members of the House will join me in thanking those who put themselves on the line.

Our volunteer lifeboat services have a long and proud history, spanning 200 years, of contributing to the safety of lives at sea, and their volunteer ethos is a cherished cornerstone of British society. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) made a fantastic speech highlighting the understated heroism of those who put themselves on the line. The United Kingdom is also proud to have approximately 40 independent lifeboats that continue to provide life-saving services around the clock; they support our emergency services and protect the environment.

In 2022, HM Coastguard was proud to celebrate its 200th anniversary with events across the country. Our 3,500 volunteer coastguard rescue officers are proud to maintain a tradition of voluntary life-saving services, and to continue their traditional role in local communities across the country, as we heard from many Members today. It has been great to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), and from the hon. Members for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and many others about their local lifeboat services, or other lifeboat services that they wanted to recognise.

Our esteemed RNLI is recognised the world over for its service, and for its contribution to life saving and to search and rescue operations. However, as we have heard, we are fortunate to also have a large number of independent operators who are not part of the RNLI. Those operators provide vital life-saving services both at sea and in inland waters, as many hon. Members highlighted, and face significant challenges in maintaining their operations. Through the dedication and actions of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, the new National Independent Lifeboat Association has been formed. The NILA was formally launched at the emergency services show in September last year, and its intention is to support independent lifeboats and provide a cohesive voice for smaller organisations that continue to support search and rescue around the clock. I welcome the development, as do the Government, of the association; it will recognise the contribution of independent lifeboats, and provide ongoing support to charities—an important point mentioned by my hon. Friend.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I have not only the RNLI but two independent lifeboats in my beautiful constituency, one at Pett Level and one in Hastings. Does the Minister agree that independent lifeboats, along with the RNLI, provide an invaluable service to our local communities and save thousands of lives every year, and that it is important to highlight the challenges they face, including with funding, public awareness and long-term support?

Mr Holden: I could not agree more. I will come on to some of the ways the Government are trying to help independent lifeboats.

The coastguard has been working alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes to support and guide the development of the NILA, to enable independent lifeboats to apply to be represented on the UK search and operators group. That would enable those small, dedicated charities to contribute to discussions on shaping the future of our maritime and rescue services, which is vital.

Jamie Stone: I mentioned the East Sutherland Rescue Association. Clearly, my constituency is in a part of the United Kingdom that is far away, which means we can feel a little bit left out, but the new body is a brilliant way of making such associations feel that they are part of a much bigger whole.

Mr Holden: I quite agree. It was great to hear from the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr about how remote parts of the United Kingdom, such as Carmarthen Bay—although that is not as remote as parts of Caithness, where some of my family lived for many years—need to have a voice in a central organisation. The NILA is so important in bringing those voices together into a single voice, and recognising their broader contribution. I urge all independent lifeboat operators to join the association. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes for his support for the association, which has increased recognition of the role and dedication of independent search and rescue operators.

Our independent lifeboats and lifeguards, who are not part of the RNLI, continue to provide support to search and rescue operators around the coast and on our inland rivers, lochs and lakes, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), for Torbay, for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), and for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier). My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) made a particularly important point about water safety, and I thank him for his vital work on that. It is a major issue. Through the National Water Safety Forum and our partners, we reach millions of people a year with advertising and information campaigns. It is particularly important that we continue to do that as drowning is, sadly, still a major cause of death, especially among young people. The UK is proud to continue to support World Drowning Prevention Day, and to promote the selfless work of lifesavers across the UK and the world to prevent drowning and push further prevention strategies.

Our independent lifeboats are often not recognised, but they are run by dedicated volunteers and provide vital emergency services and lifesaving capability. They offer assistance to any person who may be in difficulty around our beautiful coast and countryside. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay made the important point that these charitable organisations rely on community organisation and voluntary support, which is at the core of a lot of what they offer. As mentioned, independent lifeboats operate across England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Jersey, and are dedicated to the appropriate tasking authority, which may ask for assistance in life-critical operations. Independent lifeboats, in common with all our search and rescue operations, are responding to an increasing number of call-outs, particularly following

the pandemic, because members of the public have been holidaying in the UK and taking part in more adventurous leisure activities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned, support from the Department is very much there, and I urge him to write to the Secretary of State inviting him to come and see some of the independent operators.

I turn to a couple of the questions that have been raised. On VAT, fuel duty and the rescue grant fund, I will happily write to the Treasury about this issue, and I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes to do so as well. My office will write to him when we have a response from the Treasury. It is an issue that I know hon. Members are keenly aware of, but we will require further support to get to where we want to be.

Regarding recognition of His Majesty's Coastguard rescue facilities, independent lifeboats operating at sea and in a coastal environment are required to meet the standards laid down in the rescue boat code, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned, in order to meet the appropriate construction and safety standards. However, I am pleased that, following feedback from independent operators, the RNLI and key stakeholders, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is undertaking a review of the code to modernise and simplify the requirements, which will assist our dedicated volunteers in continuing to support search and rescue operations. The MCA hopes to complete the review of the code in the early part of this year.

A presentation was held on the membership of the UK SAR in October 2022. Now that the NILA is fully established, membership applications would be welcomed, although I cannot confirm anything at this stage, as hon. Members will be aware. In some cases, independent lifeboats offer specialist skills that would support rescue and prevention activities, both in our cities and in remote inland locations, as hon. Members mentioned. Those operators continue to provide lifesaving operations during these particularly difficult times, saving hundreds of lives annually. I ask the House to join me in thanking them for their continued support for search and rescue services across the length and breadth of the UK.

I am very proud to have responded to the debate on behalf of the Minister responsible for maritime search and rescue, and I hope to have the privilege of meeting some of our wonderful volunteers and dedicated teams, who continue to rise to the challenge of providing lifesaving services, whatever the circumstances and whoever needs them. I finish by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay for raising this important subject, and all hon. Members who have taken part in a very worthwhile debate highlighting the vital search and rescue services.

10.54 am

Kevin Foster: It has been a very welcome debate, and it has been great to hear so many contributions, and so many tributes paid to volunteers, who are the backbone of lifeboat services. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) and the Minister for their contributions, and it is a rare occasion when we see the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) completely agreeing with each other.

This has been a good chance to pay tribute to those working in lifeboat services and remember their heroism. As I said in my speech, in the words of that great hymn, “when the breakers roar and the reef is near”, the lifeboat services go in and do their duty.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of lifeboat services to search and rescue.

10.55 am

Sitting suspended.

Emergency Service Personnel: Posthumous Awards

11 am

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I shall call Wendy Chamberlain to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the mover of the motion to wind up.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered posthumous awards for emergency service personnel.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I hope that the Minister will agree that it is not controversial to want to recognise the members of our emergency services who have shown particular bravery or have died in the course of serving our communities. We have long-standing awards for gallantry, sacrifice and service for those who have given to our country and people in all sorts of ways. Indeed, several of our own were recognised in the recent new year’s honours list—not only Members from across the House but, most notably, the Clerk of the House, Dr John Benger, who was awarded the distinction of Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath for his services in this place and to democracy. Such service deserves recognition, and the recipients and their families are rightly proud.

Sadly, there are those who have equally served their country and made sacrifices but who are not being recognised as they should. That is why I am here, and I am pleased to see so many other Members here for this short debate. Before I turn to the broader issue of a posthumous award for emergency service personnel, let me set out how I became involved in the issue, and the facts of a particular case in which an individual’s bravery and sacrifice have not been recognised, and a family has suffered a loss that they feel has been forgotten.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing the issue forward; the fact that we are all here to support her indicates that our thoughts are the same as hers. Does she agree that a posthumous award not only rightly honours the dead, but is a small token of our respect and gratitude, which can be understood by a grieving family who long to know that the memory of their loved one will continue in the annals of history? This House must send the message that the sacrifice of our emergency service personnel is valued enough to facilitate that very honour.

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely. No award or recognition can ever replace a loved one, but if we can go some way to making a family feel that the loss has been recognised, it is important that we do.

I have mentioned my police service and experience in this place on a number of occasions. My father—also a police officer—was awarded the Royal Humane Society’s testimonial on parchment for his central role in the rescue of a man from drowning in the James Watt Dock in Greenock in November 1983. I vividly remember being sent to school with the newspaper cuttings, and then being asked whether I knew what a “PC” was and being unable to answer. Early in my service, a colleague

[Wendy Chamberlain]

and I attended reports of a domestic dispute, and we were both assaulted when we attempted to deal with the situation. We both received the chief constable's commendation. I mention those things not to receive praise, but to emphasise that accepting a degree of threat to one's physical safety is simply a fact of life for police officers. Why else are officers issued with defensive equipment daily? When officers and staff are judged to have gone beyond what is reasonably expected of them in the line of duty, they are regularly recognised at force level and beyond.

It is almost a year since I was approached by the Lanarkshire Police Historical Society about its campaign for recognition for the late Constable George Taylor. I have no links with Constable Taylor or his family.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Chamberlain: I am happy to give way to the constituency MP.

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and for referring to the case of Police Constable George Taylor, which relates to my constituency. I also highlight the case of Detective Sergeant Ross Hunt. The two cases are horrific, and although the families' grief will never subside, official recognition would go some way to ensuring that the officers' sacrifice is remembered. Does she agree that the five-year time limit on posthumous honours and awards is arbitrary, and that an exception would be welcome and appropriate in this case?

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Lady is thinking of exactly the points that I will raise. I am grateful to her and the Lanarkshire Police Historical Society. I knew the chair of the society from my service at the Scottish Police College, so although I have no links to Constable Taylor or his family, nor have I ever spoken to them, my police service meant that I was keen to support the work. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), who is present, is also a former police officer, and we have discussed this case.

The late Constable Taylor died on 30 November 1976—just over 46 years ago—and I want briefly to outline the facts relating to his death. On the evening of 30 November, two patients, Robert Mone and Thomas McCulloch, escaped from the state psychiatric hospital in Carstairs, and in doing so they assaulted and killed a nurse and another patient. Shortly afterwards, a passer-by was travelling in his car on a nearby road when he saw a man lying on the road and another signalling for him to stop. He slowed down and saw that the man was wearing a nurse's cap and assumed that he worked at the hospital. The man asked for a lift, but the driver saw that a police van was approaching and insisted that it was a matter for the police.

Having arrived at the scene and having been told what had taken place, Constable Taylor, who was in the passenger seat of the police van, went to the man lying on the road to see whether he was injured. Suddenly and without provocation, he was attacked. A contemporary account of what then took place says:

"A man was swinging a long-handled axe at Constable Taylor's head, and he, baton in hand, struggled with his assailant."

At this point, Constable Gillies, who had been driving the police van and only got out when it was clear that something was wrong, was struck on the back of his head by a baton and turned to exchange blows, before running again towards Constable Taylor. He was once more assaulted and pushed aside. His attacker was running towards Constable Taylor, who was still engaged in a violent struggle with the axe-wielding combatant. The two men struck at Constable Taylor, as Constable Gillies called for assistance on his personal radio, without response. He then struck out at both men who were attacking his colleague, but to no avail. After attempting once more to make contact by personal radio, Constable Gillies ran to the police van and put out a brief call before being attacked by Mone, who ran towards him, swinging a knife in his hand.

Despite the brave efforts of both officers, the men escaped in the police van and were later captured near Carlisle. Constable Taylor died before he could reach hospital for medical care, leaving behind a young family. In the words of the then chief constable of Strathclyde police, Patrick Hamill,

"Constable Taylor displayed exceptional gallantry and courage in attempting to overpower these two dangerous, violent and armed men. His bravery and determination are in the highest traditions of the Police Service."

I want to place on the record my agreement with his remarks, and I urge the Minister to do the same.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this long-overdue, important debate to recognise the sacrifice of PC George Taylor, who was brutally murdered and has not been formally recognised for his gallantry. I offer my full support in ensuring that the situation is rectified. Does she agree that the situation is disgraceful, and an insult to the memory of the officers who gave their lives, and to other brave emergency service workers who keep us safe? Does she also agree, without detracting in any way from the bravery and courage of Constable Taylor and others, that such a retrospective award should be extended to other emergency workers, including WPC Yvonne Fletcher, who was shot in the back and brutally murdered on 17 April 1984 while policing a political demonstration outside the Libyan embassy—an act for which no one has ever been prosecuted?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He and I know all too well the sacrifices that police officers make every day. He has pre-empted some of the remarks I was going to make to the Minister. This is a very regrettable oversight, and I hope that the Minister is in a position to look at the matter. I know about the work he is doing with regard to Yvonne Fletcher, and I am grateful to him for that.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for organising this Westminster Hall debate. As a Nottinghamshire MP, I thought it was really important to mention that 20 years ago this week, PC Ged Walker was killed in the line of duty in Bulwell in Nottinghamshire. He was attempting to remove the keys from a taxi when the stolen vehicle dragged him to his death. He was survived by his wife, who is my constituent in Broxtowe, and their two children. He is a shining example of why an award, such as a medal, should exist. He and all police officers put their life on the line every day that

they go to work. Does she agree that officers such as PC Walker, who lost their life in tragic circumstances, protecting their community, must be recognised?

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely; that is why I am here. The fact that so many Members are here for this very short debate shows the strength of feeling about the need to make sure that those officers are recognised.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As we are hearing, a number of very brave constituents have died in the line of duty, and we are here to support the hon. Lady's call to commemorate them with these posthumous awards—the Elizabeth medal—on behalf of their families. PC Nicola Hughes was murdered in Manchester 10 years ago, alongside PC Fiona Bone. Nicola's dad, Bryn, is one of my constituents. I raised this point at Prime Minister's questions just before Christmas, so there is a lot of strength of feeling here. Please keep going with the campaign, and let us give them the awards that would recompense and support their families.

Wendy Chamberlain: I certainly remember the visceral emotion I felt on hearing about the murders of PC Hughes and PC Bone. It is really important that we do not let those memories be forgotten, and that we give their families some degree of comfort.

I took the time to recount the events of 1976 because Constable Taylor's courage was never properly acknowledged. The description of the attack, and Chief Constable Hamill's assessment of George Taylor's bravery, are taken from a letter that he wrote to the then Secretary of State for Scotland, Bruce Millan, recommending that Taylor be recognised by the late Queen for his bravery.

Three of the police officers who were involved in the ultimate arrest of McCulloch and Mone were given awards. I have a copy of the *London Gazette* from August 1978, which details the award of the Queen's gallantry medal to the officers from Cumbria constabulary who were involved. No such recognition was provided to Constable Taylor, who died while bravely trying to stop the attack and escape of those two armed and dangerous criminals.

It has never been made clear why George Taylor's courage was overlooked. The best guess of people who have been engaged in the campaign longer than I have is that it was simply a mistake. We know that mistakes happen; I am sure that they happen with typed and written letters and paper records, given the electronic issues that we have today. That is not to blame long-retired civil servants or Bruce Millan, now deceased, who was a well-respected and effective politician, but mistakes happen. When it was a mistake on the part of the Government, they cannot hide behind an arbitrary and absolute rule of awards having to be made within five years; sadly, that is what the UK Government said today.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The hon. Lady is giving a very powerful speech. As she recognised, the number of Members here shows that she has brought forward such an important issue. Does she agree that the very least we can do when people have given the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty is to recognise them with an award?

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely; we need to do that. There are two issues here. We want to talk about the Elizabeth medal—I know that that is why many Members are here—but I want to talk particularly about Constable Taylor. The UK Government's response to the campaign is that he cannot be recognised in the way that the Cumbrian officers were because the attempt to have him recognised took place more than five years ago. When the Government do that, they are saying that the officer murdered while trying to effect an arrest cannot have the same recognition as the officers who later apprehended the offenders.

It is not like Constable Taylor's family decided decades after the fact that his bravery should have qualified him; indeed, his commanding officer explicitly recommended him for an award within six months of his death. If a decision was made explicitly ruling out Constable Taylor—although I fail to understand how that would be the case—and setting out reasons for that choice, the family have not had that communicated to them. It is as if that recommendation was simply lost. Without any clarity or explanation from the Government, we cannot know why he was overlooked, and his family will continue to struggle to find peace.

There has been a long-standing campaign by his family and the Lanarkshire Police Historical Society to right this wrong, and I believe that this is the first time it has been explicitly addressed in this place. There is momentum behind the campaign to finally recognise his bravery. The Scottish Police Federation and the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents support it, and it was debated at Holyrood last April in a Backbench debate brought by a Conservative MSP representing Central Scotland. I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice wrote to the Government following that debate highlighting the Scottish Government's support.

It is in the Minister's power to right this wrong. This is clearly uncontroversial, and I hope that anybody who has heard these circumstances today will ensure cross-party support. I hope that he will use his time to agree to do so, or at least pledge to disclose why the award was not made at the time, and meet with the Taylor family to discuss the next steps.

As exemplified today, Constable Taylor is not—and will not be—the only police officer or member of the emergency services to die in the course of service. There are many others and many other families—we have heard about some of them here—with ongoing campaigns for justice, which is why I am here with other Members to call on the Government to institute a new award for the emergency services.

As the Minister knows, there is a precedent for this. The Elizabeth Cross was launched in 2009, and it is granted to the next of kin of armed forces personnel killed in operations or as a result of terrorism as a mark of national recognition for their loss. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it so well: we cannot replace the individual, but we can at least give their families some comfort.

Awards are not simple and straightforward, because the honours system is pretty opaque. It is part of the royal prerogative to determine honours and awards, but the Prime Minister advises on such matters, so it is entirely within the Prime Minister's and Government's purview to discuss and put forward the recommendations

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endorsed not only by Members in this place but by professional bodies across the country for such a new award.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The hon. Lady is giving a powerful speech and we all stand with her in the specific circumstances of PC Taylor, which she has shared today, and supporting the campaign. More broadly, I spent a night shift on Boxing day evening with West Yorkshire police officers—we have lost too many officers from that force. They are asked to attend harrowing situations, and when we are with them we feel their vulnerability. So often the officers are there on their own, and there is no such thing as a routine call in policing—circumstances can change in an instant. I very much believe that the Minister will understand, given his previous contributions in this area, the sacrifices that we ask police officers and their families to make day after day. The medal would be one step towards understanding the contributions that they make, the risks that they take, and what we owe to the families of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty.

Wendy Chamberlain: I was a police officer, my father was a police officer, as was my husband, and both my stepchildren are serving police officers, so I know very well from conversations round the dinner table what they experience. I know what has changed and much of what has not changed since I served. The danger that we ask our police officers and other emergency services personnel to face in protecting the public has never changed.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Lady referenced my colleague Graham Simpson who led the debate about PC Taylor in the Scottish Parliament, and there is a strong consensus in the Chamber today. On the point she makes about the current pressures, I declare an interest as the husband of a serving police officer. Does she agree with me that ultimately we do not want to issue any of the medals because we want to protect our police officers and those in our emergency services? A way of doing that would be to ensure that assaults on police officers lead to fines or imprisonment. All too often when there is a series of charges, particularly in Scotland, we see that the assaults on police officers are the first to be dropped, but they are the most important and should be progressed through the criminal system.

Wendy Chamberlain: I remember when police assault was an aggravation to an offence. Dropping that aspect is the complete opposite of what the aggravation to an offence was intended to do. We absolutely do not want people to be in circumstances where they are placed in danger, but we know that accidents happen. I remember a colleague who was killed on a night shift when putting traffic cones out after a road accident, so those kinds of things also happen, as well as the more violent circumstances that many of us have talked about today.

It is always a tragedy when people who serve our communities die: firefighters rescuing children from buildings who do not make it home to see their own families; ambulance workers who rush to relatives for medical care but get attacked and abused by the people

they want to help; and the police officers, as I have emphasised at length today, who keep our communities safe, but in doing so sacrifice themselves. I understand that the Government will carry out a review of the honours system this year. There is overwhelming support for the new honour, and I urge the Minister to take the opportunity to pledge Government support for it. There have been mistakes and they ought to be righted. Today we have the opportunity to make sure they are not made again. I hope the Minister will agree to review Constable Taylor's case and ensure that the creation of the Elizabeth Cross is included in the Government's honours review.

11.19 am

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Davies. I pay a heartfelt tribute to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate today. She knows that the topic is close to my heart. The families of those involved will be watching this debate and I very much want to speak to them to outline our approach. The first thing I would say, having been through the journey recently with nuclear test veterans, is that it is historically a very complicated process, and it is not within the gift of Government to give the medals out. It is within the gift of the palace and it is the palace's decision. Of course, the Government can do the background work and prioritise in a way that sees the results that we would support. That is certainly what I will be doing now.

In the last two or three years, we have seen the best of our public servants in particularly difficult circumstances, and I want to pay tribute to the work of our emergency service personnel over that period. They have been on the frontline of some extraordinary circumstances. Hon. Members will be acutely aware of the dangers faced by all public servants, and Members of our own House have been targeted simply because of the work they do. We also remember police officers, including PC Keith Palmer, who died only yards from here in 2017 defending this place from a terrorist attack, and George Taylor, Ross Hunt and those who have been remembered today. I remember very clearly the killings referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry). I also want to highlight people such as Bryn Hughes, the father of Nicola, who has spoken about recognition for emergency service workers, and Lissie Harper, who, after her husband PC Andrew Harper was killed in 2019, campaigned for Harper's law, calling for a mandatory life sentence for criminals whose actions resulted in the death of an emergency service worker.

I recognise that the campaign has been going on for some time, much like nuclear test veterans and other campaign groups. Things have changed over the last couple of months around the difficult technicalities of working out who should be eligible for this sort of award. Yesterday, we held a meeting on this, as would be expected, and it is now a Government priority to get this resolved this year. I want to get this sorted out and I want to do everything we can. Recognition of the sort being talked about is extremely important.

There are two different aspects here: one is gallantry and the other is those who lose their lives. Clearly, in the military, we have been through this process and as the hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned, in 2009, the Elizabeth Cross came into being. I think she recognises,

as many will, the sacrifices that our public sector workers face. There should be no difference, as there is no difference in the pain of the loss in defending the public and the institutions such as this place and others. I am determined to make sure that their sacrifice is recognised in the appropriate way.

When it comes to gallantry, I understand the frustrations, particularly in the George Taylor case. Awards of gallantry, in my experience, are complex, often divisive and difficult to understand at times. The frustrating thing is the lack of transparency, so I will commit to go away and look at that particular case. I will write to the hon. Lady with exactly what has gone on and the decisions that have been made. Clearly, I do not make decisions around gallantry and all the rest of it, but I think transparency is important in this space and I will go away and write to her with details of that specific case. I am more than happy to see her or the family in private to go through and explain what has happened. I am not going to promise things I cannot deliver, but transparency is important. It is important to the family as well.

It is worth putting on record that the circumstances that the hon. Lady related in her powerful contribution are extraordinary. I can completely understand the way the family feels and I can understand the way the police community feels in the perceived disparity of awards. I am more than happy to increase transparency in that place, and have a frank discussion about what has gone on there, so that everybody understands what has happened and we can see the art of the possible.

As the hon. Member for North East Fife is aware, the honours system is a matter for the Crown. The boards and so on set up to go through that are complex. I have just navigated them for another group of veterans who have been through that system. I want the hon. Member and the family to take away from this that in my view this has gone on too long. An incredibly important part of public service is to recognise those who act above and beyond their line of duty and, in particular, those

who lose their lives—as well as the families affected—in defence of the freedoms and privileges we enjoy in this place day after day.

I am determined that we will resolve that matter. It is now a Government priority, and I am personally determined to get it sorted out for the hon. Member for North East Fife and, more importantly, for the families and those who have lost loved ones in defence of the society and freedoms we enjoy today.

I want to pay tribute to everyone who has contributed today. We can all recall those who have served in our constituencies, whether they have lost their lives or not, and their incredible bravery, particularly that of the police, ambulance and emergency services but others as well, in administering the civil structures of this land, without which nothing of what we do here would exist. It is important to recognise their contribution and that of their families. Such jobs are often an all-in occupation, and the families live that as well. The hon. Lady knows that. We need to do more to recognise them, and I will personally grip that and look to advance it. I will write to her about this case and am more than happy to have a transparent conversation, within the art of the possible and what can be done.

I will take this forward and hope that this year, with a bit of drive and energy, we can bring the campaign to a conclusion with which we are all happy. There are no two ways of saying it: losing a loved one in the line of duty can never be rectified, whether in police uniform or in the military. It is incredibly important to recognise the sacrifice and the lives of those who serve. I am determined that we will do everything we can to resolve that matter in the near future. I assure the hon. Member for North East Fife that this is now a Government priority and I will meet her to take this further.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

House of Lords Reform

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered reform of the House of Lords.

Happy new year, Sir Gary. Before I was elected to this place, I was opposed to the House of Lords. Indeed, in 2005 I proposed a motion to the Scottish National party conference that confirmed the party's position that no SNP member would take a seat in the House of Lords. However, after being here and seeing the role that the House of Lords plays in scrutinising and revising legislation, how it holds the Government to account, and the expertise and experience that its Members bring to the parliamentary process, I am now really opposed to the House of Lords. When I say that, I mean no disrespect to any individual member of the House of Lords—and I know that some peers are paying extremely close attention to this debate.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am glad that my hon. Friend has noted that there is a peer present: Baron Foulkes, who was elected to the Scottish Parliament. Does my hon. Friend agree that if Baron Foulkes, who is unelected, wants to have anything to do with legislation, he should perhaps seek election, rather than sitting in the Public Gallery and no doubt tweeting throughout the debate?

Patrick Grady: I will leave my hon. Friend's comments on the record. However, it is possible for people to be elected to the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, our former colleague, Winnie Ewing, has the distinction of having been elected to the Scottish Parliament, the House of Commons and the European Parliament; I think that she is the only person ever to sit in all three of those legislatures. I do not know whether a seat in the House of Lords was then offered to her, but if it was she certainly never took it.

However, this debate is not about individual Members of the House of Lords. Many of them have immensely valuable skills and experience that sometimes are not found or replicated in the Commons. Nevertheless, there must be better, more imaginative and more innovative ways of using such experience for the public good than simply appointing people to the legislature for the rest of their lives and just letting them get on with it.

Even the majority of peers themselves think that the current arrangements are unsuitable and unsustainable. The Lord Speaker's committee on the size of the House published a series of recommendations in 2017 aimed at reducing and stabilising the composition of the House of Lords, but under recent Prime Ministers the House of Lords has become even more bloated. Famously, the National People's Congress of China is the only legislative Chamber in the world that has more members than the House of Lords.

That is one of those amusing anecdotes that some of us like to tell guests when we show them around this place. Another one is that Lesotho is one of the two countries in the Commonwealth where hereditary chieftains retain the right to make law, the other being the United Kingdom. Another is that Iran is one of only two countries in the

world where religious clerics sit as of right in the legislature, the other being—again—the United Kingdom. Those statements are not just anecdotes; they are anachronisms. They are not really amusing; they are absurd. Sometimes, when we show guests, particularly those from developing countries, the opulence of the Lords Chamber, words begin to fail us. How do we adequately describe what the Lords actually is, how it is composed and why it functions in the way it does in what is supposed to be a 21st-century democracy?

Sometimes, visiting delegations—perhaps under the auspices of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Inter-Parliamentary Union or the Westminster Foundation for Democracy—come to Westminster from countries in Africa, Latin America or eastern Europe. They meet parliamentarians such as ourselves around antique tables and oak-panelled walls and they talk about good governance, democratic accountability and anti-corruption practices. Although such learning and sharing among parliamentarians is always valuable, many eyebrows are raised if in discussions it happens to come up that one in 10 Conservative peers have donated more than £100,000 to the Conservative party, and that in the past seven years every former Conservative party treasurer has given at least £3 million to the party, and almost all of them have been offered a peerage. There seems to be an uncanny connection between donating vast sums of money to the Government, or indeed to some of the official Opposition parties, and the chances of being offered a seat for life in the House of Lords.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am glad that my hon. Friend is making that strong and powerful point. We have some gall to lecture the developing world about good governance arrangements, when we are prepared to stuff a political institution full of people who are little more than donors, cronies and political place-people, in order to ensure their place in what I would not call our democracy, but our legislature, just for the fact that they have some money to give to political parties. Does he agree?

Patrick Grady: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend. As he and I have said, the connection is quite uncanny. Of course, no one is levelling specific accusations, but that connection is out in the open. It is a simple fact; it is simply numbers. In conjunction with Brunel University, openDemocracy calculated that the odds of so many major Tory donors in the UK population all ending up in the House of Lords are the equivalent of entering the national lottery 12 times in a row and winning the jackpot every time. That is quite astonishing.

As we know, there are limits on the collective ability of the Lords to veto or overrule the elected House. However, as my hon. Friend alluded to, the rights available to individual peers are very similar to ours in the House of Commons. They can put written and oral questions to Ministers. They can vote on and seek to amend legislation during a three-stage process that parallels that in the Commons. Incidentally, that means they can also bump into Ministers privately when they are in the voting Lobbies, which is supposed to be one of the great advantages of in-person voting.

Peers can introduce their own private Members' Bills. They can sign up to inter-parliamentary bodies such as the CPA and the IPU, and they can join all-party

parliamentary groups. There is, rightly, a lot of scrutiny at the moment of the operation of all-party parliamentary groups, but I wonder how many colleagues present have had to leave early or arrive late at an APPG meeting that they were interested in because they have had to deal with urgent constituency casework, or get to the Chamber for an urgent question or a statement relating to their constituency. Meanwhile, colleagues from the Lords at such meetings are content to run on and opine about the topic under discussion, whatever that happens to be, and build their connections with stakeholders and the secretariats of those meetings, whoever they happen to be.

In return for all that, peers are entitled to claim £332 for every day they attend the House, tax free. Sometimes it is pointed out that over an average of 150 sitting days a year, that works out at slightly less than the salary of a Member of the House of Commons after tax. However, in the Lords it is guaranteed for life. Members of Parliament are, without doubt, very well remunerated compared with most of our constituents. However, our constituents can, quite rightly, choose to stop that remuneration and elect a different representative in our place every time an election comes round.

David Linden: Would my hon. Friend put on record the fact that the tax-free allowance that Members of the House of Lords are given is based on a system of them just coming and clocking in? We saw with Lord Hanningfield that they can literally be on the Estate for five minutes, then beaver off and get on with the other jobs that they have.

Patrick Grady: It comes back to the point about accountability. Members of Parliament who behave in such a way would be taken to task, first by their Whips, secondly by the local party members, and finally by the electorate.

Since the end of the second world war, 65 countries have gained their independence from the United Kingdom. Although many have based the design and practices of their legislatures on might be called a Westminster model, I am not sure whether any of them have chosen to replicate a wholly unelected, appointed, partially hereditary Chamber where members serve for life. Even in Lesotho, with its hereditary chieftains, appointed members of the Senate serve a five-year term. Its Senate has 33 members, not over 800.

SNP manifestos in 2015, 2017 and 2019 called for the abolition of the House of Lords. When Scotland becomes the 66th country to achieve independence from the United Kingdom, there will be an opportunity to consider how the enactment of legislation, scrutiny of the Executive and representation of the population can be most effectively—and perhaps innovatively—achieved.

There have been proposals for an upper Chamber of some kind, perhaps based on the model of the Irish Seanad. There have been calls for an increase in the number of MSPs, both under current devolution and indeed under independence. There are more radical ideas for pre-legislative scrutiny and a greater use of citizens' assemblies and other forms of direct democracy that could feed into the main legislature.

However, nobody, as far as I am aware, has suggested that when Scotland becomes independent, or when any other country has a good hard look at its constitution,

it would be a good idea to have a wholly appointed second Chamber. The idea is just incomprehensible and incompatible with a modern democracy.

Pete Wishart: This has always been a quandary for me: what does an independent Scotland do with existing peers who have Scottish titles or who are from a Scottish part of the world? It struck me that, just to show generosity and good spirit, perhaps we could donate all the Scottish lords to the rest of the United Kingdom as a parting gift? Does my hon. Friend think that is a good idea?

Patrick Grady: During the independence referendum campaign my hon. Friend was probably so busy making the case for independence in the House of Commons and in his constituency that he missed the fact that the peers dwelled on that issue for some considerable time and that it was a matter of great concern to them. They came to the conclusion that because they had been appointed for life and were peers of the United Kingdom, the fact that they once lived or served—or even continue to live—in Scotland was irrelevant and they would all be safe in their place. After that they appeared to lose interest in the question of independence.

Pete Wishart: What a relief that is!

Patrick Grady: I am sure it is a relief to many people paying attention to the debate. Anyway, that information was meant to be just for background and context, but it turns out that simply by describing the absurdity of the current system the case for reform of the Lords starts to speak for itself. My point today is not so much about what kind of reform of the House of Lords is necessary or what should replace it were it to be completely abolished, but about why reform has not happened or is not happening and the ongoing failure—indeed, the impossibility—of any kind of meaningful reform. There seem to be two main reasons for that.

First, it is not in the interests of the governing party at Westminster or the Prime Minister—any Prime Minister—to weaken the immense power of patronage that the ability to make appointments to the Lords represents. Secondly, it is simply not possible to reform the Lords in any meaningful way without reforming the Commons, and that would mean not just procedural reform but electoral reform, followed by a review of the entire structure of the UK's constitution. That would never be in the interests of any incumbent party of government.

Members may be aware that there have been some significant interventions on the issue of Lords reform in recent months, and these have, intentionally or otherwise, conceded both of those points. The Lord Speaker addressed the issue of Lords reform in the Hansard Society's 75th anniversary lecture just before Christmas. His proposed framework was thoughtful and pragmatic, and it is easy to agree with several of the key principles he outlined about why reform was needed and what it could start to look like. He made a key point that the more radical the change to the composition of the Lords, the more radical would be the change to the role of the House, even if there were no explicit changes in its powers. However, to me it then follows that there would inevitably also be a change in its relationship with the Commons, and the Commons would want to find new ways, quite rightly, to assert its democratic mandate.

[Patrick Grady]

The Lord Speaker diplomatically regretted the decision of recent Prime Ministers not to show restraint in making new appointments, and remarked that the House of Lords has increased from 778 members in June 2019 to 828 today, with more to come. Those figures show just how irresistible the power of patronage is to many Prime Ministers. Other than various absolute monarchs and dictators, who else in the world has the power to confer a job for life on any person of their choosing? That is a power that rests with the UK's Prime Minister, exercisable over wavering Back-Bench rebels, potential advisers who need to be enticed away from the private sector and, it seems by more than mathematical coincidence, over many wealthy party donors.

The Lord Speaker also pointed out that a change of Government could easily lead to a further surge in membership of the Lords in order to reflect the changed balance of power in the Commons. That shows, once again, that it is impossible to speak of meaningful reforms of the Lords in isolation, and not consider the effect that reform would have on the UK's wider political system.

These points are raised in the other recent major intervention on the issue, the recommendations published by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, after he modestly accepted a commission from the Leader of the Opposition to produce a report on the future of the United Kingdom.

David Linden: Plus ça change.

Patrick Grady: Yes, what an achievement!

Incidentally, it is a bit odd that this debate is not being led by a Member of the official Opposition. People would think the report would have inspired a rush of applications from Labour Members eager to share their thoughts on constitutional reform and the role of the House of Lords, but in reality, barely a month after its publication, the status of that report is not clear.

Media coverage at the time suggested that it would form the basis of Labour's next manifesto, which would mean the next election would become a de facto referendum on the constitution. A vote for the Labour party would be a vote to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with an assembly of nations and regions, for further regional devolution throughout England and for reform of the powers of the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru, never mind that they were established by a Labour Government after popular referendums, or that previous extensions to their powers came as a result of cross-party commissions, including representatives from those institutions. Now it seems a Labour Government elected on 40% of the UK-wide vote will claim a mandate for sweeping constitutional reform.

Pete Wishart: Would it not be a simple way for Labour to show commitment to true House of Lords reform if it just stopped making appointments to it? A better gesture might be to even remove a few of them now and again, including the ones who do not turn up. Maybe that is a suggestion that my hon. Friend could make to our friends on the Labour Benches.

Patrick Grady: There are a number of Members, including the spokesperson for the official Opposition, present, so they will have heard that. They will have also read the repeated reports of the Lord Speaker's Commission. The irony is that the House of Lords is more keen on reform than the Government are.

David Linden: I do not wish to burst my hon. Friend's bubble on Labour party commitments, but is he aware that since 1910 the Labour party has made manifesto commitments to abolish the House of Lords? Given that it has not happened in 110 years, how seriously can we trust the report by Gordon Brown?

Patrick Grady: That is the point; the pattern continues. We keep talking about but never actually implementing any meaningful or wholesale reform. The report does at least recognise that we cannot tackle one part of the system without tackling all of it. For all the fuss and media fanfare, it will just sit on the shelf and gather dust, as my hon. Friend suggests. Reform of the Lords and of the wider constitution becomes a second-order or a second-term issue, and the Executive can get on quietly putting to use the accumulated powers that they enjoy under the status quo.

That probably helps to explain, at least in part, the current Government's position. They have said in various contexts that reform of the Lords is "not a priority", despite the Conservative manifesto saying that the role of the House of Lords should be "looked at". But now, even the modest suggestion of a cap on numbers, endorsed, as I have said, by the House of Lords itself, is too radical. The Minister who is in his place told me on 8 December at Cabinet Office questions:

"The Government do not have a view on the upper limit of the House of Lords."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 510.]

So there we go. It is quite remarkable—to infinity and beyond, the House of Lords filled with Tory donors, cronies and time servers. I have maybe saved the Minister his entire summing-up because the position appears to be that constitutional perfection in the UK has been achieved, and nothing needs to change again. Indeed, his colleague, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, seems to have said that he does not believe there should be any further devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament, either—now or in the future. Fortunately, it is not up to them to decide.

Those of us who support independence for Scotland are often accused of obsessing about the constitution. We are told that we should focus on the priorities of our constituents—the cost of living crisis, improving public services. I agree—

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Now you are doing my summing-up speech.

Patrick Grady: The Minister might be interested to hear this, then. I certainly do agree that those are the key priorities for people, families, businesses and communities in Glasgow North and beyond, but to really address those priorities, we need to address the fundamental systems underneath. One way of putting it would be to say:

"While many of our immediate economic problems can be fixed by pursuing better policies, by stopping the race to the bottom in our economy, Britain needs change that runs much deeper—giving the people of Britain more power and control

over our lives and the decisions that matter to us. Changing not just who governs us, but how we are governed, will address a system of government that the British people perceive is broken.”

Those are not my words. Those are the words of Gordon Brown in the introduction to his report on the UK’s future. They make the case that constitutional change is needed if we are to drive radical, social and economic change. The difficulty for the Labour party, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has said, is that it has been promising that for 113 years, and for 13 of those years, starting in 1997, it had a chance to change it.

At the end of those 13 years, there was a certain amount of devolution across the UK, but there was still a first-past-the-post system that stoked division rather than built consensus, and a system that allowed an individual Prime Minister to appoint whoever they wanted to a seat in Parliament—and there were 92 legislators who still had a seat in Parliament because of who their parents were.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, which is a topic of great interest to me, because I have introduced a Bill that is scheduled for debate next Friday. Its purpose is to end the scandal whereby eight seats in the upper House are effectively reserved for men only. I urge the hon. Gentleman to put his support behind my Bill next Friday.

Patrick Grady: I would be very happy to support the hon. Lady’s Bill, and I commend her on her work with the international institutions that I mentioned earlier.

I would also be happy to come back to Westminster Hall and debate how we can reform the private Member’s Bill system, because the chance of many of those Bills getting through is another aspect of Westminster democracy that many of my constituents find incredibly frustrating.

That takes us back to the point that real change to how we in Scotland are governed cannot, and will not, come through gradual, grudging and piecemeal change at Westminster. Frankly, it is independence for Scotland that is most likely finally to force the rest of the UK to look at and reform its constitution, including the role and composition of the House of Lords. For those of us from Scotland, that will perhaps be the topic of some fascinating future inter-parliamentary roundtable, while the democratically elected and accountable Parliament and Government of an independent Scotland gets on with building a fairer, greener and healthier society in what will be the early days of a better nation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I was going to invite those who wish to speak to bob, but you have done so. If you have not bobbed, I assume you do not wish to be called.

2.51 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I come to this debate somewhat prepared and somewhat remembering my A-level classes, where we had to debate the idea of House of Lords reform. As I stand here now, a few years on from my A-levels, and think about the merits of the House of Lords, I fear that the wolves are circling.

When SNP Members turn up to a Westminster Hall debate and promise to improve the constitution of the United Kingdom, I feel they are somewhat acting like pandas: they want to eat, shoot and leave our constitution. I worry about that and about the damage the proposals from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) might cause. In his typically erudite way, he came up with a whole host of reasons for some of the mistakes and problems that can be seen in the House of Lords. Of course, we can see mistakes and problems in the House of Commons, and we should not be outright opposed to some reforms or changes. However, what the hon. Gentleman typically forgot to do was to talk about some of the positive aspects of the House of Lords and the important work it does, or about many of the occasions on which the SNP has been led to support the House of Lords when it has checked the Government on important pieces of legislation.

I will start with a few points of rebuttal, since I do believe this is like an A-level debate.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): As the hon. Gentleman knows, supporting something and agreeing with a decision are two very different things. Just because, on occasion—particularly during Brexit—the SNP has agreed with decisions that the House of Lords has made, that does not mean that we support it or have ever said that we support it.

Anthony Mangnall: I was not suggesting for a second that the SNP had done so. I was more making the point that, although I hope Scotland always remains part of the Union of the United Kingdom, if the SNP wants to not be part of it, perhaps it should not be making comments on this topic.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North made a point about opulence and tradition—that he was not so in favour of it and that he is lost for words when he stands in the House of Lords. I, too, am lost for words when I stand in the House of Lords—because of the sheer magnificence, the history and the tradition. No nation was ever weakened by a love of tradition; in fact, a nation can be strengthened and improved by it. We can use tradition to our advantage.

When we talk about that tradition and that opulence, we can also talk about the important pieces of legislation that start in the House of Lords and make huge differences to people across the land, not because those in the Lords have necessarily been elected by the people, but because they bring with them a specific understanding and knowledge of sectors that would never normally put individuals into the public eye to make pieces of legislation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): An interesting consideration about an elected second Chamber is how it would retain its huge expertise across so many industries, which is very important to legislative scrutiny. Does the hon. Member have any thoughts on how that could be done effectively?

Anthony Mangnall: I worry about that, because one thing we may find common cause and agreement on is that being in public life is becoming increasingly hard for us all—both Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords. It is difficult, and it is unfortunate that we are so often in the glare of the public eye, with

[Anthony Mangnall]

all of the trials and tribulations that come with that. I would not want to see the House of Lords elected, because I do not think we would achieve that aim of encouraging specialists to be part of it. I will develop those points later in my remarks.

David Linden: I have to say that Baron Mangnall has a ring to it that we could all get behind. The hon. Member spoke about some of the wonderful specialists in the House of Lords. Could he develop his point a little more by talking about the specialisms of, say, Baroness Michelle Mone?

Anthony Mangnall: If I may, the hon. Member's colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow North, started off by saying that he was not going to be specific about individuals, and I do not think it is right that we are specific about individuals. However, if there is an individual who has done extremely well in business as a woman in the 21st century, I think it is important to note that. But I might also point out that the House of Lords has been a welcoming home to refugees, in the form of Baroness Helic, who fled the war in Bosnia. It also has extraordinary scientists, such as Lord Winston. These extraordinary people make an extraordinary contribution, and they are not the minority—they are the majority.

In his opening remarks, the hon. Member for Glasgow North pointed out only a few small issues, rather than the vast majority of positive things that go on throughout the House of Lords. He made the point about cronies in the Lords; the House of Lords is still conditioned to the standards that Parliament sets, and it is still compliant with the rules that we too must follow. It is important to remember that it is not some lawless upper Chamber in which people can do what they want. It is set to the same procedures and scrutiny that we must follow. I do not think we should put that aside.

I have a few points to make. First, the House of Lords serves as an important check and balance. I notice that not a single SNP Member was at yesterday's debate on the Procurement Bill, apart from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who was on the Front Bench. Dry, difficult and sometimes dull as procurement might be, it is a perfect example of how a Bill can be introduced in the House of Lords, shaped by fantastic expertise from across the Chamber and then brought to the House of Commons, where it passes its Second Reading, not with great confrontation and difficulty, but with acceptance that it is a good piece of legislation that will make a huge difference.

Kirsty Blackman: I would be interested to know whether the hon. Member thinks that the Government will undo some of the amendments the Lords put in and that the Bill will end up looking more like it did when the Government introduced it—rather than retaining what those experts in the House of Lords did to it?

Anthony Mangnall: It is perfectly acceptable to say that there will be scrutiny and change, as there always is, but that is not to say that the job has not been well done by Members of the House of Lords. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Aberdeen North may laugh about that, but that is exactly the point of the process. We want to

be able to make use of that expertise in the House of Commons, and we want our legislative agenda to be scrutinised in the House of Lords. That is the way the system works.

Those important checks and balances have meant that pieces of legislation that have been passed on the fly—I have felt that, in some cases, they have perhaps been passed too quickly—have been checked and sent back by the House of Lords. When it comes to international development, which I am deeply concerned about, the House of Lords has been extremely effective in that regard. That is something that those on the Labour Front Bench might agree with me on.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman keeps talking about checks and balances. Can he talk further about how many cheques have been donated to political parties by people who happen to sit in the House of Lords?

Anthony Mangnall: The vast majority of Members of the House of Lords are not people who have donated cheques, but people who have done extraordinary things in society. If the hon. Gentleman would like to go back and look at those numbers, I would be happy to do battle with him—the numbers are in my favour here. The vast majority of Members of the House of Lords need to be applauded, not ridiculed and pursued for being cronies and for not serving their country. They serve their country just as much as we do.

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech supporting the work done in the other place, but surely he would agree that there is a need for incremental reform? Surely he cannot support the fact that an eighth of the seats in the other place are reserved for men only? Will he, too, support my Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill?

Anthony Mangnall: I am used to being a constant rebel to the Government, so I am not entirely sure whether I am allowed to support anything, but I agree in principle with what my hon. Friend is doing. If primogeniture is going to be used, why should it not include women being able to take on titles? However, that perhaps goes over my head and is there for the constitutional experts.

The important point, which should not be overlooked, is that a vast number of Ministers who work in the House of Lords do so not for the extra salary, but because they are interested in the subject. That is something to be supported and encouraged. We need to note more often that Members on both sides of the House of Lords—including on the Cross Benches—work incredibly hard, and not for huge remuneration. They often work far longer hours than those in the House of Commons. It is important to say that we support this system. We can look at minor reforms to improve it and to ensure that Ministers who serve the Crown do so under their own hard work—not with the remuneration of the State.

I have made my points regarding the checks and balances, the value of the scrutiny of the Lords and the hard work that Ministers and peers put in, but it is also worth looking at the composition of the House of Lords. I have mentioned people such as Baroness Helic, whom I know as a friend and whom I have worked for, and I have followed individuals such as Lord Winston. Too often, we are scared to stand up to public opinion,

but in the House of Lords we have a body of people who are governed not necessarily by public opinion but by the expertise and knowledge they bring to that place. They can discuss the issues not because they have read a briefing paper that morning or been briefed by a group, but because they have real-life, world experience. They have the expertise to be able to tease out the legislation that needs to be passed. That is something to be grateful for and to be cherished. It improves our legislation and the system we have in this country.

It is easy for individuals, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North did in his opening remarks, to talk about things such as China and to make an anecdotal point I have made on a number of occasions. In fact, I have often made the joke that when a young Member is introduced to the House of Lords they usually get a cheer when they run up the stairs, because they are so young. Perhaps it is rather unfair to say that, but I would make this point: yes, we can change the numbers in the House of Lords—maybe that could be up for discussion in the future, but that is up to the Government—but we need to ensure that we retain that expertise.

I will use an international example, as that is what the hon. Member for Glasgow North did. The Cabinet of the United States Government is not made up of elected individuals. They are appointed, albeit not for life—I accept that point—and they wield huge power, so let us not say that we are out of kilter with the rest of the world. We have a body of people who check themselves and who are required to have parliamentary scrutiny and the rigours of debate. This arrangement does work in other countries in certain systems. That is the important point, not the comparison to China or Lesotho, which the hon. Gentleman made. We should look at where this works and where we might be able to improve things.

I have taken far too long already, but there is another important point to make. There is value here. Improvements can always be made in both Houses. We should all be aware of that. I fear the day when we are unable to ensure that experts can go into the House of Lords, because they fear the rigours that we all have to deal with as elected Members. It is not easy being a Member of Parliament—we all know that. I do not think people would be readily able to stand up in the House of Lords and say, “I’ll go for election and the scrutiny and difficulties that come with that from the British public.” It is deeply troubling and unfortunate that so many people are persecuted and subjected to such appalling things on social media.

We must continue to use the House of Lords as a check and balance, a place of expertise, a place where we can celebrate the hard work of our Ministers and a place to which we can attract some of the most extraordinary people from around the world. It is typically generous of this country that we take migrants and end up putting them into the House of Lords. That has happened, and I think we should celebrate it.

3.2 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing the debate. As a democrat, it is one that I welcome. I believe that those who are responsible for our laws should have democratic legitimacy.

If they do not, our politics, which already struggles to hold the confidence of many members of the public, will continue to ebb away. Of course, it is not entirely correct that no Member of the Lords has a democratic mandate. Last year, there were half a dozen by-elections to replace hereditary peers. As we know, it is a very selective electorate, with only other hereditary peers able to vote. The last election saw a grand total of 37 votes cast. I suggest that anyone who believes that that should be the limit of our ambitions for democracy in the House of Lords should aim a little higher.

As has been reflected on, many Members of the House of Lords do make excellent contributions, but some are, sadly, a little less assiduous. We know that an average of only between a half and two thirds of the Members of the upper House actually attend, and many Members have not spoken or voted in a considerable time.

Margaret Ferrier: The House of Lords currently has a huge number of peers—over 800. Does the hon. Member agree that reducing that number could be one aspect of initial reform, along with looking at ways to increase the diversity of the membership of the other House, as the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), said.

Justin Madders: I believe that it was Government policy not so long ago to reduce the membership of the Lords. I am not sure that that has been kept on track—like many Government policies.

Many Members do not speak or attend at all, but they appear to be able to do so without any accountability. That is an affront to democracy and an insult to the public.

David Linden: When we talk about the House of Lords, one thing I find amusing is the concept of working peers. We do not talk about “working refuse collectors” or “working brain surgeons”. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be some sort of threshold, at least in the beginning, such that if a peer has not spoken or voted, they automatically lose their place in the House of Lords, by virtue of not being a working peer?

Justin Madders: That is an interesting suggestion. I would suggest that lords in that position should do the honourable thing and resign. We have spoken about the Government wanting to have minimum service levels; indeed, they want to sack nurses and teachers who do not keep to those. Perhaps they should apply the same standards to Members of the Lords.

I am certainly not claiming that there are no valuable elements of the current House of Lords. As we have heard, there are many extremely talented Members who demonstrate high levels of integrity, expertise and independence. However, we make a huge mistake in assuming that the second Chamber is naturally imbued with those characteristics because of the way that Members are appointed. As we have heard, there is a growing tendency for those with the biggest cheque books to be offered a seat at the table. That is not democracy; that is not the way a modern country should operate. I see no reason why those who have a place because of their skills, experience or abilities would not have a good chance of continuing to serve if they put themselves

[Justin Madders]

forward for election by the public. Ultimately, for all the positive qualities that those particular Members show, their contribution is fatally undermined by the lack of democratic legitimacy.

We essentially say to the public, “We trust you to decide on our future relationship with Europe. We trust you to elect Members of Parliament, councillors, police and crime commissioners, and Mayors. But we do not think we can trust you to elect the upper Chamber of Parliament.” I have no truck—we have already picked up on this—with those who are recent converts to the merits of the House of Lords just because, on a particular occasion, it voted in a particular way that suited their political views. That does not negate the overall democratic deficit that, in its current form, it represents. Let us not allow the day-to-day decisions, and the painfully slow incremental process that we have seen, to cloud the bigger picture: the House of Lords belongs to a bygone era of privilege, establishment and a closed political world, when we are, I hope, becoming a more open society.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made a fundamental point: if we reform the House of Lords, we effectively reform the House of Commons. My hon. Friend is suggesting direct democracy for the House of Lords. Does he agree that that would necessarily diminish the powers of the House of Commons? It would put another House in opposition to our House, which would be a bad thing.

Justin Madders: That is not necessarily the case, and that is not where the argument need take us. That kind of argument is often put forward by people who want to stifle change and reform.

I cannot believe that anyone would think that the current arrangements are satisfactory. We have, in effect, a halfway house between the medieval institution the Lords once was and the modern democracy that we, or certainly I, hope to see. When the number of hereditary peers was reduced in 1999, Baroness Jay described the Lords as a “transitional House”. It is clearly an anomaly that we have certain people entering there by different routes, and it is time that that was ended.

Anthony Mangnall: I will have two bites of the cherry. The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the House of Lords being a place of privilege, but the vast majority of people are not appointed from a background of privilege; they are appointed from a background of expertise and specialism in their subjects. He references the 92, but they are not the vast majority of the House of Lords.

Justin Madders: That is 92 too many, in my opinion. I do not believe that having a place in our legislature by reason of birth has any place in our modern democracy.

As has been picked up on already, the recent report from former Prime Minister Gordon Brown sets out the case for reform very well; it contains serious proposals for what a modern, democratic second Chamber could look like, which could be implemented without us necessarily having to change the way we in this House work. Some of the big messages in that report about the loss of trust in our democratic institutions are ones that

we should all be concerned about. The fact that more than 50% of adults believe it does not matter who they vote for and that nothing will change, and that more than 60% of people believe that Britain has a ruling class that will always rule the country, should ring huge alarm bells for single one of us who cares about democracy in this country.

Graham Stringer: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I would like to pursue the point. If a second Chamber were elected after the House of Commons had been elected, how would conflict between the two Houses be resolved if they had two contrary mandates? I agree that the current House of Lords is not justifiable, and I believe in its abolition, but I do not think we should set up an alternative democratic base to the House of Commons.

Justin Madders: I refer my hon. Friend to the recommendations set out in the Brown report, which outline the limitations on a second Chamber’s ability to reject legislation. The suggestion is for it to have a defined constitutional role and this will cover when it is able to reject issues. Those are matters for further discussion, but nations around the world manage to have democratically elected second Chambers without creating chaos. I believe that is something we should aim for.

Coming back to the figures, we should take very seriously the fact that so many people have so little faith and trust in us representing them. Democracy is fragile and should not be taken for granted. We ignore those findings at our peril. We have to make our politics more open and accountable to the people we serve. An appointed body cannot have a future in that respect.

I will finish on this point. There are always pressing priorities, but we need to look at the bigger picture and at how the world is radically different from just a decade ago. We cannot allow our institutions to remain static forever. We must listen to what the public are telling us.

David Linden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Justin Madders: I am just finishing. The public want change and a political process that they feel a part of and that is not geographically weighted towards London and the south-east, as the second Chamber is at the moment. They want people with a mandate from the whole nation, and a body that is not just invitation only. They want accountability and representation. In short, they want democracy. Reform of the House of Lords is unfinished business, and it is about time we had a Government who intend to see that through to its conclusion.

3.13 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I would like to begin by posing a scenario. We go to the public and we say to them, “We have a good idea for constitutional reform. Let us double the number of Members of Parliament.” How do colleagues feel that would go down? Not very well, I think. Suppose we then said, “Let us double the number of Members of Parliament, but elect half of them at one time, and half of them at another time.” How would that work in practice?

Alternatively, we could say, “Let us elect them all at the same time, but sit them in two Houses.” In which case, they rubber-stamp each other. Finally, we would say, “Let us elect one group under one electoral system and the other group under a different electoral system, but one will clearly be subordinate to the other, even though they are both democratically elected.” I wish anybody luck in trying to resolve the arguments and the deadlock resulting from that.

David Linden: May I add one further option? There would be 59 fewer Members of Parliament if Scotland becomes independent, and then the remaining guys could do what they want with their own constitution.

Sir Julian Lewis: If we were having a debate about Scottish independence, I would be happy to engage with that. Our Scottish colleagues have quite rightly chosen to participate in the UK national constitutional debate, and that is what we are considering this afternoon. I have a firm view that if the House of Lords had to go, it would be far better to have a single elected Chamber, rather than two elected Chambers that would perpetually be either deadlocking or rubber-stamping each other.

Graham Stringer: I agree with the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman’s arguments. Does he agree that there is a fallacy in the comparison with other countries that have two different systems and an upper House? They rely on a written constitution and the courts interpreting it. That fallacy is deep within the Brown report—somehow, constitutionally, we will limit one House when we do not have a written constitution. Is that not a nonsense?

Sir Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is an independent thinker on his party’s Benches. Not for the first time, I find myself in total agreement with him. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said that the system of two elected Houses works well in other democracies. I am not sure that the citizens of the United States would entirely endorse that opinion, great though their democracy is.

Pete Wishart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Julian Lewis: Forgive me, but I would like to develop my argument a little more. I promise that I will then give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Pete Wishart *rose*—

Sir Julian Lewis: How can I refuse the hon. Gentleman?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is always courteous. I am an abolisher of the House of Lords, but the UK is a complex democracy and some sort of revising Chamber would be required to take care of all its specific demands. The right hon. Gentleman and, I think, the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) were here when Robin Cook proposed a series of reforms. I think we voted 11 times on a number of proposals, and none of them went through because of the very arguments made by the right hon. Gentleman. We cannot have competition with the House of Commons, but surely abolishing the House of Lords would not mean that we were left with nothing. There must be something we can think of to go in its place.

Sir Julian Lewis: I remember that series of votes, because I voted against every one of those propositions. I was absolutely convinced that all of them would have changed matters for the worse.

Having said that, I agree with the hon. Gentleman as far as saying that there surely must be ways in which reforms can be made to the existing, non-elected upper House. I am sure that many thoughtful Members of that House agree with that proposition, not least the noble Lord Cormack and Lord Norton of Louth. They run an effective campaign for an effective second Chamber that is constantly looking at ways in which the existing upper House can be successfully improved.

After a promising start, having given a nod or two to the expertise of many Members of the upper House and to the quality of their debate, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), to whom we are all grateful for introducing the debate, fell into the traditional trap of complaining mainly about what the House of Lords is rather than what the House of Lords does, and does very well. In the short time that I wish to take up, I will give an illustration of that—if my technology will allow me.

I have a confession. I have been a Member of Parliament for over 25 years, and in all that time I, as an individual legislator, have managed to change only one piece of legislation, and that was because of the most unusual occasion of a free vote in the lower House. However, in a six-year period in the latter part of the 1980s—before I became a Member of Parliament—I was able, with the essential help of Members of the House of Lords, to change no fewer than four pieces of legislation. For the record, one was to require postal ballots for trade union elections, which was incorporated in the Trade Union Act 1984 and the Employment Act 1988. The second was to outlaw political indoctrination in schools, which was incorporated in the Education Act 1986 and carried forward in the Education Act 1996. The third was a measure prohibiting local councils from publishing politically partisan material on the rates, and that was incorporated in section 27 of the Local Government Act 1988. Fourthly, a more strict definition of the concept of due impartiality in coverage of politically contentious issues on television and radio was incorporated in the Broadcasting Act 1990.

I imagine that SNP Members in particular are sitting in horror at the prospect of all those legislative changes having gone through, but whether or not we agree with the particular changes, the fact is that they were possible only because the unelected House has a very limited whipping system. If a Member persuades thoughtful and independently minded Members of the upper House of the wisdom of a proposed amendment to a piece of legislation going through the parliamentary process and convinces them to back that amendment, there is every prospect that the upper House will insert it in the legislation, and it will remain there when it returns to the lower House, thereby forcing the Government to consider it seriously.

I mentioned the issue of postal ballots in trade union elections, which are now accepted by all. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) tabled an amendment on that issue in the lower House, it got nowhere. It was voted down—not on its merits but because of the whipping system. The vast majority of Members who voted on it probably did not

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

have much idea of what his amendment contained. They did what they were told. In the upper House, if I could convince people that something was sensible and they voted it through into the legislation, I found that it had a better than 50% chance of remaining in that legislation when it went back to the lower Chamber.

There are, of course, undeserving people sitting in the House of Lords, but there are also many people who chose not to become professional politicians. They chose to stay in their own professions and to rise to the top of them. They became top academics, lawyers and people in the field of, for example, medicine or any other profession or trade. I am not in any way being disrespectful to the abilities of those of us who chose to become full-time, or more or less full-time, Members of the House of Commons, but when we made that decision we gave up our ability to maintain and develop our level of expertise such as it was before we took that career path.

Having an unelected second Chamber, even though some people may be put there for the wrong reasons, should nevertheless not blind us to the fact that many people who have great intellect, knowledge and expertise can bring those talents to bear on legislation as it goes through and improve it. It is precisely because they are not elected that they can never seek to usurp the powers of the House of Commons, but always be rightly subordinate to us in this House while we benefit from the value added that they bring to the process.

3.24 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate you taking the time to chair this debate so excellently, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this debate. When I was first elected to the House of Commons, I was made the SNP spokesperson on the House of Lords. It is the easiest job an SNP politician can do, because when they do something, we say, "Abolish them," and when they do something else, we say, "Abolish them," again. There is just one line you need to know. That is why this debate has been interesting. It has been a thoughtful debate with lots of issues and concerns raised about the House of Lords. Some Members have talked about how great they think the House of Lords is, but we have also discussed a number of different issues.

I will focus briefly on the issue of constitutional obsession. We all have a constitutional obsession. Indeed, hon. Members would not be here if they did not think that things that were not working needed to be changed. It is not just about improving a single constituent's life by writing to an energy company to complain about a wrong bill. We can improve all of our constituents' lives by changing the system. That is what all of us are here to do. We are all here to talk and think about the constitution and the changes we want to make to it and to the systems and the ways in which we operate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North is correct that Governments of any type, in any country, have less impetus to deliver change than anyone else. Governments are appointed by whatever system they work within. That means that the system works for

them: it has put them there and entrenched their power. Why would they want to lessen their future chances of getting that power?

That point is neatly summed up by the fact that one in 10 Conservative peers have donated more than £100,000 to the party. I do not know which came first: did they donate money and then happen to become a peer, or did they become a peer and then happen to donate money? I do not know the order in which it works, but surely that is a symbiotic, beneficial relationship for both groups of people. It is great for the Conservative party that it can get so much in donations, and it is great for peers that they can get £332 a day, as well as the power and prestige that comes with being a Member of the House of Lords as a result of their relationships, patronage and appointment for life.

I will now talk specifically about how the House of Lords works and operates, and what it looks like. The most recent figures I could find in the Library are from 2019 and show that the average age of Members of the House of Commons is 51. That is not as young as it should be and does not reflect the general population or even the general voting population. However, the average age of Members of the House of Lords is 71. The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) may be interested to know that he is younger than the youngest peer in the House of Lords. Although he and I are relatively young Members of Parliament, we are far from being the youngest MPs these days.

Sir Julian Lewis: As a 71-year-old Member of the lower House, I will not take offence at the hon. Lady's ageism. I will just point out, however, that if people get to the top of their professions before they get seats in the House of Lords, where they can apply their expertise, they will tend to be older rather than younger.

Kirsty Blackman: My issue is not with the actions of individuals at certain ages or with the fact that there are many 71-year-olds who could run rings around significant numbers of us younger ones—I absolutely agree that that is the case. My issue is that it does not represent the population. We are supposed to have a representative democracy but it fails to be so because its membership does not look like the rest of the population.

I will take a moment to tackle another thing that the hon. Member for Totnes said. Some 57% of Members of the House of Lords went to private schools, which is ridiculously high.

Anthony Mangnall: That number is going down.

Kirsty Blackman: It is going down, yes, but much more slowly than if we had an elected Chamber where Members were not appointed for life. Some 6% of Members of the House of Lords are from a minority ethnic background, whereas 13% of people in the UK are from such a background. Because the unelected Chamber is over 800 people large, every person appointed to the House of Lords over a period of years would need to be from a minority ethnic background in order for the membership to look like the population. The unrepresentative nature of the House of Lords is a problem that cannot be fixed easily or quickly because of the fact that people in that House are appointed for life.

The issue of attacking the House of Lords because of what it is rather than what it does has been raised. That is the opposite argument to the one we hear from the Labour party, which suggests that we should not attack the current constitutional arrangement because of what it is—that we should not attack the current constitutional arrangement. The Labour party says that just because the Conservatives are in power, that does not mean that the constitutional arrangement for the devolution settlement is less than perfect, and that once we have a Labour Government it will be grand and everything will be significantly better than it currently is. I am not going to buy that. I am going to attack things for what they do and what they are. It is completely reasonable for us to have issues with the actions of the House of Lords or of the Government in the House of Commons, and with the way that those institutions are set up and run. I see no contradiction in making criticisms of both those things and am quite comfortable doing so.

I do not think that anybody here believes—I really hope they do not—that the current constitutional settlement and the way the House of Lords currently works and interacts with the House of Commons is 100% perfect. I do not think that anybody is willing to defend the current system as absolutely the best possible system we could have. I do not think that is the case, because the system is indefensible. We have a massive House in the other place, and one of the things that frustrates me most about the House of Lords is the fact that it can originate legislation. It is a checking and balancing system; how dare they originate legislation? Lords are unelected. It is done for reasons of timetabling. That is completely shocking if it is to continue to be an unelected Chamber.

I very much appreciate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North having secured this debate and allowed me to have a bit of a rant about the House of Lords and my criticisms of it. Obviously, the way to resolve this—I am quite happy to eat, shoot and leave—is for us to leave the United Kingdom and leave youse to it. In the meantime, while we are members of this United Kingdom, although currently against our will, we would like to improve it. We would like to try to make it better, and to do that we need to abolish the House of Lords.

3.31 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this debate. I often say that a debate is timely, but this debate really is: we are at a crux of time in our country when we are looking at who we want to serve us. There is a real crisis of trust in our democratic institutions, so it is only right that we talk about this issue.

I am proud to be given this opportunity to speak about Labour's plans to make our Parliament fit for the 21st century. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his contribution and I agree with him. I speak as a democrat, proud to be part of a democracy but shocked to be part of only half a democracy at many times. There is a democratic deficit in an unelected Chamber belonging to a bygone era that undermines the value of the expertise that has been rightly pointed out by many Members in the debate. Change is needed.

I cannot continue without paying tribute to our tireless Labour peers. Time and again, they have stood up against the Government's worst excesses, whether that is by blocking attempts to strip refugees of their rights and dignity in the Nationality and Borders Bill or by inflicting a record 14 defeats on the Government's anti-protest clauses in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Many lords are expert and hardworking, and deserve the respect of us all on the Opposition Benches.

In the past year the House of Lords has considered 5,244 changes to 100 Bills. Members in the House of Lords raised concerns, pressed the Government for action, questioned decisions with debates, asked daily oral questions and tabled urgent questions, in more than 3,350 hours of business. We are not saying that the House of Lords does not do a lot of hard work or that lords are not, often, experts in their field; we are saying that the Lords could be far better with a democratic mandate.

The time has come for change. We need a Lords that is properly accountable, where the expertise is strengthened by that democratic mandate, and that is up to the task of rebuilding the whole of Britain after 13 years of Conservative failure. The next Labour Government will scrap the House of Lords and replace it with a new second Chamber that truly represents people across the UK.

Anthony Mangnall: May I ask for a bit of clarification? Is the hon. Lady saying that the Labour party is wholly committed to a wholly elected Chamber of the House of Lords? If she is, does that mean there will be a referendum, as has been promised on previous occasions when Labour policy has suggested large constitutional change?

Fleur Anderson: I do not think the hon. Member is alone in having questions about our policy, which is to have a conversation with the British people to decide what the future policies would be. I am not going to be outlining all the dotted i's and crossed t's of Labour party policy, because that would be wrong. We need to have further conversation about the result of our conversations. Later in my speech, I will go into what will underpin that.

The SNP has used this debate about the second Chamber for game playing, to undermine the strength of the Union, and has denied Scottish people a voice in the second Chamber by boycotting it—by just leaving it alone. It has no interest in making Westminster or devolution work. Labour will work with the Scottish people to give Scotland and other parts of the UK an even greater say in UK-wide legislation through a new second Chamber. Under a Labour Government, a second Chamber that is more representative will give Scottish people more of a mandate to deliver for Scotland and undo the damage caused by the SNP and the Conservatives.

There are three reasons why we need reform, the first of which is trust. Trust in Westminster is at an all-time low, and in many ways who can blame the public? Never before has the privilege of power been used and abused for personal gain so much and so frequently. The mantra of "It's one rule for them and another for us" is said far too frequently; people should not feel like that about their elected bodies, and the Lords is a prime example.

[Fleur Anderson]

Take the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). He recommended 87 new life peerages, but two of those people have not made maiden speeches, even though one was appointed in September 2019 and the other in July 2020. His brazen attempt to subvert democracy by rewarding donors, lackeys and friends makes him the latest in a long line of Conservative Prime Ministers who have gamed the system by installing a conveyor belt of their cronies into the House of Lords, undermining it as a result. Instead of rewarding Conservative donors, we should be rebuilding trust in politics.

Kirsty Blackman: How many peers did the most recent Labour Prime Minister recommend?

Fleur Anderson: I do not know, but we are talking about the system. It should not be the patronage of the Prime Minister that gets to recommend those who vote on our behalf; the people should decide who is going to make those decisions. That is the point I will be making, whichever party the Prime Minister comes from.

In the past seven years, every former Conservative party treasurer bar one has been offered a seat in the Lords, and 22 of the party's biggest donors have been made lords since 2010. We cannot keep on sheepishly asking for the trust of the people: we need to show how things will be different. Reforming the second Chamber has to be part of that.

The second reason is democracy. Devolution was a major achievement of the last Labour Government, and the next Labour Government are committed to continuing that proud democratising tradition. We have shown that we will put our money where our mouth is when elected. We must go further than the devolution that has already taken place, which includes making the second Chamber of our Parliament fit for the 21st century. It must be more democratic and accountable, and therefore effective, and must accurately represent the people of our diverse regions and nations across the United Kingdom.

We need reform that retains expertise, yes, but the right expertise from throughout the country, not just expertise in knowing the right people. Consecutive Conservative Prime Ministers have ridden roughshod over the system of appointing people to the House of Lords. If things continue as they are, there will not be many experts left; instead, the House of Lords will be packed to the rafters with those who owe their place to favours and dodgy dealings rather than talent and expertise. For too many, a peerage is a fancy title or an Instagram photo opportunity, which undermines the work done by so many hard-working peers.

Hansard tells us all we need to know. There are 41 Members in the House of Lords who have only made one contribution since the beginning of the 1992-93 Session—one contribution in 30 years—yet those Members can claim more than £300 a day for attending and can vote on any issue, changing the lives of people up and down the country. They are not accountable; there is no check or balance. Those Members do not have to look into people's eyes and be accountable for what they have done, how many times they have attended, what they have said and what they have voted on.

Anthony Mangnall: I think the hon. Lady mentioned 41 lords; could she help me with something, because it is important to be accurate? Of those 41, how many have claimed allowances, how many have actually voted and how many have attended the Chamber at any point? How many of them actually have parliamentary passes? I ask because we need to be clear about this matter; otherwise, someone can start setting a narrative that is not accurate about the important work that is done in the Lords.

Fleur Anderson: The fact is that they have the right to come and vote if they want to, the right to attend and the right to take the money for their daily attendance, no matter what happens. It is just a job for life. They have the notoriety and the title, which gives them some credibility, yet they are not doing the work that should accompany their position. They should be accountable. If they are not attending, not taking the money and not voting, they should do the right thing and resign their positions.

YouGov polling from August last year shows that the public have had enough. Only 6% of British people favoured a House of Lords that is mostly appointed, whereas 48% supported a House of Lords that is mostly elected. Our plans are not just democracy for democracy's sake, though, even though that would be reason enough. That brings me to the third reason for why reforms are vital. We cannot fix the economy without fixing our institutions and we cannot bring about the social change that we need in this country without fixing our institutions. They are fundamental to our decision making. Inclusive growth must go hand in hand with inclusive governance. A second Chamber packed with the mates of former Conservative Prime Ministers, all of whom have given up on the levelling-up agenda as far as I can see, will not deliver equal growth and opportunity for all nations and regions.

Labour will consult members of the public from throughout the UK to determine the exact size and make-up of the new second Chamber. We launched the commission on the UK's future, which was chaired by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and involved people from throughout the country, including people from academia, local government, the legal profession and trade unions. As a result, we have articulated three clear principles that will underlie our vision of reform. First, Members of any new Chamber should be elected by voters rather than being appointed by politicians; secondly, it should be truly representative of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom and play an important role in safeguarding the devolution settlement; and thirdly, it must remain a second and secondary Chamber and continue to have a role complementary to the work of the Commons. It will not replace the Commons.

We have to earn back trust. That will happen only with a Labour Government. Only Labour has the ideas and the credibility to fix our politics as well as our economy, and we are the only party that sees the intrinsic connection between the two and that will make the change that is needed.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I call the Minister and remind him to leave a couple of minutes for Patrick Grady to speak at the end.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary.

I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this very interesting debate. I often think that we do not spend enough time in the Commons debating our constitution in the broadest sense, although I know that the hon. Gentleman is more interested in the constitution in a narrower sense. If a party is a single-issue party, it is important for it to adhere to that single issue; otherwise, what is it? Nevertheless, it is genuinely interesting to hear what the SNP thinks about the House of Lords because, notwithstanding the fact that the party has a shadow Minister for the House of Lords, as I discovered today, we do not often hear its views on such broader constitutional issues.

That said, it is atheists musing on the divine, in that, like some sort of mystic panda, the SNP intends, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) put it in his truly excellent speech, to “eat, shoot and leave”. Were SNP Members proposing long-standing major constitutional reform with the intention of living in that new constitutional structure, I would probably have slightly more time for their arguments, but alas it is not to be. We heard today a range of complaints and grievances about the House of Lords without any alternative proposal other than that there should be an independent Scotland. The SNP is entitled to hold that view, just as it is entitled not to engage with the House of Lords by having SNP Members of it.

I cannot help but think that after the 2014 referendum which, as the SNP acknowledged at the time, was a vote for a generation, it was somewhat churlish of the SNP not to join the current House of Lords, even if it disagreed with the structure and wished to see it reformed. That would have been a way of representing Scottish views in the United Kingdom, which people in that country voted to remain part of. Because the Union continues, I am proud to say, I encourage the SNP to rethink its position of—I was about to say “abstinence”, but that is the wrong word entirely—abstaining, or staying out of, the House of Lords.

Much as I disagree with the SNP’s views, I think that the Lords Chamber would be richer for the presence of SNP Members. I would like to see more people from more parts of the United Kingdom represented there. Would that it were not so, but a lot of people vote for the SNP, and it would be good if there were SNP expertise in the House of Lords to seek to influence legislation that would have a bearing on people in Scotland. But that is a decision for the SNP. I did not come into the House of Commons to give advice to the SNP.

My own experience of the House of Lords is rather different from that of the hon. Member for Glasgow North, who is grudgingly prepared to acknowledge that maybe one or two Lords have some expertise and something to say. As a Back Bencher and as a Minister, I have attended a large number of debates in the Lords, and I am always struck by how well informed they are and their courteous nature. It is acknowledged that people on the other side of the argument are worthy of respect, even if one disagrees with their views. I have also been

struck by the fact that in that forum there is a great deal of highly positive soft diplomacy on legislation. As a Minister I have seen that. You hear and absorb the views of learned folk in the upper House and you start to wonder how and whether they should be reflected in policy.

When I was first elected to the Commons, I had a conversation with—I hope he does not mind my mentioning his name—Lord Young of Cookham. I asked how he was getting on as a Minister in the Lords and he said, “Well, it is a bit of a change from being a Minister in the Commons. In the Commons you get your briefing pack from your officials, you stand up and you can feel fairly confident that you’re on firm ground. When you stand up at the Dispatch Box in the Lords, five former Secretaries of State, three former heads of the civil service and a whole bunch of expertise from the wider world are all waiting to hold you to account.” That is a level of scrutiny of which we should be proud and that we should think twice about before seeking to remove. This is a good-natured debate, but we cannot just chuck away the life experience and professional experience of people we all know are making a positive contribution to legislation in our country.

Kirsty Blackman: The Minister is making a good case for a culture change in the House of Commons. There should be more listening to experts. When we consider the Procurement Bill, will he and his colleagues listen to the words of those giving evidence? Will he listen to their expertise and consider making changes? Or will the Bill come out with no amendment that any expert has put forward other than in the House of Lords?

Alex Burghart: We have already listened very closely to arguments made in the Lords, and we have already started to make policy improvements based on some of their recommendations. That does not mean that the Government will agree to all of the amendments that the Lords have made. The important thing is the debate, because iron sharpens iron. We can pretend that we will get similar expertise—as the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), said—from a democratically elected second House, but that simply is not true, for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes made clear.

There are a great many people in the Lords with huge experience, perhaps towards the end of their careers, who will not want to stand for democratic election. They will not want to put themselves through that and on the doorstep, and I have sympathy with them. I understand. It would be terribly sad if we lost those people from our legislature and if we did not have their expertise. Also, alongside that expertise, there is space for people in our legislature who are of no party affiliation. I know that the hon. Member for Glasgow North has a passionate, political viewpoint. He is a passionate member of his political party, but not everyone in the country is; not everyone in the world is. There are a great many sensible, intelligent people who have a lot to give our democracy, but who do not wish to stand for election under the flag of a particular party. If we were to move to a system of proportional representation, they would have to. There would be no independence in the Commons or the Lords. That, too, would make our Houses poorer and, I think, weaker.

[Alex Burghart]

The Government accept, as I think everybody here accepts, that our constitution evolves. It has been in a constant state of evolution for centuries. We are alive to the fact that we will always need to consider changes. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the Opposition spokesperson spoke in favour of radical reform. Were a future Government to undertake that radical reform, it would bring major risks with it. There would not just be the loss of expertise, but a conflict of mandates, as described by the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), who is no longer in his place. It is very easy to brush that aside and pretend that we will deal with it later or that it does not matter. I can guarantee that in the event that we had a fully elected upper House, it would start to use its mandate against the mandate of the Commons from day one, and voters would not know how long the mandate in one House would last over the other. We would very likely find ourselves in a constant cycle of elections, rather than being in a position where one party or a coalition of parties could be elected for a term and deliver based on their mandate. Those are all risks that we as parliamentarians must be alive to and aware of.

I have greatly enjoyed the debate today. It is important that from time to time we engage in debate on these major issues.

Patrick Grady *rose—*

Alex Burghart: The hon. Member for Glasgow North is about to sum up, but I will let him intervene.

Patrick Grady: The Minister said the constitution evolves. As a bare minimum, do the Government agree with the findings of the Lord Speaker's Committee on the size of the House of Lords, which said in 2017 that there should be a cap on the total number and efforts to reduce from the current number?

Alex Burghart: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave him just before Christmas. If people do not turn up, they do not get paid. If people turn up and are involved, why not have their expertise? The Government depend on a majority in the Commons on an elected mandate. If there are more people in the upper Chamber who are capable of bringing decent scrutiny to bear on Government legislation, I have no problem with that. As I was saying, I think it is very good that we get to debate these issues, but it is also important that we do not come at debates such as these pretending that there is a perfect system out there—that we pretend that what we are doing here is laughable, and that, in other countries, they have got it absolutely right. What I do know is that, in this country, we have a fine set-up in

which there is one House with a democratically elected mandate, and another House whose job it is to scrutinise and which can advise, refine and, if necessary, delay. It is a system that I think has served us well, and I believe can serve us well in the future. That said, the Government are aware that there is always room for evolution and improvement.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you. Patrick Grady will have the final word.

3.55 pm

Patrick Grady: Thank you, Mr Streeter. I would just say to the Minister that I prefer to think that we are on the side of the divine, musing on the behaviour of the atheists, and I will not take any lessons on being a single-issue party, given that the Conservatives all got elected on the three-word slogan of “Get Brexit done”.

I thank the Minister, the Opposition spokesperson—the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson)—and my colleague from the SNP Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for their contributions. I also thank the hon. Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), and my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), for all of their contributions.

It has been a thoughtful and useful debate, and I want to reiterate that none of what any of us have said—I think—has meant any disrespect to any individual Member of the House of Lords. I think we can all recognise, as the Labour Front Bench did, the significant contribution that many of them make.

As SNP MPs, many of us do not want to be here—we want Scotland to become an independent country. There are actually many Members of the House of Lords who do not want to be there either; they want to see it reformed in such a way that it will probably cost them their positions. But I think that makes my point, which I was trying to get across to the Minister in my intervention. When the Lords themselves support reform, yet such a simple measure and straightforward framework as the proposals in the Lord Speaker's Committee cannot get enacted, and the Government do not just ignore it but actively work against the recommendations in it, then my point is proved; reform might be a nice idea, but it simply ain't going to happen. That means that the answer for people in Scotland who do want constitutional change to drive economic and social change—which is what the Labour party's position is—is that the route for them is going to be independence.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered reform of the House of Lords.

Unaccompanied Minors Seeking Asylum

3.58 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): If Angela Crawley is ready to go, it is a delight to call her to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. Just to remind Members, there is not an opportunity in a 30-minute debate for the Member in charge to wind up. That is our convention.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered unaccompanied minors seeking asylum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I am grateful for the opportunity to lead today's debate on an urgent and sadly all too familiar issue. Last month, 30 miles out at sea, at 3 am, in freezing conditions, four migrants died after a small boat capsized in the English channel. That is not a new story, sadly—it happens too often—but one of the dead was just a teenager. That news never gets any easier to hear or digest.

In that same tragedy, eight children were among those who were successfully rescued by the coastguard. *The Mirror* reported that one 12-year-old survivor was escaping Afghanistan after his whole family had been killed by the Taliban. None of us can imagine the horrors that drive people to get on boats or take perilous journeys to cross the channel, yet those horrors are experienced by innocent children every day.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrive alone, afraid, and have no idea where to start. Unfortunately, this Government are fixated on criminalising and discrediting desperate people who have come to the UK to seek a new life. Vulnerable children and young people are having their rights and protections stripped, and that is the wrong approach. Our duty must be to give them a warm welcome, a fresh start and the protection and hope that they so desperately need when they arrive to seek refuge in the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. It is an absolutely super subject, but a very worrying one as well. Does she agree that all young people, no matter their backgrounds, deserve a healthy, stable upbringing that gives them the same chance to succeed in later life? Most of these minors will be helpless. Does the hon. Lady feel like we could do better to fulfil our duty of care by not only providing food and clothing, but ensuring that they have a chance of a future life with an education and a stable home?

Angela Crawley: I absolutely agree. I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, as always. He is correct. We have a duty not only as a country and a nation, but as humans, to acknowledge that these children are not the criminal gangs or the ones facilitating the process of getting to the UK. They are simply the innocent bystanders of a process that they themselves may not have chosen.

Far too often, children have been incorrectly declared as adults. An immigration officer will make an age judgment based on demeanour or appearance. If they are judged to be an adult, they are not sent for an age

assessment. Rather, they are given a date of birth and sent to live in shared rooms with adults. In 2021, a specialist programme run by the Refugee Council worked with 233 young people over 12 months. The Home Office had initially determined them to be “certainly” adults, when in fact, only 14 of them were adults. That means that 219 of those children were denied the rights and protections of a child, and were exposed to further exploitation, trafficking and violence as a result of that determination. Those 219 children were counting on us to take care of them.

The Home Office refuses to document how often that happens, how many children are judged incorrectly to be adults or what happens to them. There is no process to track such a decision. If there is any dubiety in that decision, there is no pathway to ensure that those individuals are protected and safeguarded until a definitive determination can be made. It is fair to say that even the determinations that are made are questionable at times. I therefore ask the Minister to be more transparent about frontline decision making. Will he commit to publishing statistics on age-disputed children who are initially treated as adults? Will he outline a pathway for those individuals to ensure that they are protected and safeguarded within the system, as they should be?

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 gives the Home Office powers to conduct medical age assessments. However, the British Association of Social Workers has stated that there is no known scientific method that can precisely determine age. Pushing scientific methods upon age-disputed young people is incredibly insensitive. It ignores the trauma they have been through and the atrocities they have seen.

Those who are wrongly declared as adults will not be able to avoid deportation to Rwanda under this Government's cruel plans. That is a terrifying prospect for children and young people. I am disappointed in the UK Government. A place that was supposed to be their second chance and a place of safety is only adding to their stress and anxiety. I therefore ask the Minister: when will the report from the Age Estimation Science Advisory Committee on specific scientific methods for age assessment be made available? Will learning from the national age assessment board pilots be shared, given their frontline role in rectifying the Home Office's mistakes? We need to ensure that these processes are transparent and that we can scrutinise them appropriately.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are being abandoned by the Home Office and placed in hotels that are desperately unfit for anyone to live in, but particularly children, who are forced to live alongside adults, further exposing them to potential harms. The Home Office has set out its intentions to speed up the process by which unaccompanied children are transferred from temporary hotels to long-term care, but it is simply not enough. Again, that process is not transparent. It only normalises the use of hotels that are unfit accommodation for anyone, but particularly for children who should be nowhere near them.

Every Child Protected Against Trafficking says that housing children in hotels is unlawful, dangerous and contrary to the UK's child welfare legislation. In October last year, more than 220 unaccompanied children went missing from hotels. Had those children been in the care of authorities, they would have been protected. I ask the Minister again, what is the pathway and how do we

[Angela Crawley]

ensure that no child who is placed in any form of accommodation can go missing without someone being directly accountable and responsible?

Unaccompanied children are alone, scared and vulnerable. Many have left behind their families not knowing how they are; they deserve to have their families join them in safety. The Home Office's position on altering family reunification rights for children is nothing short of ridiculous. This Government believe that allowing children and young people to sponsor their families would incentivise parents to send their children on dangerous journeys to the UK. Whether that is the case or not, I do not believe it is a decision any parent would make outside of the most desperate of circumstances.

Turning briefly to the point on family reunification, the Home Office's minimum income requirement means that UK citizens and settled persons currently have to earn £18,600 before they can sponsor a spouse or partner to join them—more, if children are involved. That means that a substantial percentage of the population who do not earn that sum cannot live with their family and have to leave the country. Many thousands of families have been split apart since its introduction almost a decade ago, and many more have been affected by the rules that will also apply to European economic area family members.

Rather than reduce the level of income, or abandon the policy altogether as I have argued for repeatedly, reports have emerged over Christmas that the Home Office is thinking of increasing it further, splitting more families apart. The fact is that many families in the UK right now may struggle to meet those requirements in the current circumstances. To place that requirement arbitrarily on families only serves to ensure that further families will not receive reunification. It is not a reason to keep families apart. That they make those perilous journeys only highlights the grave circumstances that children flee from.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 brought in a ham-fisted policy with deferential treatment for refugees seeking family reunion based on the way they entered the UK. Those who arrived outside of one of the ever-dwindling safe and legal routes need to meet higher tests and additional requirements before being able to reunite with their family members. Organisations such as Families Together are calling for this discriminatory policy to be scrapped.

I close my contribution by apologising to the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who come to this country seeking safe harbour—because it is simply not the case. I apologise to the thousands of children who have come here and potentially been lost in a system with no traceability, because this Government refuse to acknowledge that they are in fact children. I am sorry that I could not cover more in this debate, but their voices and stories should not be ignored just because of where they came from. The fact is that they are children, and they should be treated as such. The harm and neglect that they are facing after seeking refuge in the UK can only be blamed on this Government, and the heartless Home Office policies that they exhibit.

I do not wish to hammer home the point any more than I already have, but it is simply unimaginable to me that we have, just recently, 219 children who we cannot

account for, and many more who we have incorrectly administered as adults. What will the Minister do to correct that? It simply cannot continue.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): This is a half-hour debate; do you have the permission of the mover of the motion to speak?

Angela Crawley: He does now.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Mr Watling, you have five minutes.

4.8 pm

Giles Watling: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing this very important debate. I represent the coastal community of Clacton in Essex; we have the second-longest coastline in England. It is a very beautiful coastline with many sandy beaches. Essex has many points of entry. It has two freeports. It was in Essex where we had the horrific loss of life, when 39 people being trafficked were accidentally asphyxiated in the back of a container—Members might remember that horror. I am a yachtsman, and I know how treacherous our waters can be.

Children from the likes of Syria, Ukraine and Afghanistan must have a quick, legal and safe route of asylum to our country. Quite frankly, some of the stories I read about children chill my blood. As we on the coast in Essex know, illegal crossings are inviting disaster, though for victims of modern-day slavery, the crossing might well be the best part of it. But we cannot be emotional here; we have to be calm, and to think this through, as the evil traffickers do. They know that if they tell people to claim to be under 18, those people will mostly be subject to our care system, as opposed to the justice system. They know that councils struggle to deal with complex cases, so people absconding from care to get to their sinister destination is certainly not unheard of.

The only solution is to negotiate with our French neighbours. We have British boots in control rooms in France, which is a welcome development, but we can negotiate further and get British boots on the ground in France. We can finance that. With every boat that lands here, we are telling those overseas that their dangerous business model can work, and telling those waiting here for their product that their evil business model is still viable. However, the point of my speech is to highlight that, for areas such as Essex, stopping small boats is not enough. Human misery can be and is traded in large vessels, heavy goods vehicles and so on, as I mentioned earlier. I urge the Minister to apply the same focus that we have on small boats to other modes of travel, which can be equally lethal, and to get boots on the ground in France for the sake of these children.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling)

for his contribution. This is clearly an important subject, and I hope that in the time available I can respond to the points raised by both hon. Members.

It is important to underline that the UK has a proud record of providing protection and sanctuary to people who need it in accordance with our international obligations. Between 2015 and September of last year, we offered a place to almost 450,000 men, women and children who sought safety via safe and legal entry routes. They include people from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, as well as the family members of refugees. Last year, we offered more entry route opportunities than in any single year since the end of the second world war. Over the same period, the UK offered protection in the form of refugee status, humanitarian protection and alternative forms of leave via asylum applications to over 90,000 people, including dependants.

It is important to recognise the wider background to these matters. The Home Secretary and I have been very clear, repeatedly, about the challenges that we face as a country, some of which have been referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton. We should be under no illusion about the fact that the UK's asylum system has been under immense strain and mounting pressure for several years, owing to the very large numbers of people crossing the channel illegally—principally, but not solely, in small boats. Last year, over 45,000 people arrived in clandestine boats. The journeys are facilitated by ruthless criminal gangs who are interested only in profiting from human misery. The tragic loss of life in the channel last month, to which the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East referred, was the worst possible reminder of the dangers of the crossings, and underlines once more why it is so critical that we destroy the business model of the people smugglers.

That is why deterrence will be suffused through everything that we do as a Government, and why I disagree with the hon. Lady's characterisation of our policy with regard to Rwanda. There is nothing compassionate about perpetuating a trade in people that risks the lives of thousands of individuals, including children, every year. That evil trade must be stopped, and we are taking concerted action to do so on a number of fronts, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out at the end of last year. That action includes deeper co-operation with our key partners, such as the French, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton set out.

Angela Crawley: If just one child is incorrectly defined as an adult because of this Government's abhorrent policy—the Minister calls it a deterrence policy—on preventing criminal gangs, is that not one child too many who will fall through the cracks and be in further danger?

Robert Jenrick: I will come on in a moment to answer the hon. Lady's questions about age verification, but I disagree that sending individuals to Rwanda, which has now been declared a safe country by the courts, is a policy that is uncompassionate or cruel. Quite the opposite is true.

We live in an age of mass migration. Millions of people wish to come to the United Kingdom. If we do nothing to deter people from coming to the UK, which I think is the position that the hon. Lady and her party suggest taking, we will find not 45,000 people crossing

the channel, but hundreds of thousands of people doing so in the years and decades ahead. We have to respond to this issue as a country, as many other countries around the world are doing.

From the conversations that the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have had with our European and international partners, it is clear that every developed country in the world is thinking carefully about how they can put in place procedures and policies that will prevent mass migration and deter individuals from making dangerous crossings or damaging their national sovereignty. Other European countries are looking to the work we are doing on Rwanda. We may see other European countries copy that policy and make agreements with third parties in the years ahead.

Giles Watling: The Minister almost answered my point in his last sentence. In 2020, I believe there were some 90 million displaced people across the globe on the move. That figure will have increased. Other countries will be facing the same problems that we face, and they will all have different models. Are we looking at different models?

Robert Jenrick: We are looking at all models; I hope that hon. Members can see from the plans set out by the Prime Minister that this will be a campaign on several fronts. We are looking at every viable route in order to deter people from coming to the UK, to process applications as swiftly as possible, and to find better forms of accommodation when they are here. I know that my hon. Friend's constituency has been on the sharp end of the situation regarding accommodation. Of course, we are talking to our international partners around the world, who are all grappling with the same challenge.

We are not an international outlier. The policies that we are enacting are those that are being enacted or considered by most other developed countries. The Prime Minister, through his recent conversations with President Macron, and the Home Secretary, through the Calais Group of northern European states, are working intensively and constructively with our partners to find common ways forward. The treaties that we are bound by, such as the refugee convention, were created for a different era, in the immediate aftermath of the second world war, prior to this period in which tens if not hundreds of millions of individuals are looking to travel around the world. It is in that context that we need to sharpen the deterrent we have as a country to make sure that we are not providing an easier route than our European neighbours, and are not a more compelling destination than our nearest neighbours, for those shopping for asylum or, particularly, for economic migrants.

I will answer the questions the hon. Lady has brought to my attention. The first point is about how we house individuals. It is important to say—I mean no disrespect to the hon. Lady, but this point needs to be made—that Scotland is bearing a lighter burden than other parts of the United Kingdom when it comes to refugees generally, and to those who are crossing the channel in small boats in particular. The same appears to be true with respect to children.

Angela Crawley: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will in a moment. I know the hon. Lady feels passionately about ensuring that individuals are housed decently and compassionately, so the best thing that she and her colleagues could do is go to Scotland and speak to the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities, and encourage them to adopt better policies, so that Scotland takes a fair and equitable number of those crossing the channel.

Before I give way, I want to give the statistics. The Scottish Government have nine hotels supporting asylum seekers, and five hotels supporting the Afghan cohort in the UK, which represents just 1.6% of the combined asylum and Afghan hotel population across the whole of the United Kingdom. There are small cities in England, such as Stoke-on-Trent, that have more hotels housing asylum seekers than the whole of Scotland. That is not fair and equitable. If the Scottish Government and members of the SNP want to play a full part in these debates and discussions, the best thing they could do is ensure that they played a greater part in this.

Angela Crawley: The Minister should be mindful when quoting statistics. It is somewhat misleading to suggest that, because Scotland is using fewer hotels, it is not adequately playing its part. Most local authorities in Scotland have more than stepped up to the plate. The use of selective statistics is very misleading and not great practice. Let us be honest: are not most hotels not suitable accommodation, temporary or otherwise, for individuals? It is therefore misleading to suggest that Scotland is not playing its part. There are many other ways in which we accommodate asylum seekers. *[Interruption.]*

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. Can the Minister finish in 30 seconds? I suspect not. If not, we will have to come back.

Robert Jenrick: Could we come back? The hon. Lady had a number of points I should address.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Indeed.

4.21 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

Future of Postal Services

5 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before I call Tahir Ali to move the motion, there is obviously a cast of thousands here. It is a one-hour debate, and the Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople will speak for five minutes and the Minister for 10 minutes. When Tahir has sat down, I will let you know what your life expectancy will be, but it will be about two minutes, so you should prepare for that. I might give you one minute more, Jeremy, but for most of you it will be two minutes.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of postal services.

It is indeed a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I refer you to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a proud member of the Communication Workers Union and an employee of Royal Mail.

The question of the future of postal services has been thrown into stark relief in recent times. The pandemic meant that many were confined to their homes, reliant on deliveries to meet their basic needs. It became clear to everyone that postal workers were key to the economy and to the regular functioning of our society. For many during lockdown, the relief provided by our postal services was vital in maintaining wellbeing and keeping families and communities safe.

During the pandemic, the volume of parcels delivered grew by a staggering 50%, with a total of 4.2 billion parcels delivered in the year 2020-21. Royal Mail saw its parcel volumes increase by 30%, with a total of 1.7 billion parcels delivered, which means 40% of the total number of parcels delivered in the UK were delivered by Royal Mail.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. While Royal Mail may have some challenges, it is important to recognise what it does well, which includes parcel delivery. With Evri, formerly known as Hermes, parcels are stolen, lost or delayed at huge cost to customers and businesses alike. Does the hon. Member agree that companies such as Evri should be held to account for their failings?

Tahir Ali: I agree with the hon. Member's comments and I hope to cover that specific issue later in my speech. The longer interventions are, the less time other Members will get.

All Royal Mail deliveries were achieved in a way that satisfied most service users. Some 83% of residential customers said they were satisfied with Royal Mail's service, while 79% of small and medium-sized enterprises said they were satisfied. That was all the result of hard work and sacrifice by Royal Mail staff, who increased the revenues of Royal Mail by a huge 40%, generating healthy profits of £758 million for the company in 2021.

However, £576 million of those profits were promptly paid out to shareholders, with the chief executive officer of Royal Mail, Simon Thompson, paying himself a massive bonus of £140,000. Let us pause for a minute and think about what that £570 million could have done

if it had come into the Treasury. It could have contributed hugely towards money to pay nurses, doctors and ambulance drivers.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. He mentioned the chief executive officer of Royal Mail, Simon Thompson. Does my hon. Friend agree that if Royal Mail is to be sorted out for the future, which the CWU was trying to do, Simon Thompson has no place as chief executive officer?

Tahir Ali: I agree with my hon. Friend. Where a chief executive does not have the interest of the workforce at heart, they need to consider their position.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, based on his 30 years' experience working as a postie. As he said, if half the money given to shareholders was given to the actual workers, there would be no need for this dispute or strike. Does he agree that CWU members deserve a pay rise and that the company can afford it?

Tahir Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; that is a very pertinent point. I stressed that £576 million, which she also referred to. This is not about affordability; this is about picking a fight with the workforce, who have put themselves at risk to make sure that we were safe and secure, and received our deliveries throughout the pandemic.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As noted, my hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree, following on from the previous points, that there can be no long-term sustainable future for our postal services while Royal Mail is paying millions to shareholders from its announced profit of £758 million, while at the same time cutting pay and condition for postal workers?

Tahir Ali: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Services in his region are delivered through Leeds mail centre, among others, which is one of the biggest in the region that he serves, yet many employees are now resorting to food banks to feed their families. In this day and age, it is absolutely shocking that a Royal Mail employee should be resorting to food banks.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Tahir Ali: I will make a bit of progress before I give way, otherwise interventions are going to take over.

Staff were given a derisory pay offer, and faced an assault on working conditions and threats to cut up to 10,000 permanent jobs and replace them with self-employed drivers and agency workers. It has been left to the Communication Workers Union to challenge this attempt to restructure Royal Mail as a gig economy-style company and protect the interests of permanent members of staff. The recent industrial action, led by the CWU, reflects the anger and exasperation of employees, who have had enough of being overlooked and underrated. After several days of walkouts, 91.24% of workers voted in favour of continuing the strike action into the new year. If management continue to refuse to negotiate in good faith and reach a deal with workers, disruption could continue.

However, I know that staff at Royal Mail do not want to be in this situation. They do not want to be on strike, but they feel as though their hand has been forced. I know this because I spent my working life at Royal Mail—my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) almost gave my age away there; I did not think I was even 30 years old—and I know the values and principles that motivate all who work there. I have experienced at first hand the dedication and professionalism of Royal Mail staff, and I know that they put the needs of service users and communities at the very centre of their efforts.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): When Royal Mail made a record £758 million profit last year, surely it can invest in its staff to continue to deliver on the universal service obligation that it promised its customers?

Tahir Ali: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which has been echoed in previous interventions. We will be calling on the Minister to go back to the Royal Mail board and stress the need to resolve this issue, because it is not one of affordability.

Royal Mail has, through thick and thin, managed to provide a truly excellent and universal service. Despite the shambolic privatisation of Royal Mail, the ethos of those working within it is still one of public service. Royal Mail was founded on the principle of universal service, and its staff still stand by that principle today. However, the current leadership of Royal Mail seems to be moving the company further and further away from its public service ethos, and seeking to emulate multinationals such as Amazon, DPD and DHL, where bogus self-employment is rife and pay and working conditions are abysmal.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is making a fantastic speech. Does he agree that if Royal Mail cannot operate without driving down workers' pay and cutting jobs because its first priority is clearly always its shareholders, it has failed in its stated aim to provide the public service that it is meant to? Does he agree that that is an argument for taking Royal Mail back into public ownership? In my view and the view of the overwhelming majority of the public, that is where it belongs.

Tahir Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I could not agree more.

I have highlighted a glimpse of the bleak future that the management at Royal Mail want: poorer pay, poorer conditions, overworked staff, a zero-hour workforce and a service that is neither universal nor satisfactory to the customer. That has been seen in the steady erosion of the universal service obligation, along with the recent announcement that Royal Mail will be split into two entities and potentially sold off to the asset-stripping company Vesa Equity Investment, which is currently its largest shareholder.

It is evident from this that Royal Mail profiteering is becoming the name of the game. The billions in revenue generated by Royal Mail staff are eaten up by shareholders and management, who pay themselves huge bonuses while staff struggle to make ends meet. Instead of being reinvested to truly modernise and improve Royal Mail, this revenue is being used to pay off shareholders.

[Tahir Ali]

It is clear to me, therefore, that there are two possible futures for Royal Mail: one as a universal public service provided with compassion and dedication by employees who are valued and respected; and the other just as a delivery company, to be pumped for profit and asset-stripped, at the expense of service users and with workers' pay and conditions eroded. What does all of this signal for the future of postal services in the UK?

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is making an excellent speech. Is it not, even in commercial terms, an incredibly short-term prospect? Fundamentally, the current management of Royal Mail are trashing the business and will therefore end up, even on their own terms, with a much-weakened company, which unfortunately may then have to be nationalised because it is failing. The service that it is providing is so bad that people are moving away from it. That really is a national crisis that requires Government intervention.

Tahir Ali: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend, who is a neighbouring MP from my region. This will turn Royal Mail into a badly performing company. CEOs and management move on, but it is the employees who stay and have to pick up the pieces.

I believe that the present circumstances offer us two possible paths forward: one ensuring that Royal Mail continues to offer an exemplary public service to all in the UK, with the profits of expanding operations going into decent pay and conditions for staff, as well as improvements to the service overall; and another in which Royal Mail is stripped of its public service ethos and reorganised to generate maximum profits for shareholders, while the service loses out to private competition. I believe that the choice is an obvious one. Royal Mail should be considered a public service, and therefore it should be owned and governed as one. I believe that Royal Mail should be renationalised.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this debate. As we all know, he has a huge interest in the service and has worked for a long period in it, supported by the people who work continuously. I visited a number of post offices and distribution offices during Christmas, when all the cards and everything else are sent.

This current management structure is purely about asset-stripping and making money out of the service in the short term, and getting rid of the whole service. I think it is incumbent on this Government and the Minister who is here today to have a far more serious debate—I am sure that my hon. Friend would lead it—about ensuring that Royal Mail remains a proper public service for all those people, from grandparents to grandchildren, who enjoy all the cards and other mail that they receive every day.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be brief. If we have many more, there will not be any time for speeches.

Tahir Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is always keen to visit the local mail centre. Under the boundary changes, that mail centre will fall in his constituency, so we can visit it jointly.

I believe that Royal Mail should be renationalised, and I am not alone. A recent poll showed that 68% of the public back the renationalisation of Royal Mail, and studies have highlighted that renationalisation might save £171 million a year. However, we cannot talk about postal services and the renationalisation of Royal Mail without discussing the post office network. The network is inarguably one of the most important for small businesses and local communities, which rely on their local post offices to collect and receive parcels and letters, as well as to export items all over the world.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As my hon. Friend is aware, there are only 116 Crown post offices left. When it comes to closing banks, part of the Government's strategy is that people can access banking services and cash from their post offices. Does he agree that it is highly unlikely that people can access banking services from a post office when that post office no longer exists?

Tahir Ali: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. If a post office operates as a franchise, it can close shop and go at any time. When someone is providing a public service, they have a duty of care towards the community. In rural areas, post offices are usually the only contact that people—especially elderly people—have with someone who is providing them with a service.

The value of postal services must not be overlooked. Citizens Advice reports that one in five residents visit the post office at least once a week, and in rural areas that figure is one in four people. That shows the continued importance of post offices to constituents.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. Post office staff work really hard, including in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale. We have seven post offices, but I understand that, despite one in five people visiting post offices every week, there are serious concerns about franchises being lost across the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should fulfil their duty and ensure that post offices are protected?

Tahir Ali: My hon. Friend makes an important point: we should not just look at the Post Office board; the Government have a role to play. I am sure that the Minister will respond to that.

Online shopping is growing exponentially in the UK, with the parcel market growing to over 50% of all post since 2010. Over 130 million parcels have been sent in the UK by small businesses. That has placed pressure on the postal sector to hire more employees and open more post office branches, with 11,365 branches open by March 2022. The postal service has worked hard to keep up with the surge of technology by signing contracts with Amazon, DHL and DPD, among others, to introduce click and collect services, and reaching agreements to deliver parcels to post office branches to meet higher customer expectations.

Despite all the changes, however, there are big cracks in the post office network that gesture towards a bleak future. Government funding for post offices through the network subsidy and investment grants declined from £410 million in 2012-13 to just £120 million in

2020-21—a reduction of 71%. Post office branches have been opened, but out of the 11,000-plus post offices, only 4,000 are open seven days a week and many provide only partial outreach services. By September 2021, over 1,200 branches had closed, which is double the number five years ago.

The accessibility of branches has become a massive issue in recent years; some constituents, especially in rural areas, only have a few post offices near them, and those either work on a part-time basis or are temporarily closed. Not all residents are tech savvy—I am not, either—meaning that post offices are a necessity for some, especially for banking. Over 110 million banking transactions were carried out in post offices in 2017. The number of branch closures has been rising steadily, and it is becoming harder for communities and businesses to access post offices.

The Government have played their part in creating an uncertain future for postal services by severely downplaying their role in helping the community and the economy, and significantly reducing investment in the network. Nick Read, the chief executive of Post Office, expresses the same concerns. He stated that the Government “should not overlook” the role of post offices and postmasters in keeping national and local communities connected, and urged the Government to extend their support for post office branches with energy bills beyond March 2023 to keep the postal service alive.

The CWU has described the continued selling off of post offices as “backdoor privatisation”, an assessment I agree with. It is evident that the increase in parcel delivery and collection, along with e-commerce, gives the Post Office a new opportunity for future growth. That is why we must continue to foster and grow our post office network through investment and not through sell-offs to the highest bidder.

To conclude, I have some pertinent questions for the Minister. First, at a time when the Government claim to be levelling up the nation, what are they doing to increase the presence of post offices in rural areas where elderly populations are reliant on these services? Furthermore, as more post offices are partial outreach services open for an average of five and a half hours a week, what impact assessment will the Government undertake to ensure that every member of the public has sufficient access to these vital services? Will the Government commit to restoring the post office network grant to previous levels as a means of providing real investment and modernisation to the network?

Do the Government agree that Royal Mail should see being the universal service obligation provider as a competitive advantage, rather than as something to be whittled away over time? Do they accept that those hard-working postal workers who put their lives on the line during covid-19 should be considered essential workers key to the national infrastructure? Will the Government confirm that they stand against the restructuring of Royal Mail into a casualised, gig economy-style service, which will prove detrimental to both staff and service users?

Will the Minister explain the reasoning behind allowing Vesa Equity to acquire a controlling stake in Royal Mail, particularly given the threat it poses to the future of both Royal Mail and universal UK postal services? Finally, does he agree that a postie is there for life, not just for Christmas?

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Colleagues, the wind-ups will begin at 5.38 pm. That gives us 15 minutes. Twelve people were standing, so you have one and a half minutes each.

5.24 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Thank you, Sir Gary. Occasionally, sitting on the Government Benches, I wonder whether I am going to get in on a debate, but today I have. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for bringing forward the debate. I am conscious that there is another debate later in the week on a similar topic, so I will confine my observations to two or three areas.

Let me start by saying that I agree with many of the things that the hon. Member raised about the hard-working posties who deliver mail to homes across the UK. They provide an invaluable service. Anyone who recognises the time spent waiting at Christmas for a card or parcel to arrive knows how important that service is. But it is also important to say that when the market changes, companies operating in those sectors have to change. If they do not, they simply will not be around in the future.

I put that point in the context of the number of letters that are sent by individuals in the UK annually. In 2004-05, Royal Mail delivered around 20 billion letters. Last year, that figure had dropped to 8 billion. The change is dramatic, and is not surprising when we consider how we live our lives today. We simply do not send as many things in the post as we once did.

While I absolutely agree that the universal service obligation should be retained, there is a need for Royal Mail to reconsider how it operates, to ensure that everybody continues to get the services. Crucially, it is the parcel market that is important. That is a vital sector for my constituency and I look forward to speaking further on this issue in coming weeks.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): One and a half minutes flies by. I call Jeremy Corbyn.

5.25 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for securing the debate. The current dispute of Royal Mail workers with the Royal Mail Group, led by the CWU, is appalling because of the sacrifices that those workers are making. I have stood with them on many picket lines, in my constituency and other places, and talked to them about the way their jobs have changed and the stress that they are under. They are now threatened with job losses through redundancy, a below-inflation pay rise and a speeding up of the way in which their work is done. The situation is appalling.

We need to value our postal workers for being part of our communities and for their dedication. Our service was unfortunately privatised by the coalition Government—thank you, Liberal Democrats, for your contribution to that Government—and separated from the Post Office. That is absolutely the wrong way to do things. We ought to keep the Post Office and Royal Mail as one.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

We should absolutely retain the universal service obligation, so that every address in the whole country can get a letter or parcel. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) said that the number of letters has reduced. Yes it has, and the number of parcels has increased. The world has changed, but Royal Mail is there, with the universal service obligation, to meet all those changes in our society. If we take the universal service obligation away, we will be left with a lot of pretty incompetent private sector delivery companies, which simply will not be up to the mark.

Andy Carter *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not calling the hon. Member incompetent.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. No interventions, please.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is up to the Government to intervene now to protect the USO and take Royal Mail back into public ownership, which it should never have left.

5.27 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) on securing the debate. This issue clearly requires a debate, with more time, on the Floor of the House.

The current parlous state of industrial relations within Royal Mail has been felt particularly acutely in the Northern Isles. A number of people have spoken about the position of various courier companies and the poor quality of their service. However, for many businesses in my constituency, the option of moving from an unreliable Royal Mail service to those other companies is simply not open to them, because those companies do not operate in the Northern Isles. That is why the universal service is particularly important for us.

The inability of businesses in my constituency—those that offer food and drink and send out hampers, the various craft businesses, and the whole range of other companies that have diversified their business model in recent years to incorporate mail order—to send out their products has been catastrophic. We have felt the impact more acutely than any other part of the country.

This is a regulated business, and it is clear that Ofcom has certain powers at its disposal to protect the universal service. It is surely necessary now for it to come forward. Instead of entertaining talk from Royal Mail about how it can reduce the universal service, Ofcom should look at how it uses those powers to protect it.

5.29 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): First, I want to pay tribute to my local posties, Wayne and Mark, who are incredible. Wayne, in particular, went absolutely over and above when I was heavily pregnant and then had a newborn. He always did everything he could not to generate extra journeys for me, knowing how difficult that can be with a newborn. That is the value of local posties who care. We are so grateful for the service that they provide, but we stand to lose it if we are not careful.

I tabled written parliamentary questions to the Minister at the end of November, asking what discussions his Department had had with Royal Mail Group on six-day letter deliveries and the future of the universal service obligation. I was reassured that the Government said they had no current plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service. However, in a statement on 17 November, Royal Mail said:

“A sustainable future must also include urgent reform of the Universal Service. Government has now been approached to seek an early move to five day letter delivery, whilst we continue to improve parcel services.”

We are clear in our understanding that what is going on at Royal Mail is a real prioritisation of parcels over letters. The only difference between a letter and a parcel might be the cost to send, rather than the value of the content. Is that not what the universal service obligation is there to recognise and protect? I simply ask the Minister: what are the Government doing to ensure that Ofcom is playing its role in holding Royal Mail to account on its service obligations, and what is he doing to make sure that we look after postal workers into the future?

5.31 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I send my solidarity and support to striking postal workers, who are fighting for better terms and conditions and to save our vital postal service. Since the service was sold off at a bargain basement price by the Con-Dem coalition, workers' rights have been systemically undermined. The union-busting treachery and threats by Royal Mail are destructive and smack of desperation. It is using bullying and intimidation tactics, bribing managers with massive bonuses to deliver mail on strike days, spending millions on agency workers, boasting of a £1.7 billion fund to crush its own workers rather than using that money to settle the dispute and restore the service, and threatening to destroy the jobs of posties and remove their union from the workplace.

Royal Mail must agree immediately to the CWU demands of a backdated pay deal of 9%, long-term job security, an end to the tax on union representatives and members, and a commitment to negotiations on the company's future. The Government must agree to end the closure of post offices and invest in the institutions that provide vital services to our communities, particularly those in remote and left-behind areas. They must investigate and bring an end to the bogus self-employment practices that are on the increase in the sector. We must end this race to the bottom on pay, terms and conditions. Anything less risks the loss of this vital service, and a great loss to our communities. Solidarity to the CWU and all the postal workers.

5.32 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali). Once a successful, proud British enterprise in the hands of the British public, Royal Mail is being driven into the gig economy while senior managers are milking profits and funnelling £560 million in payouts to shareholders. They did not get up in the middle of the night to travel to all parts of our country, especially during covid, to care for our communities.

So well depicted in Ken Loach's film "Sorry We Missed You", the gig economy's long hours, low wages and punitive, bogus self-employment will soon besmirch Royal Mail as it sells off the King's head. Royal Mail is wanting to break up the universal service obligations, sack 10,000 posties and be the next P&O as it recruits agency staff and owner drivers at the expense of the current workforce, further ripping up the pathway to change without having to give account.

This Government are standing by as this next chapter of fire and hire plays out. What have they done? They have walked away when they should be pressing in. They have opened the door for investors—a foreign private equity firm—to sweep in and asset strip. So much for giving back control—they are, to a Czech oligarch. I thank the CWU and its members for standing up for our postal service and bringing it to our attention. As with other companies in failure, the Government will put in place an operator of last resort. We are now at that last resort, and we need the Government to step in and nationalise this company.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): After Richard Burgon, Members will have one minute each, so that everyone can get in.

5.34 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have been speaking to local posties on the Harehills and Seacroft picket lines in my Leeds East constituency. It is clear that our posties care deeply about this service, but they are being attacked by Simon Thompson and the Royal Mail bosses. There are attacks on jobs, pay and, crucially, hard-won terms and conditions and, of course, the service itself—on the universal service obligation. Only the other Friday, 17,500 postal workers were in Parliament Square because they had had enough of being attacked by Royal Mail bosses and not being supported by the Government. They want to save this service. That is what it is all about.

If we need any further proof that Simon Thompson and the Royal Mail bosses have embarked on a path of confrontation, not negotiation, let us look at the fact that over 100 Communication Workers Union representatives have been suspended during this strike by the bosses. That smells rotten to me, and it looks like an attempt at union busting. We need a real change and solidarity with the Communication Workers Union. Anybody who cares about our public services and the future of Royal Mail should listen to the workers who keep it going day in, day out, in all weathers. Let us support them, and let us have action from the Government to turn this around.

5.36 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for securing the debate. For years, Royal Mail has repeatedly fallen short of several of the performance targets that it is required to hit. The most recent quality of service report reveals that, in the second quarter of 2022, it missed its first class USO by a staggering 20%. As Matthew Upton, the Director of Policy at Citizens Advice has said:

"Ofcom is letting Royal Mail off the hook for substantial mail delays. Failure to hit a single quarterly target for over two years is simply unacceptable."

While Royal Mail's year-end quality of service reports chart some improvement, I am not satisfied with this. Royal Mail was closer to hitting several of its targets last year, but it still consistently failed to hit key delivery targets in every quarter since the emergency regulatory period for covid came to an end. Ofcom must provide us with reassurance that unless there is substantial improvement, it will take enforcement action. After all, what do targets really mean if nobody is ensuring that they are being met?

5.37 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) and, of course, send my support to all the posties out on strike today.

I wonder if, in his remarks, the Minister could focus on the issue of our Crown post offices being replaced by agency-franchised offices instead. These agency-franchised offices obviously do not offer the same services as the Crown post offices, but that shows a disjoint and a lack of decision making in Government.

On the one hand, we have the Financial Services and Markets Bill—I sat on the Public Bill Committee—in which the Government said there will be continued access to cash and banking services through the postal network. How can that be, when they are allowing those postal networks to be replaced by agency networks instead? We will end up with fewer people having access to cash and banking services. While the banks close, the post offices are not there to replace them. I hope the Minister will address the point about financial inclusion when he replies to the debate.

5.38 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We in the Labour party made our fears clearly known back in 2010, when the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), the current leader of the Liberal Democrats, led the charge of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government to privatise Royal Mail.

We warned of the danger to the six-day universal service obligation, which is so important to our households and to businesses across the country, and the envy of many other countries. We warned against not having a major Government shareholding in Royal Mail and of the danger of asset stripping. Our fears are now being realised, with a threat to the universal service obligation.

We hear about the £400 million paid out in dividends and £167 million in share buy-backs, so it is no wonder that workers are utterly incredulous to find that jobs are being cut and they are being told that there is no money for reasonable pay rises. If we want a good service, we need a loyal, committed workforce, which is what Royal Mail has at present, but treating workers without respect and not having proper terms and conditions will soon mean losing that trust.

We need partnership working—management, workers and trade unions. That gives us a good service, which in turn benefits consumers. The workers stay; they create stability, knowledge and experience; and they know their routes, which can be covered in absences. If we do not have that, we will have greater staff turnover, an erosion of trust and, ultimately, the demise of the business.

5.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I will make a plea for post offices. For vulnerable people, those aged over 65, disabled people and those who live in rural areas, the post office clearly provides a wide range of essential services—services for the local community and citizens, including banking, bill payments and cash withdrawal. It helps older people seek their pensions and provides a sense of community for older citizens living in rural areas. Indeed, postmasters and postmistresses can often be the first to note if an elderly patron has not been in for a while, and many a life is saved by the actions taken. Post offices will also play a vital role in citizens receiving their £600 energy support payment in the coming weeks. Some 49% of all customers pick up Government forms such as applications for driving licences or passports at post offices.

I want to make a plea to the Minister on behalf of post offices. There are 11,400 post offices in the UK, visited by 28 million people a week. I support the debate and I hope that the Minister can support us.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Shannon, and I thank colleagues for their co-operation. We now move to the Front-Bench speeches, and it is a delight to call Marion Fellows.

5.40 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I will speak very fast. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for securing this important debate. I could not disagree with one word that he said.

I should declare an interest as I have a nephew who is a postie—he works in the delivery office—and I am chair of the post offices all-party parliamentary group. I have worked closely with the Minister and with previous Ministers on the subject, but this country has got it all wrong. The Postal Services Act 2011, which split Royal Mail and Post Office Ltd, led directly to where we are today. We should value post offices—I do, and I know that many Members do—but we should also value postal workers. The universal service obligation is even more important in a country such as Scotland.

The SNP has opposed such changes many times, starting back with Mike Weir in 2010. It should not be a surprise that we think that the post office network and Royal Mail should be put back together again and should be nationalised. I have worked closely with the Communication Workers Union and I have stood on picket lines myself. I think—I know—that the system is not working the way it is just now. Giving profits to shareholders is not the way it should work.

To go back to the universal service obligation, we talk about the growth in parcel delivery, but what about letters to people about hospital appointments? What about really important letters from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other Government agencies? Those things are causing great disruption to those who most need public services, and one of the public services they most need is a properly functioning Post Office/Royal Mail Group and post office network.

5.43 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) for securing this incredibly vital debate. He brings a wealth of expertise of the issue, having worked for both Royal Mail and the CWU.

After almost 500 years as a public institution, Royal Mail today connects more than 32 million addresses across the United Kingdom and is the UK's sole designated universal service provider. Its 160,000 staff are essential workers. Whether they were delivering tens of millions of test and trace kits or being a point of contact for those isolating during the pandemic, we in the Opposition do not forget their incredibly vital work during that dark time, or since, and before. That is why the debate is so well attended by Opposition Members and why we have had such fantastic and passionate contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), as well as contributions from Members from all parties.

Despite this incredibly important public service and its importance to communities and the economy, the Government are failing postal service users and communities, putting ideology above competence. In July to September last year, Royal Mail delivered 72% of first class mail the next working day and 93% of second class within three working days, both below its targets. As we have also heard, the Conservative Government have overseen sharp increases in the number of so-called temporarily closed post offices and part-time outreach services, leading to significant and growing cracks in coverage. That trend is particularly severe in rural areas. Older and disabled people, carers, and people who do not use the internet, of whom there are still many, are disproportionately impacted. The current industrial dispute has had a huge impact on both workers and service users across the country. We in the Labour party are glad that Royal Mail has returned to the negotiating table, which is what we called for, but the Government really need to do their job to support a resolution. They owe that to Royal Mail as key workers, and to the public and businesses, all of which rely on Royal Mail.

The Government's decisions on Royal Mail risk a disaster for customers and workers, and a degradation of Royal Mail as a major contributor to the UK economy. An organisation that was once thriving has had job losses in the thousands and a reduction in service, all while giving out over £400 million in dividends and £167 million in share buy-backs. The CWU has been raising concerns about the financial mismanagement of Royal Mail for several months, so can the Minister outline what discussions he has had with Royal Mail regarding its profits and dividends during the last financial year? Can he explain why workers and service users are being asked to pay more for less of a service, at a time when the cost of living crisis is impacting so many families across our nation?

As has been highlighted, there has been a decline in letter delivery. We understand that Royal Mail is seeking to grow parcel delivery, but that strategy appears to be stagnating, so what is the strategy now? Can the Minister

say what his vision is for the future of postal services, and when he will act to ensure that Royal Mail returns to pre-pandemic levels of performance? Finally, the recent increase in the holding share by Vesa Equity, a company with links to Russia, is a matter of grave concern. Can the Minister outline the Government's reasoning for not using the powers in the National Security and Investment Act 2021 in relation to that investment?

Only a Labour Government, supporting the partnership between management, workers and trade unions, can achieve lasting success for our postal services. In two days' time, my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) will lead a debate on the universal service obligation, but can the Minister provide assurances today that this Government are committed to the USO, as we are, and has he made an assessment of the impact of a five-day service proposal on the economy? The Labour party will work with postal service providers to deliver vital goods and services, and to provide social value.

5.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): Sir Gary, could you clarify exactly what time I can speak until, if I am to give the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), two minutes in which to wind up?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Two minutes to six.

Kevin Hollinrake: Thank you. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, on securing today's debate about the future of postal services, particularly given his experience and expertise. When somebody with that kind of experience and expertise speaks, we should all listen very carefully.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that postal services are an integral part of the modern economy, allowing the smallest of businesses to connect with customers across the world and providing consumers with access to a vast range of products. The importance of the postal service to keeping people connected was never more apparent than during the coronavirus pandemic, and I am hugely grateful to the delivery workers who worked exceptionally hard to deliver letters and parcels in those very difficult circumstances. The post office network also plays a unique and vital role as part of the UK postal system, and I will address the points that were raised regarding that network shortly.

To deal first and foremost with the future of the universal postal service, which was raised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, the right hon. Members for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and others, the Government's postal policy objective continues to be a financially sustainable and efficient universal service that meets the needs of users within an open and competitive postal market. That is why the six-day week, "one price goes anywhere" and the universal service remain at the heart of the regulatory regime, and why Ofcom has a primary duty to secure that provision.

To be completely clear, the Government currently have no plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of a universal postal service, which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011. However, we accept that the universal postal service is facing challenges,

particularly given the decline in letter volumes, which have halved since privatisation in 2013. That answers the question raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), about why people are paying more for less. Part of the difficulty is that the volumes have fallen so much, which affects revenue.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: Very briefly, as I have very little time.

Chi Onwurah: I thank him for giving way, but he has not answered my question at all. There is a decline in one part of the market, but another part is growing. My question was: what is the vision?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a separate point that I will come to, if I may. I have yet to hear a convincing case for the need for change to meet users' needs and ensure the financial sustainability of a universal postal service. I have met with both Ofcom and Royal Mail management to discuss that issue. I have made it clear to Royal Mail that it needs to make any case for change to Ofcom, and that I will fully consider any advice the regulator gives me on the future scope of the universal postal service.

The hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who I have worked with closely on other matters regarding the Post Office, raised concerns about quality of service. I am aware that over the last few years the business has faced increased pressures on its operations for a variety of reasons. First, there was the covid pandemic and its lingering effects; secondly, operational revisions were required to modernise and transform the business; and, most recently, there was the industrial dispute with the Communication Workers Union. I do not accept the point made by the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) that this is union busting. The management has been clear that there will be no compulsory redundancies, but these issues impact both the business and users of postal services, particularly when important mail items are delayed.

Richard Burgon: The Minister rejects my allegation that the bosses of Royal Mail are engaged in union busting, but does he not think it is rather strange that over 100 trade union representatives have suddenly been suspended by Royal Mail bosses in the course of the dispute? Is that not rather odd? What conclusion does he draw from that?

Kevin Hollinrake: We do not get involved in negotiations, as Royal Mail is clearly a private company. I welcome the fact that the CWU and Royal Mail are now sitting down with ACAS and trying to resolve the dispute. We should give that process time to reach a resolution. I understand that any strikes have been suspended until the outcome of those negotiations. As I say, the Government are not involved in negotiations because Royal Mail is a private company, but we will monitor the dispute closely, and urge Royal Mail and the Communications Workers Union to reach a resolution as soon as possible.

To ensure that consumers receive an adequate service, Royal Mail is required by Ofcom regulation to, among other things, meet certain performance targets relating to the delivery of universal service products. The regulator

[Kevin Hollinrake]

has the power to investigate and take enforcement action. Indeed, in 2020 it fined Royal Mail £1.5 million for missing its 2018-19 first-class national delivery targets. Ofcom investigated Royal Mail's service quality performance in 2021-22, and in doing so considered evidence submitted by Royal Mail of

"exceptional events, beyond the company's control"

that may explain why targets were missed. In that instance, Ofcom accepted that there had been a continued impact of covid-19 on Royal Mail service delivery, and concluded that

"it was not appropriate to find Royal Mail in breach of its regulatory obligations".

However, Ofcom was clear that it does not expect covid-19 to have a continuing significant impact on service going forwards. It stated:

"We are concerned by the fact that Royal Mail's performance in the early part of 2022-23 fell well short of where it should be. We believe the company has had plenty of time to learn lessons from the pandemic, and we are unlikely to consider the factors outlined above as exceptional and beyond its control in future."

When it comes to renationalisation, we probably part company with many of those on the Opposition Benches who expressed views on the subject, including the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the right hon. Member for Islington North, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, who sponsored the debate, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw. I do not believe that renationalisation is the answer. Although there are undoubtably challenges facing Royal Mail, the Government are clear that renationalising the business is not the answer.

One of primary reasons for the sale was to enable Royal Mail to access the capital it needed to invest in and grow the business. When Royal Mail was independently reviewed in 2008 under the last Labour Government, we were told that it was underfunded and had not kept pace with equivalents around the world, which were 40% more efficient. Compare this to the present day: Royal Mail has invested over £2 billion in the UK business since privatisation, including £900 million over the last three years and £441 million in the last financial year in areas such as electric vans, two new parcel hubs, automation and improving its poorest performing delivery offices.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, mentioned the £576 million pounds distributed to shareholders. I point out that there are good years and poor years in terms of financial performance. In the first half of this financial year, I think Royal Mail declared a £219 million loss. That is in the marketplace, so it is not breaching any confidentiality.

Ian Lavery: Royal Mail made a £758 million profit, gave £567 million to shareholders and then, shortly afterwards—weeks afterwards—it said that it was making a loss of £1 million a day. The hon. Gentleman is a successful businessman. Would he not be asking questions?

Kevin Hollinrake: We should always ask questions. I have asked questions of Royal Mail in the various discussions we have had. It is fair to say, though, that when shareholders invest, their money is locked up in that capital. Those shareholders rightly expect a return on that capital, as any Government should. I do not think it is wrong to distribute investment returns where they are fair and proportionate. The hon. Gentleman cannot simply say that money should not have been distributed to shareholders, but it should be fair. There also has to be a consideration of the context: it was probably an exceptional year. This year is clearly far more difficult.

The performance of other parcel carriers, including Evri, was raised. I have had correspondence with various Members present about Evri. It is frustrating when deliveries do not arrive on time or are damaged. Consumers should raise complaints about the delivery of items with the retailer. They can do so through Delivery Law UK or the Citizens Advice consumer service, but the key thing is to get back to the retailer. No retailer would want to carry on with a parcel carrier that was not meeting its obligations.

The post office network is hugely important to us, and we need to maintain 11,500 branches. Ninety-nine per cent. of people in the country expect to live within three miles of a post office. That will continue, and we continue to invest; there was £2.5 billion in funding over the past 10 years, and will be £335 million over the next three years.

To conclude, I have set out that the Government remain committed to securing a sustainable universal service for users throughout the UK. There are currently no plans to change the minimum requirements of the service.

5.58 pm

Tahir Ali: I want to respond forcefully on the issue of union-busting tactics. Within days of members taking industrial action, Royal Mail announced that it was taking 10,000 jobs away from workers to scare them into not going on strike. It says that it has more than £1 billion to break up the union. It is suspending union representatives without proper reason, just as a ploy to scaremonger and to bully the staff. An attack on one employee is an attack on all employees, and neither the CWU nor any employee will stand for that in any way, shape or form.

In this country, we can send a letter for 58p to Orkney or Shetland, or to the Isle of Wight. That is the only duty that the company has. None of the private companies is legally obliged to deliver to every single address in this country. We want a level playing field, but the profit and the cream are taken away by the other companies. Royal Mail is modernising—it has been—but the workers deserve more.

6 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 10 January 2023

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Spaceport Cornwall: First Launch of Satellites

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): Last night, Virgin Orbit attempted the first orbital launch from Spaceport Cornwall. Unfortunately, the launch was unsuccessful. We will work closely with Virgin Orbit as they investigate what caused the failure in the coming days and weeks. While a failed launch is disappointing, launching a spacecraft always carries significant risks. Despite this, the project has succeeded in creating a horizontal launch capability at Spaceport Cornwall, and we remain committed to becoming the leading provider of commercial small satellite launch in Europe by 2030, with vertical launches planned from Scotland in the next year.

[HCWS489]

Statutory Deadline for Planning Decision: Alternative Use Boston Projects Ltd

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Alternative Use Boston Projects Ltd for the construction and operation of an energy from waste facility at Boston in Lincolnshire.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Boston Alternative Energy Facility application is 10 January 2023.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 6 July 2023 for deciding this application. This is to enable my Department to seek further information from the applicant and to ensure there is sufficient time to allow for consideration of this information by other interested parties.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS488]

EDUCATION

Reform of Post-16 Qualifications

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): Today, I am notifying Parliament of the next stage in the Government's review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 in England—the publication of new criteria for alternative academic and technical qualifications funded from 2025.

In July 2021, we published the Government response to the second stage consultation of the review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below. Here, we made clear our intentions to streamline the qualifications landscape, simplify choices for students and only fund qualifications that are high quality and lead to good progression outcomes. It is vitally important for social mobility to ensure that everyone, no matter their background, is able to access the education and skills opportunities which lead to good jobs.

The reforms are taking place in three stages.

In July 2022, we completed the first phase of streamlining the qualifications landscape by removing funding approval from around 5,500 qualifications at level 3 and below in England that had very low numbers or no new students enrolled on them.

By August 2025, we will also have removed funding approval from qualifications that overlap with our new, highly rigorous T-levels, so that T-levels have the space they need to flourish as the main technical route for 16 to 19-year-olds. In October 2022, we published details of the first 106 qualifications that will have funding approval removed from 1 August 2024 because they overlap with a T-level in Education and Childcare, Digital, or Construction and the Built Environment. Funding approval will also be removed from qualifications that overlap with the Health and Science T-levels and we will publish this list once the review of the outline content of those T-levels has concluded. Funding approval will be removed in August 2025 for qualifications which overlap with T-levels in waves 3 and 4—Legal, Finance and Accounting; Engineering and Manufacturing; Business and Administration; Hair and Beauty; Catering and Hospitality; Creative and Design; and Agriculture, Environmental and Animal Care. A provisional list of these qualifications will be published in spring 2023.

From August 2025, all alternative academic and technical qualifications in scope of the review will be required to demonstrate that they serve a clear and distinct purpose and meet new quality and funding criteria, irrespective of the T-level overlap assessment process. Details of the new approval process, which all qualifications at level 3 in scope of the review must go through in order to be publicly funded from 2025, are being published today. This includes full details of the types of qualifications and subjects that we will fund, and the criteria that awarding organisations must meet to secure funding approval.

For academic qualifications, this includes progression to higher education, evidence of demand and a clear statement of why the qualification is needed. Technical qualifications will be required to meet new occupational relevance and employer demand tests developed by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). This will ensure that technical qualifications deliver the content that truly matters to employers, and that the skills system is simpler for learners, training providers and employers to navigate. All qualifications must also meet regulatory requirements set by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual).

Our reforms do not constitute a binary choice between T-levels and A-levels. We have listened to feedback and recognise the need for additional qualifications, including alternative qualifications such as some BTECs designed to be taken as part of a mixed study programme including A-levels. These alternative qualifications are an important

part of how we will support diverse student needs and deliver skills that employers need for a productive future economy, in areas that A-levels and T-levels do not cover. In addition, the T-level Transition Programme provides a high-quality route on to T-levels, for students who would benefit from the additional study time and preparation that it will give them before they start their T-level.

The Government also recognise that there are still too many people who are being held back by poor maths. The Prime Minister has set out his intention that all students in England should study some form of maths to age 18, to ensure they are better equipped for the jobs of the future. Further detail on this measure will be set out at a later date.

Today's announcement marks the start of the final stage of the reforms to post-16 qualifications and will give the education sector clarity on the shape of the future post-16 qualifications landscape.

I look forward to engaging with parliamentarians and colleagues in awarding bodies and further education as we implement these important reforms.

[HCWS490]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

English Freeports

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): Today I am announcing a major milestone for the flagship UK freeports programme, with two further English freeports—in Plymouth, Solent and in Teesside—now fully up and running after receiving final Government approval. Each

of these freeports will now receive £25 million of seed funding and potentially hundreds of millions in locally retained business rates to upgrade local infrastructure and stimulate regeneration. This is alongside a generous package of trade and innovation support for businesses locating there.

This significant milestone is an important step on the freeports journey and sends a clear message: the UK Government are backing these places as a key part of their economic strategy.

Freeports are at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda. They will unlock much-needed investment into port communities and their hinterlands. This in turn will help these areas overcome the barriers holding them back and bring jobs and opportunity to some of the UK's historically overlooked communities.

Freeports catalyse investment through a combination of tax reliefs on new economic activity, a special streamlined customs procedure, an ambitious programme of public investment, and wide-ranging support from the UK Government to help businesses trade, invest, and innovate.

Excellent progress has been made with delivery: investors can now take advantage of tax reliefs in all eight English freeports and are starting to do so, and we expect the remaining five English freeports to join Plymouth, Solent, and Teesside in receiving final approvals shortly.

This Government also remain committed to ensuring that all parts of the UK can reap the benefits of our freeports programme. We have recently concluded competitions for two green freeports in Scotland and a freeport in Wales, and we will announce the winning locations in due course. We also continue discussions with stakeholders in Northern Ireland about how best to deliver the benefits associated with freeports there.

[HCWS487]

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