

**Wednesday
1 February 2023**

**Volume 727
No. 111**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 1 February 2023

House of Commons

Wednesday 1 February 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution Rates

1. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase the proportion of cases relating to violence against women and girls that are prosecuted. [903433]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Tackling violence against women and girls remains one of the Government's top priorities, and we are doing all we can to make streets and homes safer. We are prioritising prevention, supporting survivors and strengthening our pursuit of aggressors.

Wera Hobhouse: It is a well-known national scandal that only 3% of rape cases have led to charges against the perpetrator. Locally, Avon and Somerset police are making big strides towards change. They have tripled charge rates, are bringing more cases to the Crown Prosecution Service and have changed their investigative focus from the victim to the perpetrator. I am immensely proud of this progress, and I hope that my local area could become part of the ongoing pilot for specialist rape courts. Can the Attorney General confirm when a decision on the further roll-out of specialist rape courts will be made? Will my local Crown court be considered to be part of the next stages?

The Attorney General: Evidence is being gathered from our three specialist courts, but I should emphasise that every Crown court tries rape cases and will benefit from the learning. The south-west, as the hon. Lady has outlined, is showing the way by demonstrating new ways of working with the police, providing specialist training to all first responders. They are also, I hear, planning a community event later this month.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Prosecution rates for the appalling crime of rape against women and girls have been too low across the country. What impact does my right hon. and learned Friend believe that Operation Soteria will have on prosecuting cases of rape?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is always a great advocate for vulnerable people. Operation Soteria is focused on delivering cultural transformation in the investigation of rape offences. It looks to ensure that the victim is well supported and the case thoroughly investigated. I was glad to see joint

working between the police and CPS when I visited Leeds last Friday. They are working closely together and, crucially, with support services such as independent sexual violence advisers to make sure we really deliver for victims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A recent revelation in Northern Ireland is that a man was punished with 140 hours of community service after domestically assaulting his wife on two different occasions. What steps will the Attorney General take to ensure that harsher sentences are given to those guilty of inflicting violence on women? We need harsher sentences.

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important case. Sentencing is, of course, a matter for the independent judiciary, the Ministry of Justice and the Sentencing Council. I know that he shares the Government's desire to do all we can to make sure that the victims of violence against women and girls get justice.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that the Crown Prosecution Service is very dependent on the quality of the investigation from the outset? I therefore welcome this joint working, which is something that had been hoped for over many years and seems to be delivering results. I do not know whether she has anything she can say about its roll-out to the country as a whole.

The Attorney General: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his question. I know that this is something he has personally been working on for many years. It is true to say that joint working is the answer, and in Leeds on Friday I was able to see a police gatekeeper—that is what he is called, but I think a better word would be “interpreter”—who was able to work between the lawyers and the victim and witnesses and ensure that the case was investigated properly right from the beginning and that disclosure was managed in a sensible way.

Access to Justice

2. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in ensuring access to justice for victims of crime. [903434]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): All victims of crime deserve the right support, and the CPS has published the findings of independent research and is implementing changes based on that to deliver what victims need. There is new and innovative victim communication for half of CPS areas.

Mick Whitley: Justice delayed is justice denied, but as of September 2022 more than 17,300 Crown court cases had been outstanding for a year or more, and nearly 5,000 had been outstanding for more than two years. What does the Attorney General have to say to the victims of those crimes, whose lives have been put on hold for years while waiting for their cases to be brought to justice, and to those who cannot cope with any more delay, even if that means allowing their cases to collapse?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and the Attorney General and I are working closely with the Ministry of Justice. There has

been good progress in terms of the CPS and the time it takes for cases to be heard. The most recent figures for the CPS show that it is 171 days on average, and I am determined to see that improve and decrease.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Victims of crime have already been through distressing circumstances, so can my hon. and learned Friend tell me what the CPS is doing to inform and support people to navigate the criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her interest in this important area. The CPS has launched a new online guide for victims, ensuring that they have access to the necessary information. She is right that accessible information is the key to supporting victims and ensuring that they can navigate the criminal justice system.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Solicitor General will be aware that victims of crime are being badly let down, waiting months and years for their cases to come to court. That problem is being exacerbated by the fact that there is now a disparity between criminal defence barristers' pay and that of prosecution barristers. What does he intend to do to right that wrong and put victims first?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should be putting victims first, and indeed we are doing so. On his specific question, the Treasury has agreed to consider the CPS funding position following publication of the criminal legal aid independent review—a report that he will know about. Discussions regarding fees and funding are ongoing, but I fully support him in putting victims first and ensuring that those cases are brought on as quickly as possible.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I put on record my thanks to the Solicitor General for his compassion and care when dealing with the very tragic case of Charlotte-Sky, who lost her life on Endon Road in Norton Green. He will know that Claire, Charlotte's mother, has felt that she has been failed, because ultimately it took over a year to get simple answers from a blood test as to whether in this case someone had been drinking and on drugs. What engagement has the Solicitor General had with the Department for Transport about its review, in order to speed up answers for our police officers and, most importantly, for victims of this horrific crime?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has diligently and vigorously pursued his constituent's case—I well remember the Adjournment debate that he brought to this House and the important points that he raised concerning the unduly lenient sentence scheme. I am determined to work closely across Government, and I know that my hon. Friend will continue his campaign to pursue this.

Roles of Lord Chancellor and Law Officers

3. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the ninth report of the House of Lords Constitution Committee, "The roles of the Lord Chancellor and the Law Officers", HL 118, published on 18 January 2023.

[903435]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): I thank the House of Lords Constitution Committee for its thoughtful and detailed report, which highlights the complexity of this historic office. It is an honour to serve—to make law and politics work together at the heart of Government.

Clive Efford: The Constitution Committee rightly says that we need Law Officers

"with the independence of mind, autonomy and strength of character to deliver impartial legal advice to the Government, even where it is unwelcome."

I am sure that the Attorney General agrees, but can she give a single example of where her predecessor met that standard in the advice that she gave to the Government?

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but as he knows—as we all know, I think—the Attorney General's convention means that I do not comment specifically on the advice that has been given by any holder of this office, or even whether or not advice was given.

Seriously—this is a serious matter—the report highlights some very important points about how the Law Officers work in combination, as politicians and as lawyers. That is something that I take extremely seriously myself. I know that I have duties to the court, as well as to my constituents and to the Government, and it is very important that we treat this matter with the seriousness it deserves.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I think the Attorney General has just demonstrated that she and the Solicitor General are well up to the task of internal inquiries. In welcoming the report, will she recognise that, given the Attorney General's important role of speaking truth to power—to Government—it is also important that the Law Officers should be consulted in a timely fashion, and appropriately and fully, on any controversial matters that may have a legal aspect, and that fellow Ministers should then listen and act accordingly, consistently?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend—he is a very learned Gentleman, on whose Committee I was extremely proud to sit for many years—for his question, which I think was more of a statement. It is important to note that the Government's commitment to the rule of law is absolute, and I will do my very best to uphold that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Attorney General.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I join the Attorney General in thanking the House of Lords Constitution Committee for this excellent report? I have to say, it is a damning indictment of the former Attorney General, but also a helpful warning for current and future holders of the post. I want to ask the Attorney General about one specific point in relation to the report. Does she agree that it would be helpful to provide greater clarity within the ministerial code on the duties of Law Officers, particularly on upholding the rule of law within Government and providing impartial legal advice regardless of political considerations—both areas that the former Attorney General fell so drastically short on?

The Attorney General: I have looked often at the ministerial code, and I think the section that deals with legal advice is sufficient. To go back to the previous question, I note that it is suggested that the advice sought should be timely, but, as all lawyers present in the Chamber know, that is not always the way with clients, and we do our best to accommodate them. On some things, however, we can clearly be less accommodating. The rule of law is absolutely a thread that runs through the legal advice provided by the holders of this office.

Emily Thornberry: May I ask about one specific area of the ministerial code that might benefit from particular clarity? Section 7 requires Ministers to inform Law Officers if they risk becoming

“involved in legal proceedings in a personal capacity,”

including when they are potential defendants or in relation to potential defamation cases, and preferably before they have instructed their own solicitors. On that basis, I ask the Attorney General to clarify two points of fact: are Ministers currently obliged to inform Law Officers if either their solicitors are sending letters to journalists threatening to sue them for libel, or they are under investigation by His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs over the non-payment of taxes?

The Attorney General: I am not going to comment on specific cases—the right hon. Lady will understand why that is the case. I think the ministerial code allows for a certain level of wiggle room on that particular area. It is clear that when proceedings have already commenced, it is essential to ask the Law Officers’ opinion on those proceedings. However, I think she and I both know that it is not always clear at the beginning of a series of letters, which may or may not lead to proceedings, when that moment should be. I would always caution—as I am sure she would—that it would be good to involve the Law Officers at an early stage of proceedings, but I cannot comment on specific cases and whether or not that was done.

Support for Ukraine’s Judiciary

4. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps she has taken to support Ukraine’s judiciary in their conduct of war crimes trials. [903436]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): I thank my constituency neighbour for his question. This Government firmly believe in international accountability. Ukraine’s judiciary should be congratulated on prosecuting war crimes right now, in real time, during a brutal conflict. On Monday I met a delegation of Ukrainian judges in this building and heard how they are approaching this monumental task. They are grateful for our practical support, including an extensive training programme led by Sir Howard Morrison.

Robert Courts: What assessment has the Attorney General made of the international community’s progress in bringing Russian leadership to trial for the crime of aggression in Ukraine?

The Attorney General: The crime of aggression is one of the most significant in international criminal law. At Ukraine’s invitation, we have joined a core group of states to discuss the establishment of a bespoke tribunal. We are absolutely determined to play a leading role in ensuring international accountability for Russia’s actions.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will there be Russian war reparations to Ukraine, and how can the UK support that?

The Attorney General: At the moment, the international community is rightly focused on prosecuting war crimes. That is the right focus, as we hope that in so doing we will have a good effect on the behaviour of those fighting this conflict at the moment. We are undoubtedly starting to turn our minds to reparations, and there is a great deal of work going on within Government on how best to support the Ukrainians to do that. I know that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is very involved in that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Three weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Justice told me from the Dispatch Box that Russian war crimes would be pursued via Ukrainian domestic courts and the International Criminal Court, even though that denied the possibility of prosecuting Putin and his inner circle for the crime of aggression. At the time, the Attorney General appeared to share his view. Last week the Foreign Office welcomed the special tribunal necessary to try Putin, saying it would “complement established mechanisms”. That is welcome, and I think it is what the Attorney General has said today, but can she—because we know her to be a candid and thoughtful person—explain and confirm what by any definition is a screeching U-turn in Government policy?

The Attorney General: I am afraid I really would not describe this as a screeching U-turn—[*Interruption.*] No, not at all. This is a development in a very difficult area of international law. [*Interruption.*] I would just listen to this for a moment. It is a very delicate area of international law. This is a live and brutal conflict—we are all agreed on that—and it is right that most of the prosecutions take place in Ukraine, with real-time evidence and with witnesses present. Those prosecutions are going well, and I think we all support the Ukrainian judiciary in that. I hope very much that there will be an international moment of accountability following this war. I suspect that many courts will need to be involved, including both the ICC and any special tribunal.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is almost one year to the day since the beginning of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, and an estimated 7,000 civilian lives have been lost during this time, in one of the most barbaric atrocities against civilians recorded since the second world war. Given that the UK will host a major international meeting on war crimes in March, what further support will the Attorney General give on information sharing and testimonial gathering, and on ensuring that legal expertise will be fully utilised to hold Russian war criminals to account?

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is fortuitous that the Lord Chancellor has just entered the Chamber, because in March he is hosting an important conference, with the Dutch, to discuss how further we can help and support the work of the ICC. Further, we have the work of the special tribunal that I mentioned, and we are providing a great deal of

practical help on the ground in training Ukrainian judges and providing funding to help them to find evidence and to prosecute these crimes effectively.

Criminal Justice System: Backlog

5. Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in tackling the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system. [903437]

6. Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in tackling the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system. [903438]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): First, I would like to pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for his work as Solicitor General. From that work, he will know the significant amount of funding in the criminal justice system to help improve waiting times for victims. Both the Attorney General and I have seen that at first hand in our visits to regional Crown Prosecution Service areas.

Edward Timpson: I thank the Solicitor General for his answer. Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), in the first three quarters of 2022 there have been 235 ineffective Crown court trials caused by prosecution absence—the highest annual total since 2014—compared with just 19 in 2019. The recent uplift to defence fees has meant there is now more money in defending than in prosecuting, and consequently the CPS is struggling to find enough prosecutors for trials. What timescales is my hon. and learned Friend working to in order to address this situation?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for raising this point. Of course, I recognise the importance of ensuring that all those who work in the criminal justice system—both defence and prosecution—are paid and rewarded appropriately. He will have heard my answer earlier, and it is right that the Treasury has agreed to consider the CPS funding position. Discussions are ongoing, and I know that he will keep pressing.

Jerome Mayhew: The police are doing an excellent job in Broadland. They have just opened a new response centre at Postwick, improving response times and housing some of the many additional officers that this Government have provided. The CPS is the next line in the criminal justice journey. The CPS inspectorate undertook a report on local provision in March 2022. Can my hon. and learned Friend provide an update to the House on the performance since that date?

The Solicitor General: I recognise my hon. Friend's expertise and interest in this matter. The inspection report for the east of England praised the quality of the work in the area, and the latest data suggests that performance continues to be strong. The area is now making all crime charging decisions more quickly than it did previously. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, in the face of the backlog, the conviction rate for the CPS in his region remains reassuringly high at 85%.

Domestic Abuse: Prosecution Rates

7. Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps she is taking to help increase the rate of prosecutions for domestic abuse. [903439]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): We are committed to increasing the volume of prosecutions and supporting more victims. We enacted new provisions to increase the time that victims have to report domestic abuse offences to ensure that we bring more offenders to justice.

Elliot Colburn: Despite Carshalton and Wallington being a relatively safe part of London, domestic violence rates there are higher than the London average. Local charities such as Sutton Women's Centre do a great job in training people to spot the signs, but what assurance can the Attorney General give me that CPS staff have access to that same training to bring that level of crime down?

The Attorney General: I thank Sutton Women's Centre for its fantastic work in training the community to spot the signs of domestic abuse. All prosecutors in London are now domestic abuse trained. Close working with the police should continue to increase the rate of prosecutions.

Serious Fraud Office: Prosecutions for Fraud and Bribery

8. Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps she is taking to help the Serious Fraud Office investigate and prosecute fraud and bribery. [903440]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): Mr Speaker, you may remember that the SFO successfully prosecuted Glencore Energy UK Ltd and that the total amount the company will pay—£280 million—is the highest ever ordered in a corporate criminal conviction in the United Kingdom. We continue to work closely with the SFO to identify any policy changes that could support its ambitions.

Aaron Bell: My constituents want to see the Government crack down on corporate criminality. What measures are the Government considering in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to address corporate crime?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his interest. The Government recognise that the current law does not go far enough. That is why we have committed to addressing the need for a new “failure to prevent” offence in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill. In addition, we are introducing a provision to extend the SFO's pre-investigation powers.

Legislative Competence of the Scottish Parliament

9. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential implications of an order under section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 for the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. [903442]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): As I said earlier, by convention, information on whether the Law Officers have been asked to provide advice and the content of such advice are not disclosed outside Government. That convention enables candid legal advice to be given.

Stuart C. McDonald: Why was the prospect of a section 35 order not raised at any time before the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill was overwhelmingly passed by the Scottish Parliament? What alternatives did the Attorney General look at? When will she set out the changes to the Bill that she wants to see before the Government would revoke the section 35 order? Those are simple questions. If she cannot answer them, all we can conclude is that the Government have lost their last shred of respect for the Scottish Parliament.

The Attorney General: That would be absolutely the wrong conclusion to draw. The Attorney General's convention is clear: the UK Government respect the Scottish Parliament's ability to legislate within its competence on devolved areas. The Government are committed to working with the devolved Administrations and strengthening the Union of the UK.

Prosecution of Hate Crime

10. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure effective prosecution of hate crime. [903443]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): We are committed to delivering justice for victims of hate crime. All CPS prosecutors are trained about hate crime, and its specialist prosecutors help to lead that work. The latest figures show that the CPS has prosecuted nearly 13,000 hate crime offences, with a charge rate of 86% and, importantly, a conviction rate of 84%.

Mary Kelly Foy: As we mark the start of LGBTQ History Month, it was shocking to see in the year-end figures for hate crime a 41% increase in offences targeting people's sexuality and a 56% increase in offences targeting people's transgender identity. What are the Government doing to stop prejudice and fear, which led to that rise in crime, being stoked against the LGBTQ community?

The Solicitor General: In the hon. Lady's area of the north-east, the CPS is particularly successful in getting uplifts to sentences in relation to hate crime. In the last rolling year to date, it has been successful in obtaining uplifts in 90% of cases. The question she raises is important and the CPS is working incredibly hard in that area.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—
Engagements*

Q1. [903448] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 February.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I know the whole House will want to join me in sending condolences to the First Minister of Wales on the death of his wife, Clare. From the warmth of the tributes, I know how much she will be missed.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings today.

Kirsty Blackman: As the Prime Minister reaches 100 days in office this week, having pledged a Government marked by integrity, what are his thoughts on the UK being one of only five countries, along with Oman, Azerbaijan, Myanmar and Qatar, to have seen a decrease in Transparency International's corruption index score since last year?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there is widespread recognition and support for the UK's approach to transparency and tackling corruption. Indeed, the most recent report from the Financial Action Task Force commended the UK for the steps it had taken.

Q3. [903450] **Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Arts Council England was established to increase access to great art for the population. There is real concern and anger that its current funding decisions do the exact reverse of that, on the basis of inadequate evidence and a lack of transparency in the process. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and other concerned Members to discuss the situation whereby centres of national excellence, such as the English National Opera, are at risk of closure, and how we can reform the operation of the Arts Council, which many people feel is no longer fit for purpose?

The Prime Minister: I know my hon. Friend cares deeply about this issue. He will know that decisions made by the Arts Council are taken at arm's length from Government. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Ministers have been assured that that process was robust, but I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss this important matter further.

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

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his words about the First Minister of Wales and the sad loss of his wife? Everybody knows just how close they were, and I know he is absolutely devastated by her loss.

When the Prime Minister briefly emerged from his hibernation at the weekend, he raised more questions than he answered, so in the interests of integrity and accountability, can he set the record straight? Did his now former chair, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), tell Government officials that he was under investigation by the taxman before or after the Prime Minister appointed him?

The Prime Minister: I appointed the independent adviser to investigate this matter fully. He set out his findings in detail over the weekend and, on receipt of those findings, I took action. I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the independent adviser's report.

Keir Starmer: Oh, come on! Anybody picking up a newspaper in July last year would have known that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the National Crime Agency were investigating months before the Prime Minister appointed the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon. *The Independent* said on 6 July:

"New chancellor's finances secretly investigated by National Crime Agency."

The Observer said three days later, on 9 July:

"Revealed: officials raised 'flag' over...tax affairs before he was appointed chancellor".

The *Financial Times* the next day, 10 July, said:

"Pressure builds...to explain his finances."

Is the Prime Minister saying that his officials hid this information from him, or was he just too incurious to ask any questions?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before at the Dispatch Box, the usual appointments process was followed with respect to the Minister without Portfolio. No issues were raised with me at the time of his appointment, but as the independent adviser's report makes clear, there was a serious breach of the ministerial code. That is why I took decisive action on receipt of that report.

Keir Starmer: So, in relation to his former chair, the Prime Minister's defence is, "Nobody told me. I didn't know. I didn't ask any questions." Will he now also claim—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Gullis, we heard enough last week. I might not be able to hear what you are saying but I can certainly see your mouth moving. It will be moving outside if it continues.

Keir Starmer: Is the Prime Minister now going to claim that he is the only person who was completely unaware of serious allegations of bullying against the Deputy Prime Minister before he appointed him?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks what was known. I followed due process. I appointed an independent adviser as soon as I was made aware of new information. The independent adviser has conducted his process. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman is so concerned about what people are saying and about behaviour in public life, recently, one of his own MPs was forced to speak out because being in his party had reminded her of being in an abusive relationship. Then, his own office was caught undermining her. He ought to be supporting her and her colleagues, but if he cannot be trusted to stand up for the women in his party, he cannot be trusted to stand up for Britain.

Keir Starmer: At the last count, the Deputy Prime Minister was facing 24 separate allegations of bullying. According to recent reports, some of the complainants were physically sick. One says that they were left suicidal. How would the Prime Minister feel if one of his friends or relatives was forced to work for a bully simply because the man at the top was too weak to do anything about it?

The Prime Minister: I notice that the right hon. and learned Gentleman did not say anything about how one of his own MPs describes being in his party. When I was

made aware of formal complaints, I instructed a leading independent King's counsel to conduct an investigation, because I take action when these things happen.

What did the right hon. and learned Gentleman say at the weekend? He said that hate had been allowed to "spread unchallenged" in the Labour party under his predecessor. He was speaking as if he was not even there, but he was sitting right next to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), supporting him for four long years and not challenging. That is typical of the right hon. and learned Gentleman—declining to lead, sitting on the fence, carping from the sidelines and never standing up for a principle that matters. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear both sides. I will not be interrupted by either side. I am particularly looking for people who continue, because we will sort it out today.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister is just like one of his predecessors who treated questions about conduct as something to brush off, and thought that ducking responsibility was a perfectly reasonable response from a Prime Minister. In fairness, at least his predecessor did not go around pretending he was a paragon of integrity and accountability. On that subject, was it a coincidence that the two people who arranged an £800,000 line of credit for the former Prime Minister were shortlisted for plum jobs at the BBC and the British Council?

The Prime Minister: As I said when we addressed this previously, the appointments process for the BBC chairman is rigorous, transparent and set out in a public code of conduct. Indeed, it was fully supported not just by expert panel members but by the cross-party Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which included Labour Members who described the appointment as impressive.

Back to this week and what is happening to the people of this country, the right hon. and learned Gentleman voted with the unions to oppose minimum safety levels. He voted with Just Stop Oil to water down the Public Order Bill. What do the unions and Just Stop Oil have in common? They bankroll him and his party. While he sides with extremist protesters and union bosses, we stand up for hard-working Britons and schoolchildren.

Keir Starmer: After 13 years in power, trying to blame the Labour party for the Prime Minister's failure to sort out the strikes is rank pathetic. The Tory party's addiction to sleaze and scandal has done huge damage to this country, and the cost to the public keeps adding up. We have a justice system letting murderers walk the streets, heart attack victims waiting hours for an ambulance, and an economy that is shrinking quicker than the his leadership. Even I could not quite believe it when I saw that his Government are expecting taxpayers to pay the legal fees for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to defend himself over his lockdown rule breaking—a quarter of a million pounds! Surely even this Prime Minister can put his foot down, stand up to his old boss and tell him: he made the mess, he can pick up the bill.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot stand up to his union bosses, he cannot stand up for Britain's schoolchildren today and

he cannot stand up for the women in his party. We are getting on: we are halving inflation, we are growing the economy, we are reducing debt, we are cutting waiting lists and we are stopping the boats. While he cannot even figure out what he believes in, we will keep delivering for Britain.

Q4. [903451] Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that integrated care boards must prioritise more access to new GP services, especially in places such as South Derbyshire, where new housing estates are being built at the fastest rate in England, and in particular on the new brownfield development of Drakelow?

The Prime Minister: The Government are committed to increasing the number of doctors in general practice, and last year saw the highest ever number of doctors accepting a GP training place. The British Medical Association is consulting each year on the funding of GP services. My hon. Friend will know that the NHS has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient medical services, including general practice, in each local area.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I would like to pass on my condolences and those of my party to the First Minister of Wales, and also to the family, friends and colleagues of firefighter Barry Martin, who so sadly lost his life following the blaze in Edinburgh last week.

We have just marked the three-year anniversary of Brexit. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Government Members will not be cheering in a moment, because we have learned three things: the UK's trade deficit has grown, the economy is being hit to the tune of £100 billion each year and, of course, the UK is expected to have the worst-performing economy of all advanced nations. Does the Prime Minister still believe that the UK can afford not to be in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Member actually looks at it, since Brexit the UK has grown exactly the same as Germany. Not only that, but we are taking advantage of Brexit to deliver for people across the UK, whether that is in the fishing and farming communities of Scotland or through the two new freeports that we have just announced. The difference between his party and ours is that we respect referendums.

Stephen Flynn: Let us be clear: taken together, 2022 and 2023 are expected to be the worst years for living standards since the 1930s, and the economy is expected to perform worse than sanction-hit Russia's. As the Brexit ship sinks with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition at the helm, can the Prime Minister blame those Scots who want to jump aboard the independence lifeboat?

The Prime Minister: The No. 1 factor that is impacting people's living standards is inflation caused by high energy prices as a result of a war in Ukraine; it has nothing to do with Brexit. That is why the Government are taking significant action, supporting every family with £900 this winter. What I would say to the hon.

Gentleman is that rather than obsessing about constitutional arrangements, he should focus on delivering for the people of Scotland. That is what we will do.

Q5. [903452] David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): The baby daughter of my constituents Gary and Sarah Andrews, Wynter died just 23 minutes after she was born. When they asked questions about that, the parents were told that these things happened and that if hospitals had to listen to the concerns of every mother they would be overrun. Thanks to dogged campaigning by Gary and Sarah and other parents whose babies had died avoidably, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust was found to have systemic failures, and last week was given the highest fine that has ever been given for failings in maternity care.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that this case—this situation—has to serve as a watershed moment, and that we should not just have the highest standards of maternity care, but when things go wrong in an NHS trust or another body, those organisations have to be open, honest and transparent about their failings so that people can get the truth, and not have it hidden from them?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about the tragic case that my hon. Friend raises, and the whole House will join me in sending our thoughts to Gary and Sarah. We want to make sure that the NHS is the best and safest place in the world to give birth. The NHS has taken steps to improve, but cases such as the one that he raises highlight the fact that more must be done. Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust is receiving support from expert maternity improvement advisers and, nationally, the royal college is implementing recommendations from the independent Ockenden report, together with £127 million of extra investment. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: when situations like this arise, transparency is paramount so that we can seek answers and make improvements.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is nearly 10 years since the tragic death of nine-year-old Ella Roberta, the first person ever to have air pollution listed on their death certificate. Yesterday, the environmental improvement plan pledged to improve air quality, but the Government's target of 2040 is a whole generation away. I do not think that that is fast enough, and neither does Ella's mum, Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah. So I ask on her mum's behalf: will the Prime Minister agree to meet us both to discuss the lifesaving measures in a proposed new Bill called Ella's law?

The Prime Minister: It is very sad to hear the case of Ella, and our thoughts and hearts go out to her family. Regarding the legislation, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will make a statement later today. We are confident that the measures we are putting in place are not only legally binding but world leading in tackling air quality. The record over the past 10 years is one in which every single air particulate has been reduced, with binding targets to continue reducing them in future. Indeed, the Environment Act 2021 makes sure that we have the capability, accountability and ambition that we need to make all the effective interventions to drive down air pollution.

Q7. [903454] Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Compared to what some people seem to believe, 82% of the jobs in our economy are in the private sector and 18% are in the public sector. Most of those private sector jobs are in the small businesses on which we will depend for wealth creation and prosperity in future. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing a small business test across Government, so that every regulation we produce, every bit of legislation we produce, helps not hinders small businesses? Does he share my ambition that every white-van man and woman and every white-coat tech worker in this country will regard the Conservative party as their natural champion?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government are proud to join him in supporting small businesses. I am pleased to tell him that we do have a small business test to consider whether the impacts of regulatory changes will disproportionately affect small and micro-businesses. I will make sure that we apply that test rigorously, and he will be pleased to know that many small businesses will benefit from billions of pounds in business-rate reductions this coming financial year, as well as from our annual investment allowance which, at £1 million, is the most generous tax incentive for investment for small businesses anywhere in the world.

Q2. [903449] Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): This morning, just two hours ago, I launched the all-party parliamentary group on prepayment meters. I did so because most people on those meters are on very low incomes, yet they pay more per unit of energy than the Prime Minister, they pay higher daily standing charges than the Prime Minister, and they are automatically disconnected from their energy supply the second they run out of money. Perversely, right now, record numbers of people are being forced to use them by the energy companies. Can the Prime Minister even begin to imagine how terrifying that moment is, when the lights go out and everything shuts down? Does he agree with me—rather than reading out what is written in front of him—that what I have just described is completely unfair?

The Prime Minister: The Government do recognise the challenges facing those on prepayment meters, and that is why the Government are taking action. The Secretary of State has set out five very specific points on prepayment meters. Energy suppliers are being spoken to to make sure that they treat customers with the respect and flexibility that they deserve. Finally, Ofgem has announced that it is launching a review into supplier practices in relation to prepayment meters. All of this comes on top of the considerable financial support that this Government have provided to help people with their energy bills, with more of that support being targeted at the most vulnerable families in our society.

Q8. [903456] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): After 8,000 residents of Redditch signed my petition to bring back chemotherapy to the Alex, the trust reversed its decision to leave it at Kidderminster permanently—a fantastic win for our town. I am grateful to the local acute trust for listening so carefully and changing its mind. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is right that the acute trust can change its mind on provision of maternity and paediatric services, so that women can give birth in our wonderful town of Redditch?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has clearly been a fantastic advocate for the Alex and for her constituents. We have awarded £10.5 million to the local trust, and I understand that some of that funding is being used to improve maternity and paediatric services at the nearby Worcestershire Royal. She will know that these operational decisions are being made by integrated care boards, and I know that she will continue to make her views known.

Q6. [903453] Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): If I had £1 for every time I had heard the Prime Minister's weak excuses, I would be able to pay the former Chancellor's tax Bill. It was last July that it was reported that the National Crime Agency had investigated the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). The then Prime Minister knew. The media knew. We all knew. It is inconceivable that the current Prime Minister did not know, so why did he choose to ignore it?

The Prime Minister: I appointed an independent adviser to fully examine the matter, establish facts and report back. That is the process that the Labour party called for, and that is the process that we followed.

Q10. [903458] John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Two years ago, the Prime Minister commissioned me to propose 30 ways to boost growth and make Britain the most competitive country in the world. So far, we are under way with about half of them, but some of the most valuable, such as reforming ponderous and expensive utilities regulators or building on our international lead in open banking, have not moved at all. Will he meet me to discuss how to channel our inner Nigel Lawsons and unblock the arteries of our economy with low-cost, pro-competition supply-side reforms?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has a long track record of advocating for and implementing policies that increase our competitiveness and reform the supply side of our economy. His report was fantastic, and I look forward to meeting him to discuss those things further and help drive growth in this country.

Q9. [903457] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Ambulance waiting times are out of control. My constituent contacted me regarding her 93-year-old mother, who lay collapsed on the ground at home for 17 hours and then queued for 13 hours to get into the hospital. And yet on Monday the Prime Minister said he had his “fingers crossed” that ambulance waiting times would be reduced. Does he really think that is enough?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady actually looks, she will see that we published on Monday a comprehensive plan to reduce wait times in A&E and for ambulances, backed with more funding, reform of the system, more beds, more ambulances and more staff. It was a plan that was warmly welcomed by all working in emergency care and the ambulance services. They recognise that this plan will deliver reduced waiting times and improve care across the country, including in Labour-run Wales, where there are some things they can benefit from.

Q12. [903460] Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): If someone who grows up in Norfolk wants to become a dentist, the nearest place they can train is Birmingham

or London. It is not really surprising, therefore, that in Norfolk we have a dearth of dentists, whether NHS or private. We also know that where there is a dental training school, more dentists end up working locally. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look again at the benefits of establishing a dental training school alongside the excellent medical school at the University of East Anglia?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will know that there are around 400 dentists with NHS activity in Norfolk and Waveney, but he is right that centres of dental development build on existing local infrastructure to help to retain and recruit dentists, and I advise him to encourage his local integrated care board to look at proposals for one of those centres in his area.

Q11. [903459] Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The Prime Minister once said that he did not have any working-class friends, so he may not be aware that today half a million hard-working people are on strike, including in his constituency. Tory Britain is not working. Will the Prime Minister get a grip and negotiate with working people, or does he intend to be remembered as the Prime Minister who silenced and sacked hard-working nurses, paramedics, teachers, rail workers and firefighters in a cost of living crisis?

The Prime Minister: When it comes to teachers, we have actually given them the highest pay rise in 30 years. That includes a 9% pay rise for newly qualified teachers and record investment in their training and development. I am clear that our children's education is precious, and they deserve to be in school today being taught. The Labour party would do well to say that the strikes are wrong and that we should be backing our schoolchildren.

Q14. [903462] Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Sadly, suicide is the biggest killer of young people under 35 in the UK. Andy Airey, my constituent, Tim Owen and Mike Palmer are the Three Dads Walking. Andy, Tim and Mike all tragically lost their precious daughters, Sophie, Emily and Beth, to suicide, and have campaigned tirelessly through charity walks for suicide awareness and prevention to be included in the school curriculum. I have been humbled to support them, by joining them on their UK walk as they came through Penrith; with their petition, which is due for parliamentary debate on 13 March; and with my early-day motion, which has had support from across the House. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the three dads and will he meet me and them to discuss suicide prevention and how we can save young lives in the future?

The Prime Minister: Of course I pay tribute to Andy, Tim and Mike, especially for channelling their personal tragedies into such positive action to prevent it from happening to other families. That is inspiring and they deserve enormous credit. The Government are taking action to improve the provision of mental health services for young people in schools and colleges, but I will be delighted to meet him and Andy, Mike and Tim to discuss what more we can do.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian Blackford.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Q13. [903461] Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank hon. Members for that welcome.

Ordinary people did not need to hear an IMF forecast to understand that the UK economy is the worst performer among the leading nations in the world. They live with it every day. People know that energy bills are through the roof and that 750,000 households face defaulting on their mortgages while house prices fall. They know that food prices are rising at a record rate of 16.7% as of today. The Prime Minister has had 100 days in office and his party 13 years in power. In all that time, does he ever reflect that the only thing that the Tory party has been good at is pushing people into poverty?

The Prime Minister: Aah, it is wonderful to hear from the right hon. Gentleman and lovely to see him in his place. We are continuing to deliver for people across the UK, including in Scotland. He mentioned poverty, which is lower today than when the Conservatives first came into office; inequality is lower than when the Conservatives first came into office; and the number of people on low pay is the lowest on record.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Today in my constituency, there is a great sense of shock and disbelief following last night's horrific dog attack that killed a four-year-old girl. The police investigation is still going on, and it would not be appropriate to speculate on the circumstances, but it would mean a great deal if, on behalf of the House, the Prime Minister could send our condolences to the family and the community, and thank the emergency services for dealing with the situation with their customary compassion and professionalism.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and send my condolences, and I am sure the whole House's condolences, to the girl's family and the community after this horrific incident. I join him in thanking the emergency services. They have responded rapidly and professionally, and I know that my hon. Friend himself will be supporting them and his constituents during this difficult time.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Can I blame the painkillers? Apologies, Mr Speaker.

This past weekend, I visited a charity that was hosting an exhibition in my constituency about metastatic breast cancer, which claims 31 lives each day in the United Kingdom. The women there asked me to convey to the Government the need for more awareness, more support, more research and more drug availability. Will the Prime Minister help to bring about that support? I have also written to the Scottish Government, asking for their support. In his next meeting with the First Minister, will he mention it to her?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the charity that the hon. Lady mentioned for the work it does. She is absolutely right: awareness is key in tackling and identifying breast cancer symptoms early. That is one of the reasons why we are investing more in diagnostic screening tools to make sure that we can detect more cancers earlier, treat them and, ultimately, save people's lives. I would be happy to pick up this particular topic with the First Minister when I next speak to her and ensure that we are working together to improve cancer services for everyone, regardless of where they live in the UK.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister kindly confirm to the House that, in the United Kingdom Government's negotiations with the EU regarding the Northern Ireland protocol, the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and its four nations will not be compromised?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. I know this is something that he cares passionately about. The implementation of the protocol is having an impact for communities in Northern Ireland. That is why it needs to be addressed, which is what we are attempting to do through constructive dialogue, but the goal in that must be to ensure Northern Ireland's place in our precious Union.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Since the election of the fascist Israeli Government in December last year, there has been an increase in human rights violations against Palestinian civilians, including children. Can the Prime Minister tell us how he is challenging what Amnesty and other human rights organisations are referring to as an apartheid state?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady failed to mention the horrific attacks on civilians inside Israel as well. It is important in this matter to remain calm and urge all sides to strive for peace, and that is very much what I will do as Prime Minister and have done in the conversations that I have had with the Israeli Prime Minister.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In 2016, the British people had the wisdom and foresight to take back control from foreign lawmakers. When they did so, they believed we were taking back control of our borders, yet since that time we have faced wave after wave of illegal migration. Will my right hon. Friend, without further delay, bring forward the necessary legislation to turn back the tide and fulfil the promise that was made to the British people?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is why one of this Government's five priorities and promises to the British people is indeed to stop the boats. We will introduce new legislation that makes it unequivocally clear that if you arrive in this country illegally, you will not be to stay, and we will swiftly detain you and remove you to your own country or a safe third alternative. That is the right and responsible way to tackle this problem.

Hillsborough Families Report: National Police Response

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question, I wish to state that although I encourage Members not to refer to any ongoing legal proceedings, I am prepared to allow a full discussion of the matter, given the importance of the issue.

12.36 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the national police response to the Hillsborough families report.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know this is a subject with profound personal resonance for him. I pay tribute to him and many others for the work they have done and continue to do in memory of the victims of this awful tragedy and to ensure that the lessons are learnt.

The Hillsborough disaster was an awful, devastating tragedy. Its impact continues to be felt to this day, especially by the families and friends of the victims. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with them. It is imperative that lessons are learned from the experiences the Hillsborough families have gone through, so I am very grateful to Bishop James Jones for the report he produced, which highlighted a number of points of learning for the Government, the police and other agencies.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said during yesterday's debate, the Government are fully committed to engaging with the Hillsborough families prior to the publication of the Government's formal response. Since arriving in the Home Office two or three months ago, I have asked for this work to be sped up, and we are expecting it to come out in the course of this spring. The National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing published their response earlier this week. I welcome their commitment to avoid repeating the mistakes that were made, and I welcome the apology that they gave. They made it clear that strong ethical values and the need for humanity and humility in the police response to public tragedies are critical. One of the commitments they rightly made earlier this week was to substantially strengthen and update their own code of ethics in relation to these issues.

Some important steps have been made by the Government in the past few years, which have addressed a number, but not all, of the points that Bishop James Jones published. For example, in 2020 a suite of police integrity reforms was introduced, on a statutory basis, via the professional standards for policing, which included, crucially, a duty to co-operate with inquiries. Other initiatives have already been taken forward to support bereaved families, including the removal of means-testing for exceptional case funding to cover legal support for families at an inquest, which broadens the scope and access for families; and the refreshing of our "Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People" so that it is more tailored to their needs and provides improved guidance for others involved in the inquest process. The Inquiries Act 2005 also provides a statutory process for funding legal representation requests. Last year, the Home Office

also established an independent pathology review, and additional consultation with the families is now taking place. A consultation has also taken place on retaining police documents, which was the subject of a recommendation made by the bishop, and the Ministry of Justice has also consulted on establishing an independent public advocate.

Those steps are important. They go a long way to improving the situation, but they do not cover everything that the bishop recommended, which is why we will be responding in full. We intend to do so in the spring, but after, of course, full and deep engagement with the families concerned.

The Government are committed to making sure that these lessons are learned following this awful tragedy and I, as the newly appointed Police Minister, will do everything that I can to work with Members across the House, particularly those representing the affected communities, to make sure that this does now happen quickly.

Ian Byrne: Since that awful day on 15 April 1989, 97 people have died directly from the actions of South Yorkshire police and other agencies, including the emergency services, the Football Association and Sheffield Wednesday Football Club, with families destroyed and survivors traumatised—so traumatised that many have since taken their own lives.

The lies and smears from the cover-up by the establishment, which acted with impunity and arrogance because it could, meant that justice was never delivered for all those who have died and suffered since. In 2017, Bishop Jones delivered the report "The patronising disposition of unaccountable power: A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated." Shamefully, we have not yet had a Government response to his recommendations in the report commissioned by the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May).

Yesterday, Bishop Jones said that the delay was intolerable. His recommendations are, in essence, the Hillsborough law, which so many in this place and outside have since campaigned for. We must always remember that these recommendations are to ensure that no other community goes through the suffering that we have endured since 1989. They will hopefully futureproof the ability to gain justice.

Yesterday, we finally had the response to the report from the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council. This was the first apology from the police force for its actions since the disaster 33 years ago. For so many, including myself, it is far too little and far too late.

Yesterday's recommendations from the police did not go anywhere near far enough to change the culture that we came up against in our quest for justice. I ask the Minister whether this Government will do the right thing for future generations in our nation and implement a Hillsborough law containing Bishop Jones's recommendations with immediate effect. The families and survivors of so many disasters and consequent state cover-ups deserve nothing less, and these injustices must never again be allowed. If a Hillsborough law had existed in 1989, we would have had a chance of justice for the 97; without it we had none.

Chris Philp: I fully understand and respect the sentiments that the hon. Member so powerfully expressed in his remarks. On the timing and the years that have passed since the bishop's report, for much of that time there were ongoing legal proceedings and, of course, no one wanted to prejudice those for obvious reasons. That accounted for about four years—from 2017 to about May 2021—but about 21 months have passed since then and I agree that the Government response does need to come out quickly. Indeed, since my appointment a couple of months ago I have asked for it to be sped up, and I want to make sure that that happens this spring, following, of course, consultation with the families, which is extremely important. That will include responses to the points that the hon. Member made.

I reiterate that the statutory changes made to the professional standards for policing in 2020 include a duty of co-operation on police officers in relation to inquiries, which, as he has said, is very important. He is right: we do need to get on and respond comprehensively to the bishop's recommendations, which is what I am working on.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): The apology from the police is, of course, welcome, but it would have been far better for them to have done their job properly on that fateful April day, 34 years ago. If they had done so, families of the 97—and, indeed, the whole Liverpool community—would not have gone through the suffering and anguish that they have had to bear over the past 34 years.

Let me say first to my right hon. Friend that I do not think saying vaguely that the Government's response will be available this spring is good enough: five years on, they must now publish it. Secondly, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the elements that can be put in place to help families if, sadly, such an event—a tragedy of this sort—happens in the future is the introduction of an independent public advocate, which was promised in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017? Will he give a commitment now that the Home Office will not put any barriers in the way of the work of the Ministry of Justice in introducing such a body?

Chris Philp: As I mentioned, for approximately four years following the publication of the report there were ongoing criminal legal proceedings which nobody wanted to prejudice, but, as I have said in the House and as the Home Secretary said yesterday, we do now want to get on and respond quickly and comprehensively to the bishop's report. As for the introduction of an independent public advocate—a measure being worked on by the Ministry of Justice, as the right hon. Lady said—a public consultation has taken place. The response is being worked on in the usual way, but it is happening at pace.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), and all the other Merseyside MPs, for pursuing this matter, and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this urgent question.

Ninety-seven people lost their lives as a result of what happened at Hillsborough on that terrible day 34 years ago. We remember the football fans who never came

home, and we must also never forget the shameful cover-up that followed. The Hillsborough families have fought for decades against obfuscation and lies to get to the truth. Everyone hoped that the report from the Right Rev. James Jones would be a turning point, and I welcome the work that the former Home Secretary did in commissioning that report, but it is five years on. The police have rightly said:

“Police failures were the main cause of the tragedy and have continued to blight the lives of family members ever since.”

Nevertheless, five years is too long, and what makes this even more shameful is the fact that there is still no Government response to what has happened. The Home Secretary said yesterday that it was because of active criminal proceedings, but those finished 18 months ago, and the work could have taken place even while those proceedings were ongoing.

In September 2021 the Government announced that the response would be published by the end of the year, and we are still waiting. The Home Secretary also said yesterday that the Government were engaging with families, but what engagement has taken place? Has the Home Secretary met the families? Has she met the bishop? And I have to ask, where is she today? Previous Home Secretaries have shown respect to the families and acknowledgement of the appalling ways in which they have been wronged by being here to respond, and it is a devastating failure of responsibility and respect to them for her not to be here to respond.

The key measures on which we need a Government response are well known: the duty of candour, the public advocate and the elements of the Hillsborough law. The Labour party stands ready to support that law and get it into statute. Will the Government now commit themselves to supporting it, and recognise what the bishop has said about its being “intolerable”, given the pain of those families, not to have a response? The report is entitled “The patronising disposition of unaccountable power”. Does the Minister accept that that is exactly what this continued delay will feel like to so many families and survivors now?

Chris Philp: I entirely agree with the shadow Home Secretary's opening comments—and, indeed, with what has been said by other Members—about the appalling impact that this has had on the families of those who so tragically lost their lives. When I took my own son to a Crystal Palace football game a few weeks ago, I thought about how awful it must have been to be trapped in those circumstances, which is a terrible thing to contemplate.

As the shadow Home Secretary said, the police have apologised for the terrible failings that took place on the day and in the years subsequently. It is right that they have apologised to the families, and to the country as well. In relation to the timing, I have already said that there were legal proceedings ongoing. It has been 18 to 21 months since those concluded, which is why since I was appointed I have asked for the work to be sped up, and it will be concluded rapidly and it will respond to all the points in full.

I repeat the point I made earlier that a number of things have happened already. The right hon. Lady mentioned the independent public advocate. As she will know from her own time in government, where a public

consultation has taken place, it is generally speaking a prelude to action. On the question of co-operating with inquiries, the 2020 statutory professional standards for policing did introduce that requirement, but the response needs to cover all the points, and that will happen soon.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I listened with great care to my right hon. Friend's response to the urgent question, but I have to press him on the independent public advocate point. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, the Ministry of Justice, which I had the honour of leading—I worked with her and the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle)—is in a position to go ahead with this policy. The consultation was five years ago. What is stopping the Government from doing this?

Chris Philp: As I have said before to others, including the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the consultation has, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) said, taken place. The usual processes in government are going on to respond to that consultation. As soon as the Ministry of Justice can make an announcement on this, it will most certainly be doing so.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): May I also start by commending the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and his colleagues not just on securing the urgent question, but on all their campaigning work on behalf of survivors and families affected by Hillsborough? The persistence, bravery and decency of the people of Liverpool over these 34 years has been utterly extraordinary in the face of cover-up and smear, but they need more than warm words—they need a comprehensive response. The long overdue police report, while a start, does not provide a complete response. That needs the Government, and we should have had a Government response before now.

As Bishop Jones has said, the wait has been “intolerable”, and the families are speaking about the bishop's report gathering dust. I appreciate that questions are being raised that will not be answered today, in the light of the announcement of a spring publication, but can the Minister at least assure us that when that long overdue response from the Government is published, we can have a full debate on the Floor of the House on its findings?

Secondly, the Minister referred to engagement with the families. There has been some good engagement, but there have been some ropy times as well, so can he say a little more about what form that engagement will take going forward?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for the sentiments he expressed, which I completely understand. In relation to a full debate, scheduling business in the House is not my responsibility, but it would seem to me like a reasonable request to make, and I will certainly pass it on to my colleagues who are responsible for scheduling parliamentary business.

Families have been fully engaged. One reason why the independent pathology review, which had been commenced, has been temporarily paused is to allow for more engagement to take place, because families rightly felt that they wanted to be more involved. That engagement is continuing. Critically, before the Government response is published, there will be more such engagement, for the obvious reasons that the hon. Gentleman rightly points to.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Hillsborough disaster and the following cover-up by South Yorkshire police was a devastating tragedy that undermined the faith of my communities in Rother Valley and South Yorkshire in the police. The police apology yesterday was the bare minimum that could be done. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, as part of this process, the Government will thoroughly engage not only with the families of the 97, but with the wider communities in Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield, to make sure that lessons can be learned so that such an awful tragedy does not happen again and that there will be no more police cover-ups of such awful disasters?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I agree with the points he has made. I can confirm that the engagement he rightly requests will happen.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It was a great pleasure to meet Bishop James Jones recently. As an aside, I pay tribute to his work in securing the infected blood inquiry, which is another example of the patronising disposition of unaccountable power, where cover-ups and secrecy become a further scandal on top of the original events. Given that the Home Secretary is not here, may I ask the Minister whether she has met Bishop James Jones to discuss his report on Hillsborough and the Government response?

Chris Philp: I am afraid that I do not have visibility of the Home Secretary's diary, so I cannot give a direct answer, but I can certainly ask the Home Secretary to write to the Chair of the Select Committee in response to that question. I add my thanks to hers to the bishop for the work he has done in both of the areas to which she referred. In the coming months, there will be very full engagement with all the interested parties, including Members of Parliament who represent the relevant communities, for the reasons that she mentioned.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I was at university in Sheffield at the time of the Hillsborough disaster. A friend of mine died in that tragedy; another was seriously injured. I pay tribute to the residents of Sheffield, who are very rarely mentioned but who showed compassion and gave real practical support on that day to people they did not know. They raced to the stadium, they offered free taxi journeys to help people to get where they needed to go, and they looked after people in their homes and provided them with hot meals. It was an incredibly moving thing to witness.

It has taken too long to learn the lessons of Hillsborough. Will my right hon. Friend confirm, irrespective of the timing of the publication of a Government response, that he will emphasise to all police forces around the

[Rob Butler]

country that if such an appalling tragedy ever happens again, their officers must behave openly and sympathetically, even if it means showing their own shortcomings?

Chris Philp: Yes, I can do that. I thank my hon. Friend for his question, particularly in the light of how he has been personally affected by the tragedy. I can give him that assurance. Some steps have already been taken, partly through the changes made in 2020 to the statutory professional standards for policing. That will be further reinforced by the updated code of ethics, which will be published by the College of Policing, following its announcement yesterday, with the exact purpose that my hon. Friend has just set out in mind.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is unconscionable that 18 months after the collapse of the criminal trials, there has still been no Government response to the bishop's report. The fact that we will have to wait until spring, whenever that is, shows that the work is not finished, more than five years after that report was written and published. It is outrageous that the Government have done nothing to sort this out in that time.

The Minister keeps referring to the consultation on the independent public advocate. That happened in 2018. The Government have not yet responded to their own consultation on the independent public advocate. But I can get the Minister off the hook. My Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill will be considered again in the Chamber this Friday. If the Minister were to stop his Whip objecting to it for the 12th time in this Session, we could get it into Committee and start this legislation rolling. It is a key part of the Hillsborough law, along with the duty of candour and the equality of arms at inquests. With the support of Labour Front Benchers, the Minister could do himself and his Government a favour by getting that legislation through.

Chris Philp: As I have said, we are working quickly on the comprehensive response. The hon. Lady says that nothing has happened since 2018, but with great respect I do not think that is entirely accurate. I have referenced the professional standards for policing introduced in 2020, which introduced a duty to co-operate. I have mentioned the pathology review that has happened. I have mentioned the consultation on the independent public advocate, and I can tell her that that is being very actively worked on by the Ministry of Justice as we speak. We have had changes made to the exceptional case funding at inquest, so the means testing has been removed. A lot has been done. But I do accept that a comprehensive Government response is required. Since arriving at the Home Office, I have asked for that to be done as quickly as possible, and it will be.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Anyone who knows the story of Coventry City's 1987 cup run will know that there was a match at Hillsborough where a near crush took place, making what then happened two years later tragically predictable. The Hillsborough disaster was a tragedy; the lies, smears and cover-ups that followed were an absolute disgrace, worrying echoes of which we saw after the Champions League final last year, so the extended delay in getting this response out just makes it even worse. Will the Minister at least commit today to

the principle of the independent public advocate, to ensure that in future, families would be on a level playing field?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and agree with his point about the policing failures at the time. It is right that the police comprehensively apologised yesterday for the police's behaviour, both at the time and in the years subsequently. As I say, the consultation on the independent public advocate did happen, and it is under active consideration at the moment. I do not want to pre-empt the Ministry of Justice's work on that, because it is for the Ministry of Justice to publicly respond, but I can tell my hon. Friend and others that they are actively working on it at the moment.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): It is an absolute disgrace that the Home Secretary was sat on the Government Benches just before this debate started, but has left—a debate about a disaster that has no parallel, in terms of what happened and the injustice that took place. I am quite sure that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) would never have left the Front Bench in these circumstances.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as you may be aware, I have a number of constituents who lost loved ones at Hillsborough, and I myself was present that day at the disaster. As I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) will agree, my hon. Friend and I are so proud to have been privy to the work of the Hillsborough families over the years in fighting for justice. Part of the injustice that has existed over the years—apart from the general injustice—was the continued delays, the time it took to try to get to justice and get to the bottom of what went wrong, even though we all knew, and to get the report out. It took a long, long time, and this is adding to the torture of the families and those people who were affected by Hillsborough, so the Minister saying that he hopes to have a response by the spring is just not good enough. I ask him to come back to the House before the recess in February with an actual date for when that response will be given to the House.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Member for his question, particularly given that he has such direct personal experience of the tragedy that unfolded—that he was there himself, all those years ago. I agree that speed of resolution is now important after all this time: too much time has passed, and I can give the hon. Member my assurance that I want this done as soon as possible. It is something I have personally pressed for since arriving, and I will be doing everything I can to expedite this process and get the comprehensive response published as quickly as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): For football fans everywhere, 15 April 1989 is seared on the memory, and my sympathy is with the families of the victims who tragically lost their lives. One of the problems here is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) alluded to, this could have happened in 1987—it could have happened in 1981. I was present for the semi-final held at Hillsborough when crushing took place, but the difference then was that there were no cages. In 1989, the Liverpool fans who lost their lives were caged in and could not escape.

The key problem is that, in the same way, following the policing in 1981, 1987 and 1989, the lessons were not learned. I personally gave evidence to the inquiry about what happened in 1981, yet nothing seems to have happened about those aspects of policing. Will my hon. Friend the Minister ensure that there will be a duty of candour and the other legislative measures that we need to ensure that the police own up to their mistakes, rather than cover them up for 34 years? They may apologise now, but it is far too late for the victims.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right to point to the police failings at the time, and the fact that they essentially created the tragic situation that unfolded. The apology they gave yesterday was important: it was comprehensive, I think it was heartfelt, and it is good that they have done that. It is also important that they change the way that they respond in those circumstances, as my hon. Friend has said. That is why the changes to the code of ethics that the College of Policing will be bringing forward are important, and it is why the duty of candour I have referred to previously, enshrined in the statutory professional standards, is important as well. But I do agree with the points that my hon. Friend has made.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Former Bishop of Liverpool James Jones's report laid bare the sheer scale of the failure of the police at Hillsborough and the lies, smears and state cover-up that followed. It is disappointing, to say the least, that it has taken this long for an apology to come from the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing, and it does nothing to undo the horrific abuse of power that has been seen. What is worse—what is more shameful—is that five years on, we are still waiting for the Government's response to the report.

The appalling treatment of the Hillsborough families did not happen in isolation. As we have heard, from the contaminated blood scandal to Grenfell, it is part of a problem of failure and cover-up. When will the Government finally listen to calls for the Hillsborough law? Will the Minister back the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) so that the scales of justice can be levelled in favour of the bereaved families?

Chris Philp: We will be bringing forward the full response as quickly as possible. That is important, as Members on both sides of the House have pointed out. In relation to the Hillsborough law, that will be included in the response. However, via the professional standards of policing in 2020, which are statutory and were introduced by regulations, we have already introduced the duty of co-operation in relation to inquiries, which is one of the most important elements of that. Our response on the independent public advocate, which is also important, will happen as quickly as possible. The Ministry of Justice is working on it actively right now.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is not good enough. First of all, the Minister criticises his immediate predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who, as I understand it, really was trying to get to grips with this issue. Secondly, he fails to explain why the Government are blocking this legislative vehicle for establishing the independent public advocate. What is going to happen is that the Government

will report at the end of the spring, and then they will say it will take a long time to get through any legislation. We have a legislative opportunity before us. The debate began last July! Why will the Government not allow that Bill to have its Second Reading this Friday?

Chris Philp: First of all, to be clear, I am in no way criticising my immediate predecessor, who was only in post for a matter of two or three months. For the record, I am most certainly not criticising him, and I frankly resent the insinuation that I was. The Government are not blocking progress on the issue of the independent public advocate, but there is a process to go through to get cross-Government agreement. The Ministry of Justice is working on it, and we will respond as quickly as possible.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I would like to place on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate, and to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for their work. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope)—something I never thought I would say in this Chamber.

After 34 long years, the police finally acknowledged what every decent Scouser and every decent person in this country knew: a failure in policing was the main cause of the tragedy that saw the death of 97 innocent men, women and children. Our city has never given up the fight for truth, justice and accountability. I have heard nothing from the Minister at the Dispatch Box today to say why the Government have not responded to the report for five long years. This Friday, the Minister has the ideal opportunity to back the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood and the duty of candour. We do not want to hear the reasons why it cannot be done or that something will be brought forward in the spring. The Government have an ideal opportunity to back this Bill on Friday. The first question is, will they do that? If not, why not?

Secondly, the Secretary of State for Education—herself a Scouser—did the media round today. On BBC Radio 4, she said that there had been no Government response to Bishop James Jones's Hillsborough report because of ongoing criminal trials. The last trial finished in May 2021, and the police conduct investigation is ongoing. Does the Minister agree, after all the smears and all the lies, and after 34 years, that Ministers have a responsibility to ensure that what they say in the media round is truthful?

Chris Philp: As I said earlier, several things have been done in the last few years to address the issues that have been raised—not comprehensively and not everything—but they include the professional standards for duty of co-operation; the pathology review; consulting on retaining documents, which is another recommendation; the consultation on the independent public advocate, and the removal of means-testing for exceptional case funding for bereaved families and inquests. All those things have been done.

The IPA is a Ministry of Justice lead. I cannot speak for that Department, but I can say that it is working actively on it.

[Chris Philp]

The position on the delay is as I explained earlier. Between 2017 and May 2021, there were ongoing legal proceedings, as the hon. Lady just said. For the past 18 to 21 months, that has not been the case, and we need to get on quickly and bring forward the full Government response. I will make sure that that happens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Because of the nature of the urgent question, I am giving a bit more latitude on the length of questions, but please help me by trying to focus as quickly as possible on the question in hand.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My constituents have waited long enough. That was true last month when the Secretary of State for Justice gave me the same pathetic response. I am afraid that I have concluded that the Minister does not know very much about the issue. It affects not just Merseyside, but the whole country. As others have said, it is not just about football or Hillsborough. It affects people who have suffered because of Grenfell, contaminated blood and a host of matters where the state has tried to protect itself instead of putting the interests of the citizen first.

I want a straightforward yes or no answer. When the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) comes before the House on Friday, will the Government block it—yes or no?

Chris Philp: I have already explained several things that the Government have done in the past few years to address the issues that the bishop's inquiry raised—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question!"] I am going to. They include the duty of candour on police in relation to inquiries. That was done in 2020. I have been asked about the independent public advocate several times and I have given the same answer. It is a Ministry of Justice, not a Home Office lead. I cannot speak for another Minister's area of responsibility. It is with the Ministry of Justice, which is actively considering it and will respond shortly.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing the urgent question.

More than 30 years after the Hillsborough disaster, and more than five years after the publication of Bishop Jones's report, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing have finally apologised for what they described as decades of "deflection and denial". However, for many of my constituents, who are still haunted by that terrible day, that is too little, too late.

Does the Minister agree that while plans to revise the police code of ethics are welcome, a new duty of candour on public authorities must have a statutory footing, so that no family ever again has to struggle for truth and justice, which the Hillsborough families sought for decades?

Chris Philp: A duty of co-operation on police in relation to inquiries was set out in the professional standards for policing in 2020. We will respond to the

wider duty of candour, to which point of learning 14 in the bishop's report referred, along with everything else, shortly.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister speaks from the Dispatch Box for not only his Department, but the entire Government. I would have expected him to know what the approach of the Ministry of Justice to the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend and sister the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on Friday would be before he came here. Will he at least say from the Dispatch Box that when he leaves the Chamber, he will go to the Ministry of Justice and get permission from them to ensure that on Friday, my hon. Friend and sister's Bill, which provides for an independent public advocate, will be let into Committee and not be blocked, so that the clauses that the Ministry of Justice is currently drafting can be incorporated into the Bill in Committee? We have a legislative vehicle, we could do it now, and he could enhance his reputation. We have a legislative vehicle, we could do it now, and he could enhance his reputation.

Chris Philp: I would be very happy to convey the hon. Lady's request to my Ministry of Justice colleagues.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I send my support and respect to all the families and friends who have fought for justice for the victims of Hillsborough. The Government have said that they will respond in due course, and today we have heard that might be in the spring but it could be any time soon. The Labour party has pledged to create a new Hillsborough law. Can the Minister, without looking at his notes, commit to supporting the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), and to supporting an independent public advocate?

Chris Philp: I have just responded on the public advocate point. On the Hillsborough law point, which is different, we will respond to that and the recommendation in point of learning 14 with the rest of it. But as I have said quite a few times, we have already, on a statutory basis, changed and updated the professional standards for policing to include a duty to co-operate with inquiries imposed on the police.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I pay tribute to everybody who has campaigned for justice for the 97. I was a young school teacher in Liverpool when Hillsborough happened, and I remember how traumatised the children were on the following Monday and in subsequent weeks and months. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing the urgent question.

I hear what the Minister is saying about a Hillsborough law, but can he tell us whether, in principle, he agrees that we should have a Hillsborough law that would place a new legal duty of candour on public authorities and officials—not just the police, but all public authorities and officials—and would ensure that victims of disasters or state-related deaths are entitled to parity of legal representation during inquests and inquiries?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, particularly given that she and many other Members have been affected personally by the tragedy. It has touched an extraordinary number of lives in many

different ways, including hers. We will respond fully when we reply to the bishop's report, and I want to make sure that happens as quickly as possible. It is very important that public bodies respond quickly, openly and honestly, and with integrity, and that they do not try to cover things up, as obviously happened in this terrible case. We all have a shared interest in making sure that it never happens again.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this urgent question, but the truth is that he should not have had to do so. As soon as the police made the apology, there should have been a Government statement, and it should have been the Home Secretary giving that statement. I am afraid this gives the impression that this issue is not a priority, which, given the history, is completely unforgivable. Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), I suggest to the Minister that he should go back to the Home Secretary this afternoon and express in the strongest terms that it would be sensible for her to come back at the next opportunity with a concrete date by which the Government will respond to the bishop's report.

Chris Philp: The Home Secretary did of course reference this issue during her speech in yesterday's debate—I think it was in response to an intervention. To be fair to the Home Secretary, she addressed the issue in the House as recently as yesterday, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that it is already the subject of urgent discussions. I want to see action on this as quickly as he and others do, and I am committed to making sure that happens.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As someone who was present at Hillsborough on that terrible day and who was the leader of the council, I echo comments made by Conservative Members—first, about the incredibly generosity and warmth of Sheffield residents around the ground, who welcomed very distraught people into their homes and gave them whatever help they could.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is right; the South Yorkshire police are accountable for what they have done. They probably have not been accountable enough, given their enormous failings. But there was also a failing to recognise that circumstances had changed, with cages being put around grounds. As Lord Justice Taylor recommended in his report, those cages had to be taken down because they were making so many grounds in this country unsafe. Essentially, they were put there to treat every football fan as a hooligan, without any thought for spectator safety, and we ought to learn some lessons from that as well.

When the Government eventually produce their report, rather than merely giving us warm words and commitments, will they say how they will ensure that every single police force in the country abides by the recommendations in the report and implements them in full?

Chris Philp: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Like so many in the Chamber today and across the country, he was personally affected—indeed, he was actually present. I completely agree with his point about caging; as a football fan myself—I take my son to Crystal Palace—the idea of people being caged is

completely wrong. In answer to his direct question: yes, when there is a response to the report, which will be soon, it is important to make sure that it has teeth and is not just warm words; that it has biting and binding effect. I am confident it will, in the way that he asked.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this urgent question. Like many others, I have never forgotten that day. I lived just around the corner from the football ground and remember seeing young people queueing outside phone boxes—probably 50 of them—with not one word being spoken, because they were so traumatised. I have never seen anything like it. There were young people trembling around the streets in my area. Yes, lots of us went out to support them, because that is what we do in Sheffield. None of us has ever forgotten that tragic day, let alone the travesty of justice that has followed.

The Hillsborough disaster will live long in the memory of my constituents, but it is completely unacceptable that, more than 30 years on, 97 families are still waiting for justice and assurances that this can never happen again. It would show those families the respect they deserve if the Government were to do exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) has asked for, by supporting the Bill that will be debated in the Chamber on Friday. Let us show the families the respect that they deserve and have not received until now.

Chris Philp: A lot has been done already to address many of the issues that the bishop raised in his report. I have gone through them previously, but they include, critically: those professional standards for policing, the removal of the means test on exceptional case funding, and many other things that I have set out and will not repeat. We want to honour the families by responding in full. We want to make sure that this will never happen again. I have already committed to raising the IPA point with Ministry of Justice colleagues, which I will do straightaway. I hope that, through the actions taken already and the response we will bring forward as quickly as possible, we will show the families of those who suffered this appalling tragedy that the Government and the whole House are with them. I want to make sure that no one has to go through what they went through.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I do not think that the Government's response is acceptable, and neither is the Minister's; he can read out the same thing again and again, but he is simply not answering the question. Why will the Government not back the Bill on Friday? I would like to press him further on the Hillsborough law. The Government have access to a blank cheque for legal representation, yet victims have to navigate an often alien and complex system to access limited legal aid. Does he agree that victims should have access to public money on the same terms as the state for legal representation during inquests and inquiries?

Chris Philp: That is an important issue. It was one of the points that the bishop raised in his report, which we will respond to. We have already taken action in this area already by removing the means test for exceptional case funding at inquest for the reason the hon. Lady set out.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The fact that the Home Secretary did not think that it was a priority to be here to answer this urgent question is a complete disgrace, and yet another snub to the families of the Hillsborough 97. We know what will happen on Friday. The Bill being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) is No. 10 on the Order Paper. The Whips will sit on the Government Benches and anonymously shout “Object” when the Bill is read out, unless the Government change their position. We need no further debate on this issue. We can get the Bill into Committee, debate it line by line and get the legislation through. There is a vehicle for doing it right here, right now in this House. It will be forever to the condemnation of this Government if they do not take that opportunity.

Chris Philp: As I have said, the Home Secretary spoke about the issue when she was asked about it in this House yesterday. The private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) is due for consideration on Friday; I have already committed to communicating with my Ministry of Justice colleagues on the topic, and I will do so.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Any indication of obfuscation is dangerous for the Government. We must have a Hillsborough law. We must have a report in full, as soon as possible. A functioning democracy depends on public trust in the police forces; without that trust, democracy itself is undermined. I would like to hear a word of recognition from the Minister that this is a dangerous situation that we have to put right. We have to make sure that the general public—our voters, the people of the United Kingdom—have proper faith in their police forces. Right now, that faith has been damaged by all that we have seen.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. Policing takes place by consent, and it is important that the public have confidence in the police force. That is why the apology yesterday from the police and the acknowledgment of the terrible, terrible mistakes and wrongdoing—not just all those years ago, but in the years that followed—was right. That is important. The police have committed to change their own code of ethics to build trust in policing, which reflects the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Action is also being taken on the vetting issues that we have debated in this House over the past two or three months. We are looking to review the way in which dismissals from the police happen, so we can allow chief constables more readily to remove officers who are guilty of misconduct or of poor performance more generally. I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point; action is under way.

Let me end my answer by saying that, despite the points that the hon. Gentleman has raised and other points that we have debated in this House over the past few months, the vast majority of police officers are dedicated, hard-working, decent people who put themselves

in danger for our safety. But where there are terrible failings, as there have been in this case and others that we have debated recently, it is critical that robust action is taken, because without public confidence we cannot have an effective police force.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We absolutely need a Hillsborough law. We hear that all police forces in England and Wales have signed the charter for families bereaved through public tragedy, but the Minister should not be surprised if that has been met with some cynicism. To prevent the charter from being just empty words, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all forces are fully trained in and regularly updated on its requirements, and that they implement it in full when they deal with any future tragedy?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which is a good one. Charters, codes and so on, in this context or any other, are only as good as their implementation. The College of Policing—particularly Chief Constable Andy Marsh, who leads it—has made it clear that implementation of the charter will be a topic in training across all 43 police forces. Moreover, I expect His Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to ensure it looks at that when it conducts its regular PEEL—police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy—inspections. I would be happy to raise the matter next time I see Andy Cooke, the chief inspector, to make sure that he is keeping an eye on the issue. The hon. Lady raises a very good point, and I will take it away.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), as always, and others in this Chamber who have consistently brought this matter to the fore. No words and no amount of money can bring back a loved one or soothe the grief of loss, but the Minister will know that full accountability and openness can help some people to move on. Does he really believe that is being achieved? Will he consider implementing and legislating on the proposals in the 2017 Jones report as a signal that changes will be made to prevent this from ever happening again?

Chris Philp: Closure for victims’ families through openness is critical. The bishop’s report was an important part of that, as were the various inquiries that happened in the aftermath; we will respond in full. There were, I think, 25 points of learning, some of which address the issues that the hon. Gentleman has quite rightly spoken about. When we respond in full to the bishop’s report, those issues will be addressed.

In closing, I repeat that I want to see this happen as quickly as possible. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made very clear the House’s expectation that it will happen as quickly as possible. I will make sure that it is my duty to ensure that it does.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank Ian Byrne for his urgent question, all those who have taken part and the Minister for responding for over 50 minutes.

Environmental Improvement Plan 2023

1.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I would like to update the House on the next steps that the Government are taking to help nature recover through our new environmental improvement plan. It is a delivery plan setting out how we will achieve our ambitious, stretching environmental targets, the most critical of which is to halt the decline of nature by the end of this decade. We can and must achieve that, both here in the UK and globally.

We are already under way. In this Government's first 100 days, we have already delivered with legally binding targets to halt nature's decline, clean up our air and rivers and support a circular economy; playing an instrumental role in a new global agreement for nature at the UN nature summit COP15; enacting the legal duty on Government, national and local, on considering biodiversity; publishing our environment principles policy statement; setting out in detail our transformational farming schemes with the full range of actions we will pay farmers and land managers to do to restore nature; announcing we will ban the most commonly littered single-use plastic items from October 2023; agreeing to enact mandatory sustainable urban drainage systems for new development, which will reduce the risk of surface water flooding and pollution; putting in place the plant biosecurity strategy for Great Britain, a five-year vision for plant health to protect native species, with plants providing an annual value of £15.7 billion to the UK; and agreeing with the devolved Administrations our approach to managing fisheries. There is much more I could add.

Nature is a crucial part of our islands' story and our shared future. We know what is special with our rare habitats and our iconic species, and we also know the pressures it is under. We rely on our natural capital for a secure supply of food, for clean air, and for clean water, as well as for leisure and genuine joy. However, nature has been taken for granted for too long and used freely as a resource with little thought for the consequences. We have to reverse that and respect nature.

Seventy years ago, people were waking up to the devastation of the great flood of 1953, in which more than 300 people died, reminding us that the full force of nature can bring us challenges. We took action then and it is why we have continued to invest billions of pounds in protecting people's homes and in better protecting more than 100,000 local businesses to safeguard around 100,000 jobs. However, nature can also help us to tackle some of our great challenges, so we need to help protect nature too. Undoubtedly and understandably, the pandemic set us back in some areas, as we responded to the emergency at hand. A silver lining to that experience, if any is to be had, was the opportunity for us to reconnect with nature, and I am particularly pleased by our pledge in this plan to bring access to a green or blue space within a 15-minute walk of everyone's homes, be that parks, canals, rivers, countryside or coast.

Our focus is on picking up the pace and scaling up at home, and around the world, and that is why we are putting nature top of the international agenda as well. We brought nature into the heart of our collective

response to climate change under our presidency of COP26 in Glasgow. At COP27 the Prime Minister said that

"there is no solution to climate change without protecting and restoring nature".

The House may have heard me before extol the marvel of mangroves as the ultimate example of how investing in nature is an essential, effective and cost-effective way to take on a multitude of challenges. The key achievement of 2022 was the agreement reached at the UN nature summit, the Convention on Biological Diversity COP15 in Montreal.

To level with the House, there is much, much more to do to restore the natural world. Some of the challenges are not always so easy or so quick to fix as we might all hope, yet I assure hon. Members that with our new legal duty to consider biodiversity, guided by our environmental principles policy, we are embedding nature in the heart of every decision that Government will take for the long haul. We have a plan for the whole of Government to support this national endeavour and we have already started the journey with a great many improvements.

We are replacing the EU's bureaucratic common agricultural policy, which did so little for farmers or nature, and rewarding our farmers for taking action to help nature retain and regain good health, reduce emissions and produce food sustainably. Those things are absolutely symbiotic and we are leading the way in making this essential transition. We have cleaner air, with major decreases in all five major pollutants. Emissions of fine particulate matter, PM_{2.5}, the most damaging pollutant to human health, decreased by 18% between 2010 and 2020. I want our air to be even cleaner. That is why we are working with farmers to tackle ammonia emissions.

Councils ask for a lot of powers, but I need them to use the powers they already have, including on tackling litter and fly-tipping, rather than just asking for more. I will be publishing what they are doing and seeking to share best practice across the country.

We are accelerating the rate of tree planting. The Forestry Commission will start growing its estate and increase planting, fulfilling its original statutory obligation to help to rejuvenate the forestry and timber industry. We have strengthened the financial support through our environmental land management schemes and we will continue to promote urban tree planting so children everywhere can enjoy their local woods.

On the chemical status of our water bodies, the science and modelling are clear that it will take decades to recover and heal completely, but we are keeping a spotlight on water quality and getting industry to clean up its act. We are restoring 400 miles of river through the first round of landscape recovery projects and establishing 3,000 hectares of new woodlands along England's rivers, as well as doubling funding available for the catchment-sensitive farming programme to £30 million in each of the next three years, to cover all farmland in England. We have already seen a huge improvement in our bathing waters. Last year, nearly three in four beaches were deemed excellent—only about half of them were back in 2010—but I share people's concern about sewage in our waters. That is why we, a Conservative Government, turned on the monitoring, and why we are holding industry to account on fixing this issue. Through our storm overflows discharge reduction

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

plan, we are requiring water companies to deliver their largest ever environmental infrastructure investment, an estimated £56 billion of capital investment over 25 years. We have set clear expectations on improvements on which we will track performance. The next formal review will be in 2027, so if we can go further and faster, that is exactly what we will do.

This issue remains an international endeavour as well. We have a globally recognised track record of action, helping communities protect and restore their national treasures. Reinforced by our science expertise and financial support, we are helping nature around the world. That is the right thing to do and it is absolutely in our interests as well. Having committed to doubling UK international climate finance to £11.6 billion, and to spending at least £3 billion of that on nature, we are building on decades of action, backing efforts to take on the whole host of threats that now face the world's flora and fauna well beyond climate change alone. We are doing that through the blue belt programme, protecting an area of ocean larger than India around our biodiverse overseas territories, through our world-renowned £39 million Darwin initiative, and through the illegal wildlife trade challenge fund. We are ploughing all that expertise and experience into our newly established £500 million blue planet fund, and our £100 million biodiverse landscapes fund, to help some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities restore, protect and connect globally important but fragile habitats.

I am so proud that the UK is leading, co-leading and actively supporting the global coalitions that are committed to securing the maximum possible ambition and achieving the greatest possible impact on everything from taking on the scourge of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, to persuading countries to agree a new, legally-binding global treaty to end plastic pollution by 2040, to supporting efforts to establish a global gold standard for taking nature into account across our economies.

I could spend hours talking about nature, about our mission, about what we have already achieved. As the Member of Parliament for Suffolk Coastal, I am blessed to represent a very special part of our country, with many precious habitats and protected sites, on land and offshore. I always said it felt like I had had six years of a perfect apprenticeship before I became the Environment Minister in 2016. There are many more parts to the plan that we published yesterday. I recognise that we have work to do, and our aim is to catalyse action across Government, across the economy and across the country, with the whole Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs family, our agencies, including Natural England, the Environment Agency and the Animal and Plant Health Agency, our delivery partners and regulators, the whole of Government, and individuals, communities and businesses, from farms to finance, all working together to bring this to life.

Nature needs us to accelerate and scale up our help if we want to enjoy nature and have its help for generations to come. Together, we can achieve it. Whether someone lives in a city or town, in the countryside or on the coast, we all have a part to play in the truly national endeavour and the decade of global action that we need now to see this through. I commend this statement to the House.

1.40 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I am pleased that on this occasion we are actually getting an oral statement, rather than a DEFRA Minister having to be dragged to the House for an urgent question or sneaking something important out as a written statement. However, even on this occasion, she made a speech announcing this plan outside this House yesterday. Unfortunately, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Secretary of State, is unable to be here, as he has a pre-arranged medical appointment. I am glad the Secretary of State is here to be held accountable, but it must be difficult for her to continue to try to defend her Department's record.

The Conservative Government are big on promises but little on delivery. The proof is in the pudding, and the Secretary of State's own appalling environmental track record speaks volumes. As water Minister, she presided over a new sewage spill every four minutes—321 years' worth of sewage was spilt in just three years; and she cut the resources of regulators that are there to protect the environment by a third. Her three months as Environment Secretary have not been any better. First, she broke her own statutory deadline for publishing environmental targets. Then she told Parliament that meeting polluting water bosses is not a priority, before announcing measures that inflict more sewage dumping and toxic air on our country. *[Interruption.]* She can correct the record when she responds. Even her Department's own regulator, the Office for Environmental Protection, gave the Government “nul points” on their 25 year environmental goals. On chemicals, the Government are missing in action. Their UK REACH system is evidently not working properly. Never mind Dr Dolittle, it is Dr Damage—a lot.

Let us look at this latest plan, as I have questions. Why will our sites of special scientific interest, which have been so neglected, not be assessed for five years, until 2028? Why is there no mention of reintroducing species to help nature recovery, aid flood management and increase pollination? Does the Secretary of State agree that she is betting the house on environmental land management schemes—ELMs—by relying totally on take-up and farmer co-operation? She had the opportunity to come to Parliament to say, or to outline at the National Farmers Union conference in Oxford, that she is on the side of farming communities, but she failed to do so. Where is she on the Dartmoor issue, and the increasing threat to access to nature? How does she plan to deal with the 1,781 retained EU environmental regulations we are going to have to deal with this year?

Trust is an important word in politics, and it is clear that there is very little trust in this Government to get anything done. Actions speak louder than words. The environmental improvement plan is full of praise for the action the Government have taken since 2018 to deliver improvements in our air quality, but light on detail on the actions they will take over the next five years to deliver change. That is why when Labour plans to introduce a stand-alone, ambitious, effective and comprehensive clean air Act, it will do what the Minister will not: save lives, save money and clean our air. Labour will expand meaningful access to nature and clean up the Tory sewage scandal. We will hold water bosses to account, not just pay lip service, and ensure that regulators can properly enforce the rules.

This environmental improvement plan, which was so long in gestation, still has glaring omissions, and there is no evidence on how it will be delivered. Tony Juniper, the chair of Natural England, said at the plan's launch yesterday:

"It's now all about delivery".

Yet, DEFRA has continually failed to deliver. How can we trust this failed Government to deliver for our natural environment? Only Labour will deliver a fairer, greener future.

Dr Coffey: Well, what can I say? I am not sure how much that deserves a response, but out of respect for the House I will say that it is important to make sure that these long-term environmental plans are in place. We brought in legislation saying that we would refresh them every five years, and that is exactly what we have done.

If we are talking about track records, of course the Labour Government never did anything about sewage. They did not know anything about it. *[Interruption.]* They did nothing—nothing. I am used to the usual spew coming out of those on the Labour Front Bench and, frankly, it is not good enough.

Let us go through some of the questions on which the hon. Member wanted some updates. On chemicals, we still have the system in place, and as is set out in the environment improvement plan, we will be publishing a chemicals strategy this year.

On SSSIs, I am very conscious of the risks that exist. There are variations in what is going on around the country, which is why I have asked for an individual plan to be put in place for every single SSSI. Natural England will be going through and making the assessments of what is there and what needs to be done, and we will get on with it.

I think environmental land management schemes have been transformational. This is a journey for those in the farming industry, who are the original friends of the earth—the people who want a very special countryside—and that is why we have brought forward measures, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries laid out to the House when he came here to talk about this transition last week. We will be working with farmers, and indeed I will be at the NFU conference next month. There has not been any NFU conference since I have been in the Government, but we make sure that we continue to speak to farmers and others.

On retained EU laws, I have already told Parliament the approach we have set out. Where there is legislation that is superfluous, we will get rid of it. We will be looking carefully at all the regulations that are in place, and that is what we are going through. It seems to have escaped Opposition Front Benchers' attention that we have of course already repealed 146 regulations. They did not even notice, so there we go.

In the meantime, we want to make sure that we are holding different people to account, but there is an individual endeavour, a local endeavour and a national endeavour. That is why provisions such as those on biodiversity net gain, which will be coming into effect later this year, will start to help local nature recovery strategies. It is why we have announced extra funding for more projects, with second rounds of things such as the landscape recovery scheme. There are also species reintroductions happening in different parts of the country.

I am very pleased we have published our environmental improvement plan. I think it shows a clear path for how we will get nature recovery, recognising that this has been going on for centuries. Finally, I am delighted to say that we in the UK Government should be proud of getting nature very much at the forefront of international thinking. We are leading the way on that, and we are doing our bit around the world. I trust that we will continue to be the Conservative party because we believe in the conservation of our precious land.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Goal 5 of the plan aims at eliminating waste, and while we have made great progress—for example, in phasing out single-use plastics and substituting more sustainable materials for plastic in packaging for foods—the sad fact remains that our local authorities are very good at collecting waste, but the majority of our plastic waste is exported overseas.

Will the Secretary of State look at two things she could do to improve that situation? First, will she look at the operation of extended producer responsibility, and maybe look at what is being done in Belgium to make sure there is work with industry to incentivise investment in our plastic waste recycling here? Secondly, will she look at setting a date, as my Committee has suggested, for the phasing out and elimination of plastic waste exports to countries such as Turkey, where standards are not as good as ours?

Dr Coffey: On exports of plastics, we have recognised this issue and want to make sure that we are not exporting to non-OECD countries, but that does not mean that we give a blank cheque when there are exports to member countries of the OECD. That is why we have a rigorous process in place, but we will continue to investigate, through the Environment Agency, where issues arise and get them fixed.

On our thinking more broadly, one of our sadnesses during covid was of course the explosion in single-use plastics and the throwaway elements that were necessary for public health. We also had a reduction in our recycling rates. We do want to turn that around, and that is why we will continue to work on the important EPR reforms to which my right hon. Friend referred.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): At yesterday's launch of the plan, the Secretary of State claimed that

"we are embedding nature in the heart of every decision that government will take".

That is a very worthy aim, but how on earth does it square with the action we see from her Department? Just last week, the Department gave the green light to an authorisation of the pesticide neonicotinoid, which we know kills bees. I hope she will not tell us that this was just an emergency authorisation; this is the third year in a row that the Department has ignored its own expert committee on this issue, so this is now becoming routine. How can she reassure us that when she says words such as, "We are going to put nature at the heart of all our environment policy making", she means it? Where is the consistency?

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. We commenced the legal duty on public authorities, at national and local government level, to consider biodiversity from 1 January, so that is already in place. The environmental principles policy statement was published yesterday. It will take some time for the Government to bring that in, and it will come into effect formally from 1 November this year.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries went into considerable detail in the consideration of the decision about neonicotinoids. Every year, if an application is made, it has to be considered separately. From discussion with our chief scientific adviser, my understanding about what happened in that process—[*Interruption.*] That is not true. We increased the threshold for usage and we set a bar, to be decided by Rothamsted Research, for how much of the crop has to be at risk. Only when those thresholds are reached can the neonicotinoid be applied to the seed. That is further strengthened by a prohibition on the planting of flowering crops for, I think, 36 months—it may be 32 months, but certainly between two and three years—after the use of the pesticide. Very careful consideration has been given to the matter, and we continue to consider these applications with a great deal of care. I am conscious that with the sustainable farming initiative, for example, we have brought forward eligibility for integrated pest management grants so that we can continue to try to accelerate away from using pesticides routinely.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I warmly welcome the incredible amount of work that the Secretary of State and her team, fresh into post, have put into the five-year environmental improvement plan. This is a holistic, comprehensive update of the 25-year environment plan, and it introduces for the first time a whole slew of targets and interim targets on the journey to where we wish to get to in the next 20 years.

Looking at goal 3 on clean and plentiful water, a topic that has been of great interest to Members across this House, I ask the Secretary of State to take this opportunity to help Opposition Members who seem to have deliberately confused what we voted for in this House in trying to introduce targets, particularly in connection with persistent chemicals. They are substances such as flame retardants that are banned from use, but that exist in sediment on our riverbeds and other places and are being released through the natural process of decay. This is not something that this House has voted to continue for 40 years, as some Opposition Members have tendentiously claimed.

Dr Coffey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. He is absolutely right to say that a lot of effort has gone into this review. That is quite right, because nature matters so much, not just to those of us who have a passion for it, but because it is critical to the global web of life.

This is not the first time that Liberal Democrats have put stuff out and it has been a complete load of the proverbial. I will make a point to the House more broadly about the chemical status of water. In the last decade, while we were still a member of the European Union, we added a particular type of chemical—it includes elements such as mercury—to the list of those to be considered in assessing the chemical status of

water bodies. Before that, nearly every one of our water bodies had good chemical status. When that provision came in, none of our water bodies had good status. Exactly the same thing happened to countries such as Germany. This is a natural process, and we now need nature to heal and recover before we can get that status changed.

On the other aspects that are more within our control, we have pressed the case through our strategic policy statements and things such as the water industry national environment programme. We are getting water companies to really tighten up and clean up waste water treatments.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday I introduced the Clean Air Bill, which would require us to reach World Health Organisation air quality standards for PM_{2.5} of 10 micrograms per cubic metre by 2030, in alignment with the ambition of the EU, which is achievable. Yet today, five years into the 25-year plan, the Secretary of State comes along, on the 10th anniversary of the death of Ella Kissi-Debrah, and extends that another 10 years to 2040. How many thousands of extra avoidable lives will be lost due to that? How many millions of children will have to go into hospital with asthma attacks because of that delay? What will she do to bring forward that target to 2030 in alignment with the EU? If we were still in the EU, thousands of lives would be saved, instead of which she is ensuring that thousands will die.

Dr Coffey: I am conscious of the hon. Gentleman's passion on this and know that he has a long-standing interest in air quality, as do I. I seem to recall that, when I was first in the Department, the focus was on NO_x, because we were in legal breach, but we are not in any legal breach now. [*Interruption.*] That is not the case either. It was I who pointed out to the various groups at the time that the thing that we should worry about is PM_{2.5} because it affects everybody. I have long been passionate about this matter, which is why, with me in post, we introduced the ban on the sale of smoky coal and we got rid of wet wood as best we could, because that was the principal source of what was happening with PM_{2.5}.

As I have said publicly, I would have loved for the target to be 2030, but the powers of the Environment Act 2021 require me to believe that it is achievable. I am very sad that, in London in particular, we do not seem to be able to fix the problem. Many issues need to be addressed; we still have a problem in 14 out of 21 London boroughs. That is why I am very keen for the Mayor of London not to be doing all sorts of tokenistic things that make a marginal difference, such as the expansion of the ultra-low emission zone, but to be encouraging the councils to use their powers to inform people of the issues, so that we can really tackle that PM_{2.5}. If we can go quicker, the next time that we review the targets I will make sure that they are changed.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): May I say a huge thank you to my right hon. Friend and extend a big, grateful Herefordshire hug to her for this excellent plan? Will she meet me to discuss the Environment Agency's permitting department, which I believe is struggling, the rivers Lugg and Wye, and how we will deliver through the work that farmers do?

Dr Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I would be delighted to meet him. Hopefully I can bring along the farming Minister and the water Minister, because this is a good example of where we need different agencies to come together, as well as our farmers. We need to think through how we can improve the capture of run-offs and other elements. That is why we have made sure that money is available to farmers for slurry storage, for example, so that we can try to trap ammonia, as well as for some of the other activities that they can undertake. That is how we can help them to do the right thing.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I want to declare an interest: I am a trustee of the small charity, Fields in Trust, that works with some local authorities in trying to achieve the target of no household being more than 15 minutes away from green space.

The Secretary of State said that this was about the whole of Government. Before Christmas, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities introduced a consultation on changes to the national planning policy framework, which required the 20 major urban areas in this country to have a 35% uplift to their house building targets. On 9 January, the permanent secretary and his officials came to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, and Emran Mian, the director for regeneration, said that that uplift had been plucked out of thin air and that it did not have to be followed if it meant building on the green belt, but if it meant building more homes on green spaces, the uplift would have to be implemented. So, if in implementing that uplift—the 35%—authorities find that they cannot deliver the Government's target of everyone being within 15 minutes of green space, do they follow the uplift or follow the aspiration on green space?

Dr Coffey: I hold the Chairman of the Select Committee in high regard. As he will be aware, we do need to build more homes in this country, and while we of course want to prioritise brownfield sites, I am also very conscious of some of the changes that may be needed in different parts of the country. While I of course regret, as Secretary of State for DEFRA, the loss of any good farmland—although protections are already in place, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood is further consulting on aspects of that—it is important that we can design in great green space access. That might be something as simple as community woods. I grew up in Liverpool—I was very aware of what was happening in relation to the urgent question—and Liverpool City Council has some of the best tree programmes. I think we can design with nature in mind. That is why biodiversity net gain, which this Government have introduced, will come into effect later this year. Those are the sorts of important changes that we can make in order to ensure that people have access to green space.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. As I have mentioned in this Chamber before, in my constituency we have already seen a dramatic reduction in the number of storm overflows released on to our beautiful beaches. Analysis has shown that the only way to completely eliminate sewage overflows is to dig up and replace 60,000 miles of old pipes with two separated systems, or to build the equivalent of 40,000 Olympic

swimming pools of storage. Does my right hon. Friend know which option the Lib Dems claim they would deliver?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is a very good champion for her constituents and for nature, and so she should be. I recall going to the beautiful Croyde beach and doing litter picking, which brings joy in terms of the beauty of nature. She is right to champion our improvements on sewage. As she will know, the Liberal Democrats will often say one thing to get elected and do the complete opposite when in power.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Government's own regulator, the Office for Environmental Protection, has found that this Government are seriously failing on every one of the goals set out in their own 25-year environment plan. What are the Government going to do differently in order to deliver these commitments, or is this yet another case of the Government talking the rhetoric of meaningless words and not delivering?

Dr Coffey: I recognise what the hon. Lady has said. I was disappointed by the OEP, given that it had put out statements that we were getting cleaner air and making progress on all these things. I was a bit surprised by the headlines that came out of that. Of course, to some extent, one of the issues with the goals, which are complementary goals, is that targets had not been set at that point. I am very confident. This is a delivery plan.

Anna McMorris: Where is it?

Dr Coffey: As the hon. Lady will be aware, it is available—it was available yesterday. I am conscious that it does not cover Wales, where her constituency is, so I do not know what the Welsh Government are doing in that regard. *[Interruption.]*

I am not decrying them. This is the Parliament of the United Kingdom, so I am very happy to take questions from Welsh MPs and have already done so. But what I am keen to say is that we have already delivered. I have already shared information on how bathing water has got much cleaner under this Administration, and we will continue to do a number of activities. What we have done, and what the Welsh Labour Government have not done, is transform farming funding to make sure that we have sustainable food production, but that we also protect and enhance the environment.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): There are very many farmers in my constituency who love the Kentish countryside and are proud to be custodians of it for this generation. At the same time, they have to run profitable businesses, producing and selling good, healthy food. Can my right hon. Friend assure me and them that the new scheme has enough strength behind it to enable them to run viable businesses and to continue to protect and, indeed, enhance Kent's beautiful countryside?

Dr Coffey: I congratulate my right hon. Friend, who is right to stand up for his farmers. Kent is the garden of our country and the producer of many fine foods, fruits and, of course, wines. The same amount of money is being dedicated to supporting our farmers and landowners. I am conscious that we are on this transition journey, and that is why I wanted to offer people opportunities

[Dr Coffey]

to get Government funding as we reduce the guaranteed BPS. We are in a good place whereby farmers have a genuine menu from which to choose—a lot of this was informed by a practising farmer, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Farming—and, as well as saving the planet, the farmers in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) will have opportunities to have a viable, sustainable and profitable business.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) highlighted, the Office for Environmental Protection put out its report last week. It talked about the need for

“better alignment and co-ordination at all levels of Government, local and national, with actions that extend beyond Defra”.

Two years ago, the Public Accounts Committee published a report, which the Secretary of State's Department agreed with, in which we described that simply as a lack of clout across Whitehall. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), how will the Secretary of State ensure that these plans are actually delivered across Whitehall? Does she have the clout and the backing of the Treasury?

Dr Coffey: It is the first time that anyone has ever accused me of not having heft. Since the hon. Lady's report came out—I am sorry to say that I am not aware of it—we have passed the Environment Act 2021. That included a biodiversity duty, which we have commenced from 1 January. We have set out the environmental principles policy statement. The hon. Lady does make an important point: it has to be done with local government, with individuals and with businesses. That is why I am keen for councils to use the powers that they have asked for in the past yet are still not using. It is for them to decide, with local nature recovery strategies, how they can best make nature improvements. Of course, we want to help them achieve the best outcomes possible.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome this hugely important plan for the potential that it has to protect nature and the environment. Now, we need to see it delivered. With that in mind, I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that we are meeting our manifesto target of 13,000 hectares of tree planting every year. That is a crucial means to meet our target of halting species decline by 2030.

Dr Coffey: As a former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend knows how important our Department is in ensuring not only that we are champions for nature but that we deliver for nature. We are trying to ensure that we increase the opportunities to plant trees. We have had the woodland creation offer already. Some of the changes that we are bringing through, as well as the targets that we have put in law, will help us to accelerate that tree planting.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): These environmental targets will be a complete waste of paper if there are very few farmers left to put them into practice. Farmers have had their basic payment cut by 5% in 2021 and by 20% in 2022, and it will be cut by

35% later in 2023. Farmers are struggling to access schemes to supplement their income, and they are struggling to meet the inflated costs of feed, fuel and fertiliser. When I was walking down a lane in Devon a few weeks ago, a farmer in a 4x4 wound down the window and asked me, “Do you know what DEFRA stands for under this Government? The Department for the Extermination of Farmers.” Can the Secretary of State explain how the Government will support those farmers who are being forced out of business to deliver the environmental improvement plan?

Dr Coffey: I am not surprised by the quality of that question. The hon. Gentleman represents a very rural constituency in Devon. He should see this transition in farming as a positive action about having sustainable production as well as saving the planet. It is absolutely vital that our farmers are supported to do that. That is why we have continued the £2.4 billion of available funding. And yes, there will be a transition as the guaranteed payments start to decrease, but we will be able to target the money and pay the farmers for eco-services. That is critical to making sure not only that they can have a sustainable business, but that they work they do will enhance the nature that we all enjoy and that they need in order to make sure we have future harvests.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Kellie Hughes.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I, too, congratulate the DEFRA team, particularly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, for bringing forward the environmental improvement plan, which is full of deliverable plans with real action. As she knows, I am a passionate user of the River Medway in my constituency: I sail in it and swim in it. I have the misfortune, however, of living not far from a storm overflow, so it gives me great pleasure that, because of her Department's actions, 98% of all storm overflows on the River Medway are being monitored and tested regularly. Will she outline how the actions she has taken will further reduce the sewage and dangerous chemicals that are pumped into our river?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is clearly a champion of her special part of Kent. The best way I can put it is that a plan was set out and monitoring is taking place. We are not trying to hide anything—far from it. We have opened up to the problem and have a laser-like focus on tackling sewage. It is imperative that we continue to hold the water companies to account. In that regard, the investment will start flowing. That is all part of the impending price review.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have had a pretty good read of the plan, and it is disappointing that there is not more about the urban environment and the contribution that it can make, particularly in terms of the nature section. As the parliamentary species champion for the swift, I am keen to see more swift bricks installed in buildings. A lot has been said about trees, hedgerows and so on, but when it comes to reversing the decline in swifts, we need to look at buildings. Is that something that the Secretary of State can go away and look at, and perhaps introduce it, despite the fact that it is not in the plan?

Dr Coffey: I am very aware of swift boxes. There has been successful awareness raising in my constituency. Indeed, I think the guidance from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities talks about what can be done to make safe spaces for nature in our urban environments and in future buildings. That is, of course, important. Our Department is not just for the countryside—far from it. We can touch everybody's heart when they think about how they can reconnect with nature.

I will continue to try to make sure that prominence is given to urban areas. I grew up in a city, and over 80% of people live in urban settings. That is one of the reasons why the pledge is very clear about people having access to a green or blue space within a 15-minute walk. It is also why we will continue to focus on air quality, which is of course a particularly prevalent issue in urban situations.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement. My right hon. Friend made an important point when she said that the proportion of excellent bathing water quality beaches has increased from about half to nearly three quarters. That is very positive, but 98% of our waters with bathing water status are coastal, and inland waters with that status are mainly lakes. Does she agree that improving river water quality is an important priority, too, and will she back my campaign for the River Nidd to be given accredited bathing water quality status at the lido in Knaresborough?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say how important this issue is. It is not just about the coast. Traditionally, bathing water statistics have focused on coastal areas, because that is where the majority of people go to enjoy that leisure, so that is vital. More broadly, the quality of water matters dramatically. I think of our chalk streams, which are so precious.

Let me tell the House a little anecdote about an occasion when I went to see the River Itchen. The landowner in front of me, having spotted a bottle of dog shampoo, started to cry and said, "This person may not have realised that they have just ruined the chemical status of this river for about the next 25 years." That will not have been done deliberately, so we need to ensure that everyone is more aware. I understand why my hon. Friend is campaigning for his local river to be brought into the bathing water statistics, and I am sure that his case will be considered very carefully indeed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While I note that the plan applies to England specifically, the protection of 30% of land and sea, including through marine protected areas, must apply equally to the Irish sea. What discussions have taken place with officials from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland to ensure that Northern Ireland Water does not drop the ball, and that that protection is fully extended?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman has made a strong point. In preparation for the CBD COP15 in Montreal, we brought back together the four nations of the United Kingdom that we are proud to represent. We have the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, which is a body

that covers the UK. Last year, wearing a different hat, I visited the Giant's Causeway, which is, of course, extraordinary.

We want to ensure that there is more access to Northern Ireland in this regard, and I know that that has been an important part of the discussions that have taken place. However, we will also continue to work closely with officials—although we all want the Executive to be re-formed so that we can really make progress in Northern Ireland, which is a fantastic part of the United Kingdom.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): The quality of the water off the new city of Southend-on-Sea is fundamental both to our world-famous cockling industry and to our swimming group, the Bluetits Chill Swimmers, who swim all the year round. I welcome the statement, but does my right hon. Friend agree that claims by the Opposition parties that Members have voted for 15 more years of sewage dumping are totally false, and a bit rich coming from Labour, which ignored sewage discharges when it was in power, and from the Liberal Democrats' Minister for water in the coalition, who did nothing?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend has been in the House for a relatively short time, but she has shown how savvy she is in standing up for her constituents in Southend. Where we identify issues, we put the spotlight on them and try to fix them. We do that because we are Conservatives: we want to conserve, and we want to enhance. I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to support her in what she is trying to do for the great people of Southend, and try to ensure that our beaches are as clean as ever.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend and her team on today's announcement of the plan. Devon's farmers produce some of the best food and drink in the world; I should know, having sampled a fair bit of it. They are custodians of our countryside and have been for generations, and we owe them a debt of gratitude and certainty. Will my right hon. Friend explain how this plan will help them to go on producing fantastic food throughout the south-west?

Dr Coffey: There is great food in a number of counties, and I do not want to come between Devon and Cornish MPs about who has the right pasty or where cream should go on a scone, but I will say to my hon. Friend that it is very important for us to involve farmers and landowners in improving our natural environment. I think that, by default, most of them are already doing that, but I am very conscious of the challenges they face. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries has been very active, in a number of ways, in responding to the issues that they have raised. I am convinced that what we are doing, and what we did last week, is opening up many more activities that will allow us to pay farmers to improve, for instance, the quality of soil and integrated pest management. We will help them not only to farm more sustainably, but to enjoy the extra benefit of ensuring that the quality of Devon's food is the best it can be.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State, and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for the

[Mr Philip Hollobone]

tremendously hard work they have put into developing this world-leading environmental improvement plan. Local residents in the Kettering constituency are keen to support any measures to protect, preserve or enhance our natural environment. Does my right hon. Friend agree that (a) nature has been neglected for far too long, (b) environmental and agricultural policies were returned to this country as a result of Brexit, and (c) she is drawing on (b) to fix (a) so that we can clean our waters, tackle air pollution and increase biodiversity?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend sums it up perfectly. By leaving the European Union, we have removed ourselves from the constraints—the handcuffs—of the common agricultural policy. We have been able to develop a policy that, certainly in England, will translate into sustainable food production and improving the environment. The Lords are about to pass the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill—another Brexit freedom—which will allow us to develop climate change-resilient wheat. We can use the best of technology and our freedoms to do what is right for the farmers and people of this country, ensure that we have a healthy and wealthy farming community, and continue to enjoy all the fabulous produce for generations to come.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Going back to the Victorian era when the water companies were putting in their pipes, they did not take action on sewage overflow. Perhaps they should have. In the 13 years that the Labour Government were in office, they took no action on sewage overflow. Perhaps they should have. This Government are taking action on sewage overflow, but doing so will cost tens of billions of pounds of investment. Therefore, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right to work within the constructs of this environmental plan and other environmental plans to achieve that long-term change?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is spot on. We identified the issue—indeed, it was Lord Benyon who spotted it early on as a DEFRA Minister. He got on with it, and that is what we are dealing with. The monitoring will be in place completely by the end of this year, so we can have that laser-like focus on sorting out the unacceptable sewage problem. My hon. Friend is also right to point out that it will cost tens of billions of pounds. Some of what was proposed before was going to cost hundreds of billions of pounds, which would have added at least £800 to people's water bills. We need that balance and to focus on where we can make the most impact right now. That is what we will continue to do.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Secretary of State will know that the packaging sector and its customers welcome the measures in the plan to reduce littering and increase recycling rates. Does she agree that they will be at their most effective if they are introduced consistently and at the same time across all countries of the UK?

Dr Coffey: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is trying to make. We have to make progress in this country. We are trying to get consistency in the recycling process alongside the introduction of the EPR, but although there are many things that we and other parts of the UK agree on, we need to ensure that we have a plan that will deliver our recycling targets that we have set in law. We want to make this straightforward for our manufacturers. We need to press on with the important targets that we have passed into law in the past few days.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I was pleased to see that the environmental improvement plan included the Lapwing estate near Bawtry, which is on the border of Rother Valley, as a case study. This 5,000-acre piece of land will abate emissions, store carbon and produce food. It is funded partly by the Government. Can the Secretary of State confirm that she will continue to fund such projects across South Yorkshire and in Rother Valley to store our carbon, secure our food supplies and support our local rural communities?

Dr Coffey: Indeed, there are a number of funding streams, of which our nature for climate fund is a key element. My hon. Friend will be aware that as we make the transition to environmental land management schemes, we will continue to ensure that activities that do good things for the environment will be rewarded. Indeed, we will be going further by giving a premium where there is greater connectivity, so that the opportunity is enhanced. Improving the quality of our land is a symbiotic relationship. That will have results in improving the biodiversity we all enjoy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Apologies to Kelly Tolhurst who I have known for years, but Kellie Hughes, a very popular hairdresser in my constituency of the Ribble Valley, will be delighted with the publicity.

I thank the Secretary of State for her statement today and for responding to questions for well over 50 minutes.

Points of Order

2.24 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on how my constituent, Mr Walker, can get a response to his pension credit application. He made his application on 13 September last year but has had no response. Despite many follow-up calls and three complaints by his Age Concern caseworker, he has heard nothing from the Department for Work and Pensions. He is 73. The long delay means he is dependent on food bank vouchers and is at imminent risk of homelessness because his housing benefit is contingent on his pension credit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. Clearly, this is a very urgent matter and it is right that it should be addressed in this way. I hope that the Whip on the Treasury Bench will ensure that the Minister gets to hear of it and that action can be taken as quickly as possible.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise unreservedly for the intemperate language I used during Prime Minister's questions. I was wrong to use the term "fascist" in relation to the Israeli Government and understand why this was particularly insensitive, given the history of the state of Israel. While there are far-right elements in that Government, I recognise that the use of the term in this context was wrong. I would also like to apologise for the use of the term "apartheid state". While I was quoting accurately Amnesty's description, I recognise this is insensitive and withdraw it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. It now stands on the record.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. An essential part of being a Member of this House is to represent and support our constituents when they approach us for assistance. Members on all sides engage, or hope to engage, with UK Visas and Immigration on a regular basis through what is called the MP engagement team. My team and I have been seeking to engage with the MP engagement team since September 2022, without a single response. Given that it is my duty, and that of Members across the House, to support our constituents in their engagement with UKVI, what would you advise me and other Members to do on behalf of our constituents when there is an utter lack of engagement from UKVI's MP engagement team?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for notice of it. Again, he makes an incredibly important point. We expect, when we contact Government agencies, that they will respond in a very timely manner. That clearly has not happened in this case, and I ask the Whip on the Treasury Bench to ensure that the Department gets to hear of it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for making that statement in her point of order, but my understanding is that the use of language such as "apartheid" and "fascist" is not just insensitive but a breach of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

Mr Deputy Speaker, what advice will you and the Speaker's Office be providing to the leaders of all the parties in this House about the language we use here and the importance of tackling deep-rooted antisemitism in our political culture, which at this point in time is so evident on the left of politics? It is less than a week ago that you sat in the Chair when we were here for the annual debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. You ended that debate with very powerful words. It is incumbent upon us to tackle this deep-seated problem, is it not?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point order. Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear on several occasions that temperate language should be used throughout proceedings in this Chamber, and there are very good reasons for that. Thank you once again.

BILL PRESENTED

LIFELONG LEARNING (HIGHER EDUCATION FEE LIMITS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Gillian Keegan, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Steve Barclay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Suella Braverman, Secretary Grant Shapps, Secretary Michael Gove and Robert Halfon, presented a Bill to make provision about the determination of the fee limit for higher education courses provided by registered English higher education providers subject to a fee limit condition; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 240) with explanatory notes (Bill 240-EN).

Scotland (Self-Determination)

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

2.29 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Scotland Act 1998 to transfer to the power to legislate for a Scottish independence referendum to the Scottish Parliament; to provide that that power may only be exercised where the Scottish public has demonstrated its support for the holding of such a referendum; to provide that no such referendum may be held sooner than seven years after the previous such referendum; and for connected purposes.

The question of whether the ancient nation of Scotland should be an independent country once more continues to be the subject of much debate, indicating that the matter is far from settled. Of course, it is entirely proper for any country to review such matters. Scotland will only become independent as and when the majority of the people of Scotland choose that path, yet that requires a democratic mechanism that is constitutional and satisfies international legal precedent. The Bill seeks to standardise and codify such a requirement in line with the motion passed by this House that endorsed the principles of the 1989 claim of right, which acknowledged the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of government best suited to their needs.

The Bill is explicit on the necessary conditions to bring that mechanism into play: first, that the power to legislate for a referendum requires a democratic mandate from the Scottish public. Since 2014, that criterion has been met in successive general elections to the Scottish Parliament, most recently in 2021, when a majority of MSPs were elected on a manifesto commitment to deliver an independence referendum. In addition, a majority of the votes cast on the d'Hondt regional list were won by parties that support independence—the SNP, the Scottish Green party and the Alba party. Secondly, the Bill states that no such referendum may be held sooner than seven years after any previous such referendum. In terms of established UK precedent, that would bring Scotland into line with the provisions for a border poll in Northern Ireland regarding the constitutional future of the island of Ireland. As Robert McCorquodale, professor of international law and human rights, sets out, that would be in keeping with the UK's international legal obligations, applicable to all states, including to peoples within states worldwide, to seek to exercise their right to self-determination.

It is necessary to put the Bill into its political and historical context. In 1707, a majority of Scottish parliamentarians may have been persuaded, but the people were never consulted. The Acts of Union 1707 between England and Scotland created the kingdom of Great Britain, establishing a single political entity yet preserving the territorial, legal and institutional integrity of each partner country. The UK's constitution is not codified in a single document, so the question of whether the Acts of Union can unilaterally be dissolved by one party is not clear. However, the accepted position hitherto is that the Union is a voluntary association of equal partners and Scotland has an unquestioned right of self-determination. That is a right underpinned by Scots common law which rests not on the Magna Carta, but on the claim of right which continues to assert that it is the people who are sovereign in Scotland.

The Scotland Act of 1998 established the Scottish Parliament, which has the power to legislate on agreed devolved matters within Scotland, while the UK Parliament retains legislative competency on matters reserved to Westminster. It is generally understood that for a country to gain independence a legal process, such as a vote in a referendum, is required. Such a process was established in 2012 through the Edinburgh agreement which was signed by First Minister Alex Salmond and Prime Minister David Cameron. The Edinburgh agreement established a clear process whereby a Scottish general election that returned a Government with a mandate for an independence referendum would enable that Government to petition for authority under section 30 of the Scotland Act to respect the democratic force of that vote in a referendum. While respect for that established process has since been affirmed by the UK Government, in absence of any legal constitutional consensus the matter of Scottish independence has reached a political impasse to the detriment of Scotland's democratic process.

The Bill seeks to remedy that by setting out the process by which the democratic wishes of the people of Scotland can be respected and enacted. This would preserve their inalienable human rights as a distinct people of the ancient nation of Scotland in accordance with the constitutional tradition of Scotland, the UN charter and extant international law.

Scotland's distinct constitutional tradition is best expressed by Lord Cooper, in the case of *MacCormick v. Lord Advocate*:

"The principle of the unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctively English principle which has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law."

In the pleadings of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) in her prorogation case to the UK Supreme Court, it was noted that the 1707 parliamentary Union between England and Scotland may have created a new state, but it did not create one nation.

The UK Government enthusiastically claim that they seek to preserve democracy the world over, yet they have moved to block Scotland's consistently expressed democratic aspirations at each and every turn. Surely it is now time to move to eliminate accusations and counter-accusations of brinkmanship and set out a clear pathway consistent with the precedent across these islands where constitutional friction exists.

Can Government Members imagine the circumstances where, having entered the common market and ratified every subsequent treaty leading to the European Union, the EU Parliament moved to block or interfere with their Brexit vote, or set a limit on when and if such a vote should be held? The notion is ludicrous, because democracy is not a single event, but an evolving and continuous process. That is how civilised people behave and how fundamental rights of freedom of thought and expression are peacefully demonstrated.

As a member of the EU, the UK Government possessed and exercised a veto, yet they claimed their sovereignty was impeded by membership. Scotland has no such equivalent mechanism available to our people and remains subject to the wiles of our larger neighbour, as exemplified by Brexit. How does that constitute access to meaningful political process, as claimed in the recent UK Supreme Court judgment?

Prime Minister Winston Churchill's signing of the 1941 Atlantic charter brought into being the principle of self-determination of peoples, as now enshrined in the United Nations charter. Margaret Thatcher in her memoirs said of Scotland:

"As a nation, they have an undoubted right to national self-determination".

John Major, when Prime Minister, said of Scotland that "no nation could be held irrevocably in a Union against its will".

None of these senior Conservative politicians sought to constrain the democratic right to self-determination.

In the aftermath of the 2014 referendum, the all-party Smith Commission agreement was signed by all of Scotland's main political parties and it stated:

"It is agreed that nothing in this report prevents Scotland becoming an independent country in the future should the people of Scotland so choose."

The effect of this Bill should be uncontroversial for every Member. It merely establishes in law an equivalent mechanism to the principle, already conceded by the UK Government in relation to a border poll in Northern Ireland, that no such referendum may be held sooner than seven years after any previously mandated referendum.

In 1889 in this place, the equality of UK partner countries was asserted by one William Ewart Gladstone MP, saying

"I am to suppose a case in which Scotland unanimously, or by a clearly preponderating voice, were to make the demand on the United Parliament to be treated, not only on the same principle, but in the same manner as Ireland, I could not deny the title of Scotland to urge such a claim." —[*Official Report*, 9 April 1889; Vol. 335, c. 101-102.]

That begs the question: why would the UK Government deny democracy to Scotland but not to Northern Ireland? Could the clue lie in the words of former Prime Minister John Major from 1993's Downing Street declaration that the UK has

"no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland"?

In the case of Scotland, the opposite is true. With unconstrained access to our vast resources, energy is transmitted south to millions at no cost.

The decision on Scotland's future ultimately and rightly must rest in the hands of the people of Scotland. In the constitutional tradition of popular sovereignty in our great country, it is the people who remain sovereign. This Bill is neutral in its effect. It favours neither one side nor the other, but seeks to codify the Scottish people's right to choose their own constitutional future. To return to 1889, Dr Gavin Clark, MP for Caithness, said on the matter:

"Everybody, even old Tories on the other side, must admit that some change is necessary. Then what is the remedy to be?" —[*Official Report*, 9 April 1889; Vol. 335, c. 71.]

If democracy matters at all, every Member in this House should support the remedy contained in this Bill regardless of their view on Scottish independence. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Neale Hanvey, Kenny MacAskill, Joanna Cherry, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Douglas Chapman and Margaret Ferrier present the Bill.

Neale Hanvey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 241).

UK INFRASTRUCTURE BANK BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO.2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 1 November 2022 (UK Infrastructure Bank Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

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

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours before the moment of interruption on that day.—(*Scott Mann.*)

UK Infrastructure Bank Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

FUTURE OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE BANK

“The Bank may not be sold until commitments to meet net zero by 2050 and duties set out in section 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008 and commitments and duties set out in section 1 of the Environment Act 2021 have been met.”—
(Richard Foord.)

This new clause would ensure that the Investment Bank remains in operation until the Government's net zero and environmental commitments have been met.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.41 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Businesses and bodies the Bank invests in*—

“(1) The Bank must publish an annual report setting out—

(a) the geographical spread of businesses and bodies it invests in, and

(b) the ownership of the businesses and bodies it invests in.

(2) The Bank must prepare and publish a ‘Good Jobs’ plan for all businesses and bodies it invests in, which requires the business or body to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.”

This new clause would ensure that the Bank considers the location and ownership of the businesses and bodies it invests in and only invests in businesses and bodies who create “Good Jobs” plans to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.

Amendment 5, in clause 2, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(i) to reduce economic inequalities within and between regions of the United Kingdom, and

(ii) to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.

(c) to support supply chain resilience and the United Kingdom's industrial strategy.”

This amendment would ensure that the Bank's objective to support regional and local economic growth includes reducing economic inequalities within and between regions and improving productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards. It would also create a third objective for the Bank to support supply chain resilience and the UK's industrial strategy.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 14, at end insert, “, and

(c) to improve water quality in the UK.”

This amendment would add improving water quality in the UK to the Bank's objectives.

Amendment 4, page 1, line 22, at end insert—

“(4A) The Bank may only provide any of the support listed in subsection (4) to water companies if they have produced a costed, time limited plan demonstrating they are committed to preventing discharge.”

This amendment would require water companies to have a costed, time limited plan, demonstrating they are committed to preventing discharges before they can receive investment from the UKIB.

Amendment 2, page 2, line 9, leave out “consult” and insert—

“gain the express consent of”.

This amendment would require the Treasury to gain the express consent of the appropriate national authority before making provision in regulations under subsection (6).

Government amendment 1.

Richard Foord: I rise to speak to new clause 1 and amendments 3 and 4.

I welcome the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill. We previously had a Green Investment Bank, founded by the Liberal Democrats in government. It was short-sighted for the Government to sell it off, especially as it made £144 million in profit for its Australian owners last year. Nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats are glad to see steps finally being taken to put the replacement UK Infrastructure Bank on a statutory footing.

Liberal Democrat new clause 1, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), seeks to ensure that this new UK Infrastructure Bank will remain in operation until the Government's net zero and environmental commitments have been met.

I hope to see this new bank change investment in green infrastructure for the better, and this brings me to the two amendments—amendments 3 and 4—tabled in my name and those of Liberal Democrat colleagues. They seek to ensure that water companies set out costed, time-limited plans to deal with discharges before they can get funding through the bank. This is important because communities across the UK are currently being impacted by the actions of some negligent and wayward water companies. For years, we have seen these firms failing to invest in our vital infrastructure, but instead prioritising shareholder payouts and bumper bonuses for chief executive officers. It is shocking that this practice has been allowed to continue, and that the Government have resisted several attempts by the Liberal Democrats to clamp down on these sewage spills.

South West Water, which covers my patch in Devon, was awarded a one-star rating by the Environment Agency after having been found to have discharged sewage into rivers and lakes and on to our beaches over 42,000 times. This represents more than 350,000 hours of dumping, including at our prestigious blue flag beaches. Three of the 10 most affected beaches are in Devon. And what was the reaction at South West Water? It gave the chief executive a bonus of more than £1 million.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): We on the Government Benches are aware of some of the comments—if I may say so, the somewhat misleading comments—in Liberal Democrat propaganda about this issue. The hon. Gentleman is obviously familiar with the situation at South West Water. Could he tell me what the cost is to South West Water of eliminating sewage overflow, and what are the implications for water bills for residents in the south-west, because that is what the literature from his party has been saying needs to be done?

Richard Foord: The amendment that we are considering is about loans from the UK Infrastructure Bank. Whatever figure is required, the bank should not be permitted to release funds for the purpose of improving our sewerage system until there are plans by water companies for the system's complete restoration.

2.45 pm

South West Water is not an isolated case. Last year alone, water companies paid out dividends to the tune of almost £1 billion, with water company executives pocketing £16.5 million in bonuses. Why should those people profit from others' misery? Why should they be allowed to cut corners and get away with it? The situation is the same across the country.

Southern Water polluted our rivers and waterways more than 38,000 times in the past two years, with over 358,000 hours of spills, while their top executives raked in more than £2.3 million in bonuses, benefits and incentives. Thames Water discharged sewage into rivers and lakes 33,156 times in the past two years, lasting 378,977 hours in total, and their bosses took home more than £2.9 million on top of their already generous salaries.

It is clear that those water companies are not being run for the benefit of the British people. Instead, firms are content to sit back and watch profits pour in while communities across the country suffer. Their failure to redirect profits to patch up our ageing infrastructure and build capacity means not only sewage dumping on an industrial scale, but losing millions of tonnes of water due to leaking pipes. That amounts to a scale of negligence unparalleled by anything we have seen in recent years.

The scandal must be addressed, which is why the Liberal Democrats have tabled these amendments. It would be a scandal if taxpayers' money were given to the same firms that continue to poison our rivers and coastlines. If we do not add strict sewerage conditions to the Bill, we will give a blank cheque using taxpayers' money to fund those polluting, profiteering firms.

Those are the very same water companies that line their executives' pockets with bonuses worth millions of pounds. Now they expect public money to bail them out and line the leaking pipes that they have long neglected. If they want public money to help bail them out, they must show that they have a serious plan, which is both costed and time limited, to clean up their act and end the flow of sewage gushing on to our beaches and into our rivers.

I urge colleagues from all parties to back the amendments and show that we are serious about ending the sewage scandal once and for all.

Richard Fuller: I shall go through the amendments thoroughly and therefore I shall not detain the House long.

New clause 1 on the future of the UK Infrastructure Bank would have the effect of not permitting a sale of the bank until the duty set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 and the targets of the net zero commitment by 2050 had been met. That puts significant strictures on the maintenance of one bank and its objectives. I think the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) probably acknowledges that. He wants us to reflect on the sale of the green bank that was set up under the coalition Government. He talked about the profits that it made last year—about £180 million, perhaps a little less. However, I hope that he recognises a couple of things.

First, when the sale was made, the taxpayer benefited to the tune of £2.3 billion. That included a surplus of £186 million on taxpayer-invested funds and a commitment

from the successful acquirer, Macquarie bank, to invest a further £3 billion. In the round, I do not think that was a bad transaction to make, because it enabled the attraction of more third-party capital—private capital—to try to achieve some of the objectives of that green bank under its new owners, and indeed that has taken place. Part of the balance with this Infrastructure Bank is: how are we going to evaluate its abilities and success in attracting third-party capital? If the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton reflects, he will see that his broad point in new clause 1 is a fair one, but I hope that he will not press it to a vote, because there are strong arguments on the other side and I would not support the points that he would be trying to make.

Again, I can understand some of the import of Labour's new clause 2 and amendment 5. Labour is saying, "Here is an opportunity, with a major institution, with which we are going to look at and try to expand the infrastructure of the country, to make sure it has a full focus on the round of public interest in the things it is doing in our name." That is a good intention but, as the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) knows—we have talked about this in Committee—there are trade-offs to be made within those sets of objectives. As we add objectives to our institutions, those trade-offs make it more obscure to parliamentarians and to the public what the intention of the bank will be.

The objectives that the Government have set out in the Bill are already clear. They have the benefit of clarity, as we know what they are. They also cover a wide range of sectors and intentions, but with the underlying core objective of helping us to meet our green net zero and climate change objectives.

So if the Opposition wish us to support their amendments, where do they see the trade-offs being made between achieving those objectives and having the duties to reduce economic inequalities between regions, to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards, and to support supply chain resilience? Very few of us would disagree with some of those objectives—indeed, the Government are making great strides on some of them with their levelling-up initiatives—but we have to accept that as we give directions to some of these institutions with a broad range of objectives, we are, as democrats, losing some control over how public money can be directed; we are giving more discretion to the chief executives of those organisations to do as they see fit and not perhaps to do as we were laying down in statute. I encourage the Opposition to think again, and to consider that perhaps having the clarity and precision of objectives set out in the Bill is precisely what will enable this and future Parliaments to exercise control over the Infrastructure Bank.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who is speaking for all the Liberal Democrats today, as he has graced us with his presence in a number of the debates, talked a little about the water companies again. I hope that he will have been listening today and will be reflecting back to his party's leadership that some of the publicity the Liberal Democrats have put out has been substantially misleading about the intentions and actions of this Government. Obviously, parties make political statements all the time, this way and that. However, particularly as he has now followed up with his proposal for how water

[Richard Fuller]

company discharge can be managed, I hope he will see that it is a serious issue and therefore we should treat it seriously.

Amendment 4 seeks to provide that the support the bank can give can happen only after the water companies have produced a “costed, time limited plan”. I think the water companies would say, “We have already done that.” They have a plan, but not one that can be implemented just like that, in the flash of an eye—I mix my metaphors there. I am not sure that the amendment will have the intention that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton wishes it to have, given what the water companies are already doing and what the Government are already doing with the monitoring and the objectives being set to reduce sewage discharge.

I will step over what the SNP spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), put forward, because I am sure he will be able to elucidate that point clearly—I believe we have heard it here a number of times, although we are never bored by the repetition. Finally, I thank the Minister for listening to the points that were made in Committee and coming forward with the Government’s amendment.

Finally, I thank the Minister for listening to the points that were made in Committee and coming forward with the Government’s amendment. I can see that the Opposition have not put down a further amendment on that matter, which is a sign that he has got that judgment call right.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I will speak to amendment 2 in my name, but before I address that fully, I will say a little about the other Opposition amendments and new clauses.

New clause 1 seeks to stop the bank being sold prior to net zero targets being met, which is sensible in principle, given the fate of the old green investment bank, as I described on Second Reading. New clause 2 seeks a report on the geographical spread of investments, which, again, is sensible given the Government’s recent track record on allocating money from the levelling-up fund. It still strikes me as rather absurd that the Prime Minister’s wealthy Richmond constituency should have been allocated £90 million, while the entire city of Glasgow received nothing in the second round of funding. I think we would all want to ensure that the UK Infrastructure Bank was far more equitable in its disbursements.

Amendment 5 seeks to reduce inequality and improve productivity. Amendments 3 and 4 seek to ensure that investment in water supply quality is permitted, but with conditions on the private companies receiving it. Each of these amendments and new clauses have merit, and we will be happy to support any if they are pressed to a Division.

Government amendment 1 seeks to reduce the gap between reporting from a maximum of seven to a maximum of five years. That is progress of a sort, but five years is still too long. I would be looking for a commitment from the Dispatch Box that the Government anticipate the review and reporting frequency to be within the proposed five-year maximum.

Let me briefly reprise what I said about my own amendment on Second Reading, when I gave the UK Infrastructure Bank and the Bill a broad welcome. Taking it at face value, there was nothing to criticise in its objectives of helping to tackle climate change and supporting the efforts to meet the UK Government’s 2050 target. Nor was there anything to criticise in the objective to support regional or local economic growth.

What I pointed out, though, is that—the Minister on Second Reading alluded to this in his speech—the delivery of support to facilitate local and regional growth in Scotland is provided by the Scottish Government, local government and other agencies, and that the green targets in Scotland, such as the earlier net zero target, are also set independently. It is therefore important that the UK Infrastructure Bank actually supports the devolved Governments’ objectives and does not, even inadvertently, end up working against them. That remains important because we have our own infrastructure investment plan, our own global capital investment plan and our own national strategy for economic transformation that provides the framework for the Scottish Government’s policy priorities.

In giving the Bill a broad welcome, I also made the point that while there is clearly an overlap between the strategic objectives of the UK Infrastructure Bank and the Scottish National Investment Bank—the wording of the aims of both the UKIB and the Scottish National Investment Bank are broadly similar—it is vital to ensure that both banks meet their goals and deliver the maximum impact for the people of Scotland. In line with the objectives set in the Bill, it is essential that the two banks are able to work together to identify and support appropriate infrastructure projects in Scotland. It is also vital that Scottish interests are appropriately represented and that there is an awareness of the Scottish economic context and the Scottish Government’s policy goals.

To ensure that there is alignment between both banks’ aims, I have argued that there should be an administrative mechanism, such as a memorandum of understanding, between the UKIB and the Scottish National Investment Bank to ensure that policy alignment is maintained. I fear that unless we have a firm mechanism, the UKIB’s aims might also be undermined, and there will ultimately be a risk that it will not deliver fully on its objectives. However, the Bill merely suggests in line 9 of clause 2(7) that the Treasury must only

“consult the appropriate national authority before making provision in regulations...that would be within the legislative competence of”

one of the devolved Administrations.

3 pm

The problem we face is that recent evidence suggests that a consultation is insufficient protection against the UK Government making inappropriate regulation. For example, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 completely undermined devolution by handing decisions on animal welfare and environmental and food standards to an unelected quango. The same Act stripped Scotland of high standards by forcing all the nations of the UK to adhere to the lowest common denominator. We have seen multiple examples of the Sewel convention being breached: since Brexit alone, we have seen the refusal of

legislative consent by the Scottish Parliament overruled during passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020, and the Elections Act 2021.

Most recently and most egregiously, we saw section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 used to stop a Bill from proceeding to Royal Assent. That was an outrageous decision—a completely unjustified, full-frontal attack on the democratically elected Scottish Parliament. Therefore, our amendment 2 seeks to replace the UK Government's requirement merely to "consult" with a harder requirement to

"gain the express consent of"

a devolved Parliament before embarking on regulatory change. I commend the amendment to the House.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I was going to make my points through interventions, but as so few Members want to speak, I thought I would take the opportunity to make a speech. I will speak very briefly to new clause 2 and amendment 5—which stand in the name of the official Opposition, and deal with the need to ensure that the geographical investment is spread across the UK, which is of course is something we all support—and amendment 2, tabled by the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), which deals with the constitutional challenges created by these post-Brexit agencies and frameworks. The right hon. Gentleman made his points very eloquently, and I fully support what he said.

In my speech on Second Reading, I highlighted how I thought some of the challenges outlined in these amendments could be dealt with. In my view, that is primarily by ensuring that post-Brexit frameworks and agencies such as the UK Infrastructure Bank have a formal role for the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments within their constitutions and their administration. When I made that speech on Second Reading, the Welsh Government were withholding consent; they have now decided to offer consent because the UK Government have given an element of a concession by outlining that a director of the UK Infrastructure Bank will be responsible for liaising with the Welsh Government—I suppose the same will be true for the Scottish and Northern Irish Governments. That does not go quite as far as I was calling for on Second Reading, when I made the case for the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Governments to be able to appoint their own individual directors.

That concession is a step forward, which I of course welcome. However, the Minister might be aware that the Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee in the Senedd, which was responsible for scrutinising the legislative consent mechanism, advised the Welsh Government against awarding legislative consent because of that lack of a formal role—indeed, there was no role whatsoever for the Senedd. I would be grateful if the Minister reflected on my Second Reading speech, where I made the case that it would be very helpful if the UK Infrastructure Bank had to be scrutinised by the relevant Senedd committee, as well as by the Welsh Government.

In conclusion, this really comes down to the Labour party. We expect that it will form the next UK Government; how is it going to Brexit retrofit the UK constitution in

light of all these frameworks and agencies that have had to be created since the Brexit referendum, and since we left the European Union and the single market in particular? In Labour's response to this debate, I very much hope to hear that it is looking at a radical realignment of the British state when it forms the next UK Government, giving the Administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where appropriate, a formal role in these post-Brexit agencies and frameworks.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): A lost decade of broken Tory promises has left much of the UK with second-rate infrastructure, which is why we support the establishment and the strengthening of the UK Infrastructure Bank and will not be opposing the Bill. The bank is much needed. It will invest in projects that support our net zero targets and contribute to local and regional economic growth. However, we will go further than the Government and harness the full potential of the bank to provide good jobs and opportunities across the country. I will speak to our amendments a little later.

I wish to start by saying how much I welcome the Government's U-turn in relation to their amendment 1. I see Ministers on the Front Bench who were with us when the Bill was debated in Committee. I am sure that they notice how similar their amendment is to the one that Labour tabled at that stage. Indeed, it is identical to our amendment—an amendment that they voted against. As Labour has repeatedly emphasised, reviews of the bank's performance will be essential to ensuring that it meets its objectives to invest in the industries of the future. It was shocking that the Government wanted an initial review in 10 years with subsequent reviews every five years. The bank needs momentum and drive behind it, and I am glad to see that the Government have now realised the error of their thinking and committed to reviews of the bank every five years.

Richard Fuller: I commend the hon. Lady for holding the Government to account on this particular issue of the review period. This is where we are setting the bank free to go on its mission. As she and I agree—I think we agree—the initial few years are really very important. I notice that the Minister has restricted to five years subsequent assessments, as both the hon. Lady and I thought would be wise, but there is still that initial seven years. She did not table an amendment on that, so I wondered what the Opposition's thinking was on that initial period?

Abena Oppong-Asare: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He might remember that we tabled amendments in Committee and again on Report on that issue, but because the Government announced a U-turn, we decided to withdraw our amendment.

Yesterday's dreadful IMF forecast makes it very clear that Britain has so much potential but that the Conservative Government are holding us back. The UK is the only G7 country forecast to see negative economic growth. Let us look at the Government's record on infrastructure: a green homes scheme closed just six months after its introduction, with a £1 billion cut from its budget; an energy system that sees fossil fuel companies making record profits while hard-working people's bills soar; and just a fortnight ago, a crucial gigafactory, Britishvolt,

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

went into administration, leaving the future of the British electric vehicle market in jeopardy. According to the Government, the purpose of the UK Infrastructure Bank is to provide access to money, particularly where there is an undersupply of private financing. Britishvolt, a UK battery start-up, was expected to support new jobs and green technology with a factory in Blyth. Now it is being sold by administrators, with the Government seemingly abandoning their promises of levelling up and supporting a green economy.

Just this week, the British electric van start-up “Arrival” announced that it is cutting 800 jobs, as it moves for extra funding and green subsidies in the US. Hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that Labour has no faith in the Government harnessing the potential of the UK Infrastructure Bank to invest in the high-skilled jobs of the future. A Labour Government will use our green prosperity fund to invest in wind, solar and nuclear energy; insulate 19 million homes; grow our economy; and get Britain winning the race to net zero. We have tabled new clause 2 and amendment 5 to ensure that the UK Infrastructure Bank can play its role in this mission. New clause 2 would require the bank to publish an annual report setting out the geographical spread and the ownership of businesses and bodies that it invests in. It would also require the bank to publish a good jobs plan for every project it invests in, to ensure that the project will improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that by failing to commit to Northern Powerhouse Rail, the Government have failed on their levelling-up promises to the north? Would she, along with me and other Members who have expressed opinions earlier in the debate, suggest that the Minister needs to offer the House some assurances that the UK Infrastructure Bank will distribute its benefit to every part of the country, with the geographical spread she just mentioned?

Abena Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend makes strong points about what the Government should be doing, and I hope the Minister takes them on board. We have all seen the allegations of favouritism that have beset the Government’s levelling-up funding, with nothing in the Bill to guarantee that the bank will distribute its funds to the areas that need them the most. Our new clause would ensure scrutiny and transparency over bank investments. Given the Prime Minister’s now famous boast—I quote it in case Members have forgotten—about reversing Treasury formulas that

“shoved all the funding into deprived...areas”,

I hope the Minister can see why we think transparency is necessary. His party, after all, is the party responsible for the loss of £6.7 billion to fraud and mismanagement.

I hope, too, that the Minister is paying attention right now and agrees that we want the UK Infrastructure Bank to create high-skilled, well-paid jobs. With a good jobs plan for every project that it invests in, we can ensure value for taxpayers’ money. That approach has been taken with previous significant infrastructure projects in the UK. For example, the Olympic Delivery Authority worked with trade unions and others to ensure that the project delivered good quality local jobs, and a similar approach was taken with High Speed 2. If the Government

are as committed to their levelling-up agenda as they claim to be, I am sure that they will vote for our new clause today.

Amendment 5 would strengthen the bank’s objectives. It would make it clear that the bank’s target of boosting regional and local economic growth includes reducing economic inequalities within and between regions in the UK. Despite the Government’s assurances to the contrary, the Bill contains only a watered-down commitment that could result in the bank’s resources being poorly targeted and ineffective.

We want a further objective for the bank to contribute to the UK’s supply chain resilience and industrial strategy. I have mentioned the collapse of Britishvolt and the warnings of green investment moving abroad. Those are serious concerns. The importance of supply chain resilience has become particularly clear in the wake of the pandemic and as concerns over energy security have come to the fore with the war in Ukraine. We want the benefits of the UK Infrastructure Bank to be seen here in the UK, with home-grown renewables such as offshore wind, solar, nuclear, hydrogen and tidal power.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady is being generous in giving way, and I am grateful to her. I want to probe her thoughts a little further on amendment 5. The Bill, as I have said, has the benefit of being quite precise in its current objectives. As parliamentarians, we know that when we take something from statute and leave it to regulators, the House’s ability to hold them to account in the public interest is somewhat weakened. Does she accept that additional objectives would give an Executive a lot more discretion to say, “I didn’t achieve that because I was focusing on this objective”? We have created some primary objectives about climate change and so on. Adding others would leave us somehow disempowered, because those Executives could move and shake around where they said their priorities were. As I said earlier, I am concerned about the balance between laudable objectives and ensuring that, when we have put the Bill into statute, we parliamentarians retain the ability to control what is actually happening on the ground in one, two, three, four and five years from now.

3.15 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments—as I say, I always like to take them on board—but I fundamentally disagree with him, because our amendment would ensure that we take the Bill further. As he once said, the best way to promote UK manufacturing jobs and production is to

“shape regulation to support enterprise.”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 438.]

That is exactly what Labour seeks to do with our amendments, so I really hope he will support them. I understand where he is coming from, but our amendments would make sure that we deliver the projects that we need in the UK.

We know that the UK Infrastructure Bank could be a national enterprise. We have a world-leading offshore wind industry in Scotland and on the east coast, hydrogen in the north-west and on Teesside, nuclear power in the south-east, and solar power in the south and the midlands, but the potential of these industries can be realised only if investment stays in the UK. The amendments we have

tabled would allow that to happen. The lack of domestic champions has compromised our security and stalled progress, and our amendments would enable the UK Infrastructure Bank to help reverse the trend.

I will speak briefly to the other amendments we are considering today. Labour strongly supported the circular economy and nature-based solutions being on the face of the Bill, and we were disappointed to see the Government remove them, but we are clear that amendment 4 has not been properly thought through. Nothing in it would do anything to improve water company performance or reduce sewage dumping; on the contrary, it would give water companies an excuse to not undertake the necessary improvement works. We will therefore not support it. Labour has set out a clear plan to end the Tory sewage scandal by introducing mandatory monitoring with automatic fines, ensuring that regulators properly enforce the rules, and holding water bosses personally accountable for sewage pollution.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree, having been in the Chamber earlier today, that the Government are already monitoring storm overflows across the country? One of the reasons why we are aware of the size of the problem that we are trying to tackle is because we have increased the monitoring from only 6% a few years ago to nearly 100% now.

Abena Oppong-Asare: I am not going to take any advice from the Government. They have been in government for 13 years, and what have they delivered so far? I suggest that the hon. Lady support our amendment, which would ensure that things go through properly.

The devolved Administrations must be included in the development of the UK Infrastructure Bank. I have already mentioned the fantastic wind energy sector that we have in Scotland, and I was excited to read about the opportunities that the bank has identified in Northern Ireland. We do not believe that amendment 2 is necessary to ensure that all regions and nations of the UK benefit from the Bill, so we will not support it.

As we enter another year of low growth and failed Conservative government, we know there is a vital need to invest in the infrastructure of the future. We support the establishment of the UK Infrastructure Bank and have sought to improve the Bill throughout. We want to see stronger objectives and reporting for the bank, so that it can play a role in meeting our net zero targets while creating good jobs across the country and supporting the UK supply chain's resilience, but what the bank needs most of all from the Government is an ambitious plan. Once again, the Government are on the back foot and U-turning at the last minute with amendment 1, on the bank's reviews. It is yet another sign that Labour is the party with a plan for government—a party that will grow the economy and create jobs for the future.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare). I thank all hon. Members who have tabled amendments and contributed to today's debate, as well as those who made valued contributions in Committee. Notwithstanding a certain number of amendments, I feel that generally there is good consensus across the House about the core purpose and objective of an important institution.

If we are fully to meet our responsibilities to spread opportunity to all parts of the United Kingdom and support the all-important transition to the clean energy economy, it is right that we take bold action now with institutions such as the UK Infrastructure Bank. We have therefore introduced the Bill to make explicit—with a legislative lock, if you like—the scope of the bank's objectives

“to support regional and local economic growth”

and

“to help tackle climate change”.

Enshrining the bank in legislation will help to establish it as a long-lasting institution. That is important to colleagues across the House, as we have heard, who agree that it is a welcome initiative. I am glad that there has been general consensus today about the importance of the Bill.

I turn to Government amendment 1, which stands in my name. In Committee, I committed to looking again at the frequency of statutory reviews into the UK Infrastructure Bank and undertook potentially to propose a different frequency at a later stage of the Bill's passage. It would be a gross mischaracterisation to call the amendment a U-turn; it is simply an example of a listening Minister in a listening Government trying to do what is best to get the institution on the right footing. I thank hon. Members who brought the matter to my attention and shared their views, particularly my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), who raised the point in Committee.

It is, I hope, a sign of strength that I considered afresh what was appropriate for the first review period. However, given the pre-existing reviews to which the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury have already committed, and the need to allow a nascent institution time to embed itself, I remain of the view—having taken the question away and looked at it again—that it is right for the first review period to be seven years. However, I recognise the strength of the arguments for, the appropriateness of and the desire for a shorter period between every subsequent review to ensure that this House applies the necessary accountability. My amendment 1 would therefore reduce the interval between each regular review after the first.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Does the Minister remember rejecting our amendment about the reviews? He is saying that this is not a U-turn, so I just want to hear from him about that aspect.

Andrew Griffith: I hope the hon. Lady would never dream of trying to score cheap political points, as distinct from our good-natured and collaborative discussions in Committee. Rather than setting a new timeframe there and then, we looked at precedent in a quest for the optimal timeframe. I undertook to come back on Report and share a proposal with the House, precisely as I am doing today. Having listened and having made that determination, I can feel the warm radiation of support from the Opposition. I hope to see that good will extending to supporting the rest of the Bill without further amendment.

Richard Fuller: As it gets warm and huggy between the two Front Benchers, I would like to remind the Minister that I also tabled an amendment in Committee. I hope that he is feeling warm and huggy towards

[Richard Fuller]

Government Back Benchers as well. He seems huggy, though I am not sure it is politically correct to say that any more. I want to emphasise that the Minister has been listening, which is why he has come back with the amendment. That is the right thing for him to do.

The serious part of my point is how the institutional culture of the bank is set. The Minister will know from his own experience that the first few years are very important. He says that the first review period will be seven years, and I understand that, but can he share with the House some of his thinking about how that responsibility will be balanced? I think Members on both sides of the House are concerned that we set the institutions and regulators out there a task, but then we do not have the time, the information or the control to hold them to the original principles that we have set. Does the Minister broadly agree with that? Is he comfortable with the way the legislation will now be framed?

Andrew Griffith: Let me assure my hon. Friend and the whole House that this institution will not lack the proper scrutiny. In that initial set-up period it will be reviewed by both the Cabinet Office and His Majesty's Treasury. It will not lack scrutiny. It has an obligation to report annually. On some of the amendments we have discussed today, I have already procured a commitment from the bank to put more information into the public domain about its investments and their location, which Opposition Members have rightly pressed us for.

Although the bank is yet to reach its full complement of staffing and run rate of operations, it has already benefited from a serious review by the Public Accounts Committee of this House. I think it would be worth trying to correct some misapprehensions, but I do not for one moment take away the importance of regular scrutiny. We are talking about public money, and it is of the utmost importance that we engender trust as well as good value for public money.

That Public Accounts Committee report is a good and important piece of work. I absolutely commend the work of the Committee, which does a sterling job to protect the interests of taxpayers. We should always remember our duty of care when we are spending other people's money. It is a good piece of work, and I am grateful for it. We will respond to it in the usual way through the Treasury minute process to get that on the record.

However, I want to address one or two of the points raised. The report raised concerns about governance, but this is an institution that has benefited from strong financial governance from the get-go. All deals done to date have been reviewed by the full UK Infrastructure Bank board before being approved. Because of that, early deals were also approved by HM Treasury Ministers to ensure that we protected taxpayers' money.

I am proud, as we all should be, of the bank's work as it continues to engage with the market and across Government, building on its first 18 months in which it has done 10 deals worth more than £1 billion of additive, incremental investment across all parts of the United Kingdom.

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend has just used the magic word "additive". Would he care to explain further, in the context of these new clauses and amendments,

that the issue of additive capital is a crucial part of the bank's responsibility? This is not just about protecting taxpayers' money, but about attracting third-party private capital. One of the points about the proposal to spread the objectives is that it becomes harder to attract that capital when the mission of the institution is more diffuse. The more focus it has, and the more focus my hon. Friend has, the more likely we are to achieve the objective of additive capital that he has outlined so clearly.

3.30 pm

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend is, once again, absolutely right. The principle of being additive is baked into the core charters and constitutions, as well as the steer that my colleagues and I will give.

New clause 1 would insert a provision to prevent the sale of the bank. I understand the concern that has been expressed by Members in the past, but I can reassure them that the bank is intended to be a long-lasting institution. I have detected a strong degree of consensus about the importance of this, both in Committee and here in the Chamber, just as our commitment to net zero is long-lasting and a subject of consensus. We intend the bank to be permanent; it is an essential part of the Government's infrastructure strategy. Moreover, the new clause is simply not necessary. In the event that any future Government considered a sale of the bank—and that is not my expectation—it would require primary legislation at the time. The new clause cannot bind the House on a future occasion, and in any event it is not necessary, so I ask for it not to be pressed to a vote.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead has tabled a new clause and an amendment. New clause 2 would require the bank to publish an annual report addressing the geographical spread and ownership of bodies in which the bank invests. That is, of course, its core purpose, and I therefore do not think we need the new clause. We debated this proposal in Committee and, for the reasons that we set out then, we do not propose to accept it now.

The new clause is simply unnecessary, because the bank will already be reporting on its investments: it will publish a summary of them in its annual report and accounts. It captures data in all its deal assessments, and will be happy to make them publicly available. I have received a letter from the bank confirming that it will make publicly available the names of developers and/or sponsors of the projects it supports. It will also provide the geographical location of these projects. I feel pressed by colleagues on this matter. I have procured more information, as the hon. Lady has requested and, again, I ask for this new clause not to be pressed to a vote.

As for jobs, it is actions, not lines of statute, that count. We do not need to deliver an amendment to deliver good jobs; just ask the employees involved in the NextEnergy, Gigaclear and Fibrus investments which the bank has already supported. Every job is a good job. The bank is committed to pursuing the highest environmental, social, resilience and governance policy standards, and we do not feel that there is any added value in simply adding extra lines of statute or red tape for the sake of it, as the hon. Lady proposes. It is actions, not words, on which we are focused.

Amendment 5 asks for the bank's objective to include reducing regional inequality and improving pay, productivity and living standards, as well as supporting supply chain resilience. However, those are already implicit in the bank's current objective. That is the very purpose of setting up a UK infrastructure bank—the clue is in the name—and we now have a track record to show what the bank is doing to support regional and local growth.

Richard Fuller: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will give way one final time, but my hon. Friend will have to make it count.

Richard Fuller: I am not so sure about that, but I know that my hon. Friend has a lot of reading to get through. As he obviously knows, part of what is inherent in the net zero objectives is the fact that there will be an increase in supply chain resilience.

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend did indeed make his intervention count, because that is a very pertinent point. Of course, the whole purpose of the bank is infrastructure and capability building, and the commitment to regions is at its heart. Regional and local growth are among its core objectives. The more diverse infrastructure we have in all parts of this great United Kingdom, the more we are naturally adding resilience and achieving our objective. Indeed, the strategic steer set by the then Chancellor in March last year makes it clear that the bank must focus on geographic inequalities by reference to the levelling-up White Paper, which includes a comprehensive set of levelling-up objectives and measures and supports the Government's strategic approach to levelling up. We would rather do that on a portfolio basis than investment by investment, as proposed by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead.

Amendments 3 and 4, tabled by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), focus on the important issue of water quality. This is an area where the Government do not need any lessons. We are taking the lead in this matter, and are taking the action that the hon. Gentleman's party and its leader failed to take in coalition. Sometimes one detects the fervour of a convert, or even the working-out of some past guilt about their failure to take action on water.

Selaine Saxby: It is obviously delightful to have another Devon MP who cares passionately about the environment, as did his predecessor. I cannot help but wonder whether, if the Liberal Democrats were serious about this, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change from 2012 to 2015 might have implemented some of these things. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that there seems to be a trend of creating opportunities for dodgy graphics and social media content, rather than making serious changes to legislation?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It ill behoves a party that aspires to be taken seriously as a force in British politics to be all about clickbait, misleading graphics and half-truths, rather than about, for example, the data, which show that monitoring has increased from just 5% in 2016—a level at which it would be wrong for anyone to characterise themselves as having their arms around this long-standing issue—to more than 90% today. I understand from my

right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that it will be 100% by the end of this year. We are the party that is taking action. We are the party that is finding the data, exposing the conduct of the water companies and putting record investment into the sector to solve this long-standing problem. We are the party that provides the solution.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton needs to consider whether he wants to be part of the problem or, as we all are, part of the solution. One of his amendments is entirely superfluous, as such a measure is already underwritten by the objectives in the world-leading Environment Act 2021. Only yesterday, we announced ambitious interim targets to deliver those objectives in our environmental improvement plan. I believe that the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber for the statement that preceded this debate. For that reason, we will accept his amendment, because it sits within the actions that we are taking and the commitments that we have made.

Finally, the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) would require explicit consent from the devolved Administration before using powers under clause 2(6) that touch on devolved competence. However, I was pleased when his colleague, John Swinney, the acting Finance Secretary, wrote to me indicating that he was happy with the content of the Bill, and would recommend that the Bill receive a legislative consent motion. Last week, I was even more pleased—imagine my delight—when the Scottish Parliament gave the Bill an LCM. The right hon. Member for Dundee East will see that not just the Government but his colleagues suggest that his amendment is not required by the Government in Holyrood. As a result, I very much hope that he will not seek to push it to a vote.

This is an incredibly important milestone and moment in establishing a new national institution that will deliver real social purpose and make an enormous difference to the lives of our fellow citizens across the United Kingdom. Establishing it today in statute will give the market greater certainty and confidence, and encourage significant private sector investment in all of the bank's priority sectors. By partnering with the private sector—by mobilising the life force of private capital, the ferocious, problem-solving power of business—in areas that might otherwise struggle to get the investment they require, we will help speed up the transition to net zero and level up the UK. With the exception of amendment 4, which I have indicated the Government will not oppose, I hope Members understand the reasoning—even if they do not agree—that I have set out as to why we cannot accept the amendments and new clauses and that they respect the time of the House and agree not to press them to a vote.

Richard Foord: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 2

BUSINESSES AND BODIES THE BANK INVESTS IN

“(1) The Bank must publish an annual report setting out—

- (a) the geographical spread of businesses and bodies it invests in, and
- (b) the ownership of the businesses and bodies it invests in.

(2) The Bank must prepare and publish a ‘Good Jobs’ plan for all businesses and bodies it invests in, which requires the business or body to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.”
—(Abena Oppong-Asare.)

This new clause would ensure that the Bank considers the location and ownership of the businesses and bodies it invests in and only invests in businesses and bodies who create “Good Jobs” plans to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 210, Noes 271.

Division No. 170]

[3.41 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal

Kinnock, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Navendu Mishra*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Tonia Antoniazzi

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew

Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert

Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, rh Johnny

Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 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
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim

Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 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
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:

Joy Morrissey and
 Nigel Huddleston

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 2

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

Amendment proposed: 5, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

“(i) to reduce economic inequalities within and between regions of the United Kingdom, and

(ii) to improve productivity, pay, jobs and living standards.

(c) to support supply chain resilience and the United Kingdom’s industrial strategy.”—(*Abena Oppong-Asare.*)

This amendment would ensure that the Bank’s objective to support regional and local economic growth includes reducing economic inequalities within and between regions and improving productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards. It would also create a third objective for the Bank to support supply chain resilience and the UK’s industrial strategy.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 212, Noes 269.

Division No. 171]

[3.54 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Fleur
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chapman, Douglas
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnoch, Stephen
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Tonia Antoniazzi

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon

Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 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
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir
 Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame
 Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 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
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Symes, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 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
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
Tellers for the Noes:
Joy Morrissey and
Nigel Huddleston

Question accordingly negated.

4.5 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Amendment made: 4, in clause 2, page 1, line 22, at end insert—

“(4A) The Bank may only provide any of the support listed in subsection (4) to water companies if they have produced a costed, time limited plan demonstrating they are committed to preventing discharge.”—(*Richard Foord.*)

This amendment would require water companies to have a costed, time limited plan, demonstrating they are committed to preventing discharges before they can receive investment from the UKIB.

Amendment proposed: 2, page 2, line 9, leave out “consult” and insert

“gain the express consent of”.—(Stewart Hosie.)

This amendment would require the Treasury to gain the express consent of the appropriate national authority before making provision in regulations under subsection (6).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 41, Noes 285.

Division No. 172]

[4.6 pm

AYES

Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Hanna, Claire
Hosie, rh Stewart

Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
McDonald, Stewart
Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart
C.
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Monaghan, Carol
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gavin Newlands and
Peter Grant

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor

Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Daly, James
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, rh David
T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David

Duncan Smith, rh Sir
Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foord, Richard
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Grundey, James
Hall, Luke
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, rh James
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jardine, Christine
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay

Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Kruger, Danny
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
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Lopez, Julia
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cheryllyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
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
Olney, Sarah
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria

Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr
 Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 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
 Stone, Jamie

Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 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
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
 Joy Morrissey and
 Nigel Huddleston

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 9

REVIEWS OF THE BANK'S EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT

Amendment made: 1, page 4, line 39, leave out “7” and insert “5”.—(*Andrew Griffith.*)

This amendment would require reports (other than the first report) following reviews of the Bank's effectiveness and impact to be submitted at intervals of not more than 5 years rather than 7 years.

Third Reading

4.19 pm

Andrew Griffith: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

The Bill will place the UK Infrastructure Bank on a statutory footing and enshrine key aspects of it in legislation, ensuring that the bank's purpose is clear and enduring. It will enable the bank to lend directly to local authorities and the Northern Ireland Executive, and His Majesty's Treasury will be able to put the bank into funds. The Bill also guarantees a high standard of transparency and accountability to this House.

The Bill will now enable the bank to be fully operational, ensuring that its two strategic objectives are put into statute. It marks the next chapter for the UK Infrastructure Bank as it continues to develop operationally. Since the summer of 2021, when the UKIB became operational, 10 deals worth close to £1.1 billion have been completed, including providing financing for a new £500 million fund that could double the amount of subsidy-free solar power in the UK.

The UKIB has a transformative potential that I know is recognised and supported on both sides of the House. I would like to thank my immediate predecessors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). I also thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and her colleague the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for their appropriate challenge, but also for the support they have given the Bill.

I would also like to put on record my sincere thanks and the best wishes of this House to the UKIB, including its chair, Chris Grigg, and its chief executive, John Flint, who have both done such great work in establishing the UKIB to date. Finally, as is customary, I would like thank my Bill team—Alex McBeath, Milly Rainford and Lorna Cosgrave—along with those in my private office at the Treasury, who have supported me ably throughout this process.

I am honoured to have played a part in taking this Bill—one that will deliver meaningful, material benefits for our country and our constituents—through the House of Commons, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Backbench Business

Raising the State Pension Age to 68

[Relevant documents: e-petition 617603, Increase State pensions to £380 a week, and lower retirement age to 60; e-petition 581736, Move the State Pension age back to 60 for both men & women; e-petition 630163, Increase State Pensions to £416.80 per week & lower Retirement Age to 60 for All; and e-petition 587703, Reduce the state pension age to 63 for all.]

4.22 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of raising the State Pension age to 68.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing the time for this debate, and Members for staying here on what I know is a tricky day for travelling. Some people may have somewhere more exciting to get to later in the evening, and I suspect we will not be able to drag this out until 7 o'clock, but you never know. There is plenty to talk about on pensions, and we can but try.

I wanted to hold this debate because the Government have recently received the periodic review of the state pension age from Baroness Neville-Rolfe. They have not yet published that review, but we have been seeing stories in the media suggesting that there may be an announcement in the Budget of a change in date for the increase in the state pension age to 68 from 2044 to sometime in the 2030s. I should probably declare an interest in that, depending exactly when that choice is made, it may change my own state pension date. That is on the record, but I have no idea what year the Government are thinking about.

I hesitate to say it, but this is actually a really important decision that will have a very significant impact on a lot of people. It needs to be made very carefully, and with very careful consideration of the impacts on people of different genders, backgrounds and occupations and on those in different parts of the country. Its impact for a manual worker will be very different from that for a professional, or someone living in an area with much lower life expectancy than, say, in the south-east of this country, and it is the same for those who have had a high-earning career rather than a lower-earning one. So it is quite a hard thing to get right, as various studies have shown. The other reason to be very careful is that the whole success of the pension regime depends on certainty and predictability, and if people start to think that nothing is certain or predictable, then they cannot have confidence, the whole basis on which we save for our retirement starts to become unclear and people start showing behaviours that we would much rather they did not show.

I actually support—I did support and I still support—the position the coalition Government got to in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, in which we raised the state pension age to 66 in 2011 and brought forward the increase to 67 really quite considerably. That was based on the principle that we should get roughly a third of our adult life in retirement, and I think we should be very clear about sticking to that principle. However, it is right that, if life expectancy increases, that has to be paid for. If we are going to get longer in retirement, we have to find a

way of paying for that. The inevitable impact is that we have to work a bit longer to pay for that. If there is a clear principle that we will spend about a third of our adult life in retirement, people can at least understand what the situation is and what may be coming down the line. I urge the Minister to not move away from that principle, to at least give people that understanding.

I fully support all the other pension reforms introduced by the coalition Government, including the successful roll-out of auto-enrolment and the introduction of the single-tier state pension, which was designed to say to people, “You will get a state pension and it will be above the poverty threshold, so there will not be any means test. If you save more and have your own private pension, you won’t be losing benefits.” It is therefore absolutely worth saving for that pension. The success of auto-enrolment ties directly into that. Everybody is clear that it is well worth their doing that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): May I take the hon. Gentleman back to a point that he made a moment ago about raising the pension age because of increasing life expectancy? That has always been the justification that has been given. However, at best, life expectancy is now stalling, and in Scotland it has been falling for the past two years. Does he agree that, in that context, it seems bizarre to use that information to raise the age further and faster?

Nigel Mills: I will come to that point in my argument. If we accept that we should stick to the principle that we get roughly a third of our adult life in retirement, the reason why we would increase the state pension age is that we have seen a three-year increase in life expectancy, and that should give us two more years on the state pension age. So for every 12 months life expectancy goes up, people should effectively get four months of that in retirement and expect to work for eight months of it. The hon. Lady is right: the data does not now show, sadly, life expectancy increasing, certainly not at the rate that was forecast by all the actuarial calculations at the time of previous reviews. The data for the 2018 to 2020 reference period showed that male life expectancy had fallen by seven weeks compared with the 2015 to 2017 reference period, and female life expectancy had gone up by half a week, or something really quite insignificant.

On that logic, we would be thinking, “Yes, we are due a periodic review and it would say that nothing has changed—in fact it has got a bit worse. There is nothing to see here, so let’s not make any more changes.” The Minister can intervene if she wants to say that that is what the review says, and we can all go home quite early, but I suspect that nothing is ever quite that simple.

I suppose what we are asking the Minister to confirm later in the debate is whether the Government will stick to the principle of people getting a roughly fixed proportion of their adult life in retirement, and whether they will therefore be guided by that 33% figure. The hon. Lady’s point would appear to suggest that the position is, if anything, worse than that at the time of the Cridland review six years ago and we should presumably come to the same conclusion as that. That is not what the media stories are suggesting. They seem to be saying that the increase to 68, scheduled for the mid-2040s, will come forward to perhaps as early as the mid-2030s—possibly around 10 years from now.

That leads me on to two keys asks of the Government, and I think they were principles that were previously set. First, increases in the state pension age should always come with 10 years' notice, so we should never give people less than 10 years to have to change their retirement plans. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that there will be at least 10 years' notice.

Furthermore, we should make one of these changes only every 10 years; we should not be making multiple changes. Had the Cridland review been handled differently, we could have had the increase to 66 from 2011, the increase to 67 in 2014, and then the move to 68 a few years after that. That would have been far too much change too quickly for people to handle.

Those key principles that we established were not that different from what the Labour Government did in previous pension Acts when they brought in pension age rises. It is overwhelmingly in the interests of a stable pension system that we keep those fundamental principles in place. We do not want to end up in another situation like we had with the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, where women—and I met many of them in my constituency—genuinely did not know that their state pension age was going up significantly until they tried to claim it or thought they were about to get it, only to in some cases find out that it was another five or six years away. That is why we need to ensure we have that certainty in place. I know that that was changed in the Pensions Act 1995, so everybody had at least 15 years' notice for most of it, but people just were not told, or at least not in a way that they understood or noticed. We need a clear, stable pension architecture, as was established under the coalition Government, with a single-tier state pension above the poverty threshold, so that people could save for themselves and had predictability.

This is not random conspiracy theory nonsense. Articles are occasionally written by people who just do not believe that when they get to retirement age, their state pension will be there, or that they will ever get to it. In fact, there was an article in the *Daily Mail* raising exactly that point. Reading other stuff around, we see that there is a general pervasive fear that people will never get to state pension age—that it will always be pushed just out of reach and they will never actually get there. That is why we need to be absolutely clear that that is not what we are trying to do here. We have a predictable and reliable state pension system that people can factor into their retirement savings and then use to plan for the later years of their life. I am sure the Minister will be able to reaffirm that that is absolutely the Government's position.

There is a question about whether the Government are minded to make a change. I think the Cridland review suggested that we could have brought the change forward to the late 2030s, at least, so it should not be a complete surprise if we think that 2044 is probably too late and would result in that figure of roughly 33% becoming a bit generous and people getting a bit longer than that. We need to set out the rationale for that pretty clearly and try to work through how we can help people who will be put in the most difficult position by that change. Intriguingly, the Cridland review said that if the Government are after Budget savings, increasing the state pension age is not a very clever way to do that. Instead, the review recommended abolishing the pension

triple lock, which, I suspect, is not a view that has great support around Parliament. Hopefully this latest review does not re-recommend that, and the Government will not accept it if it does.

There were, though, some sensible analyses and recommendations as to what we can do to help people who are out of work in their mid-60s because they are either not really fit for work or not realistically going to get a job then. How do we give them financial support when we cannot give them their state pension? Do we subject them to full universal credit conditionality, or can we find a way of giving them a better experience? The review recommended potentially allowing people to access the state pension a year early, having a benefit equivalent to the state pension at least a year early or having a tapering-off approach to UC or UC conditionality, in case people fall out of work at just the wrong point.

I am not actually aware that the Government have ever really put in place any of those measures, so that would be another ask of the Minister. If the Government are thinking of making a change, while we do need the notice, can we also put in place a plan early for handling those who will be the worst affected by the change? I think we will need that for the rise to 67, anyway, which is coming up much sooner. It is just not realistic for people who fall out of work very late in their working life to get another job, and leaving them in financial trouble for those last few months before they get their pension seems to be a rather inefficient and cruel situation. Hopefully we will have made some progress on that before we get to the next pension age.

I would also like to say that I do not think handling this sort of issue as part of the Budget process is necessarily sensible. This change will not affect the public finances this year or next year, or, actually, the next Parliament; it may not be until the Parliament after that, or possibly even the Parliament after that, when this triggers any financial savings. There is not, as far as I can tell, any real Budget sensitivity to how the Government make this announcement, so I do not think we need to have a shroud of secrecy over what the Government are thinking of doing.

What the Government should do is publish the Neville-Rolfe review. It would be helpful if Baroness Neville-Rolfe could appear before the Work and Pensions Committee and explain the findings of her review. I think she has been brought back as a Minister in a different Department, so I am not entirely clear whether that would be permitted. Could we have a Minister from a different Department answering questions about a review they led before they were a Minister? I cannot think of any reason why not. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that the Government would be happy for her to come and explain the findings of her review. We could then have an open consultation about the content of that review and come up with a coherent policy, rather than it being dropped out by the Treasury and perhaps consulted on afterwards. The fear is always that once something has been announced, there is much less chance of it being changed.

I hope that the Government will get the feeling from this debate that people are concerned about there being further rises in the state pension age before we have had a chance to assess fully the impacts of the rise to 66—let alone the rise to 67 that is coming. I think we all recognise that it is a difficult situation and that it is worse for different parts of the country, worse for

[Nigel Mills]

people in different occupations and possibly worse for women than for men. It would be useful to understand those implications and how we can mitigate them before we make any further decisions.

Fundamentally, if life expectancy data is not going as has been forecast, we should respond to the facts as they change and accept that our policy on expected changes to the state pension age can change as well, that we do not need the increases to come as fast and as often as we had thought, and that we should just leave things as they are. Let us hope that life expectancy starts to increase again. We can make these decisions then, rather than rushing into things that really hurt people, that bring uncertainty to the pension system—we do not need that—and that will probably not bring any financial savings for several Chancellors.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. Let me restate my point: our pension architecture and the foundations on which we have been trying to build the system are all still there and are robust, and we can all rely on them.

4.36 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing this Backbench Business debate, which gives us the chance to ask for the Government's views on this topic of great importance and enormous public interest. I am delighted that the Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), and the former Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), are in their places on the Front Bench.

I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Amber Valley said. The idea of spending a third of adult life in retirement is a sensible yardstick to run with. He made the point, in passing, about the importance of implementing the recommendations of the auto-enrolment review, and I agree with him that that is important. We are repeatedly told that it will be done in the mid-2020s, but time to implement it before 2025 is either running out or has possibly already run out.

In my remarks, I will focus on the process we are in. I recall the wise words of David Cameron, who said:

“Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

He argued—rightly, in my view—for a culture of openness in government. One of the results of his view was the 2010 protocol on publication of all Government social research, which was most recently updated last year. It states:

“Principle 1: The products from government social research and analysis will be made publicly available”, and that research should be published “promptly”, within 12 weeks of completion.

For a number of years, that was, to their credit, the Government's approach. In 2017, when the first review of state pension age was undertaken for the Government by John Cridland—as the hon. Member for Amber Valley has pointed out—his report, and the report of the Government Actuary, were both published on 23 March 2017, nearly four months before the DWP's own review was set out on 19 July 2017, shortly after the hon. Member for Hexham took up his former post as Pensions Minister in June 2017.

I have often expressed great regret that the Department, for some reason or other—perhaps reflecting a different approach across Government—has abandoned the practice set out by David Cameron and instead now resists publication of research and analysis, or delays it for as long as it possibly can. Preventing public discussion no doubt has the benefit of allowing Ministers to avoid having to answer difficult questions, but it has the disastrous drawback of worsening policy outcomes. The policy cannot be informed by public debate before the decisions are made, because the evidence that would allow a debate is not available. The Government publication protocol was watered down a little last year, but its essential gist remains unchanged. It says, for example:

“The primary purpose of social research commissioned and conducted by government is to inform...policy and delivery, but it also plays a role in wider policy debate.”

That is quite right, but, as we have discussed in the Chamber on various occasions, in the DWP the requirements of the protocol are simply ignored. They are not being fulfilled.

I have been hoping very much that the new ministerial team will turn over a new leaf and take a more enlightened approach. Indeed, the new Secretary of State has hinted that he is considering the advantages of greater openness. But here we have a flagrant example of his predecessor's bad habits of hiding analysis and evidence until it is convenient to the Government to release them. Instead of publishing the evidence four months before the Government's decision, as was done in 2017—around the time the former pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Hexham, was appointed—the Department is keeping the evidence hidden until it makes its announcement “early in 2023”. Presumably, as the hon. Member for Amber Valley has suggested, that will be at the time of the Budget next month.

In my brief contribution to this important debate, I mainly want to press the Minister to publish now both the report by the independent reviewer, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, which the Secretary of State received on 16 September last year—more than four months ago—and the related Government Actuary's report, which was submitted to Ministers on 5 October. Publish them now. Why have they not been published already? What possible benefit can there be in keeping this important work and evidence hidden for all this time?

The Select Committee has published today an exchange of letters with the Minister on the subject. When asked why these reports are not being published before the Government's announcement as they were for the 2017 review, the Minister, who is in her place, replied that “this is a different publication schedule to the last review, the issues are still under consideration and so we think this approach is more appropriate.”

In other words, they appear to be saying, “We don't want anyone to see the evidence until we have made up our mind. This is still under consideration, so we think it is not appropriate to publish the evidence.” Surely, there ought to be a public debate about all this before the Government make their decision, not afterwards. This instinct of hiding things, not disclosing them, and not complying with the requirements of the cross-Government protocol is very damaging to the Government's ability to make good policy.

Surely, Ministers should take advantage of public debate to inform their decisions, rather than refusing to show anyone the evidence until after the Government

have made up their mind. What has become of David Cameron's belief in sunlight? We are talking here not about confidential advice to Ministers—there is no requirement to publish that—but rather about expert analysis that will eventually be published, and which sets out the evidence that will underpin the Government's decision. Publish it now so that everybody can see it. The protocol says that

"analysis should be published promptly...as early as possible following agreement of the final output."

So it should be. The recent independent review was announced in December 2021. The terms of reference said that it should explore what metrics the Government should take into account when considering how to set state pension age. They stated that it should include a consideration of recent trends in life expectancy in every part of the United Kingdom; whether it remained right for there to be a fixed proportion of adult life that people should, on average, expect to spend over state pension age, and what metrics would enable state pension costs, and the importance of sharing those fairly between generations, to be taken into account.

The Select Committee agreed months ago that once Baroness Neville-Rolfe's review had been published, we would take evidence on it, including from her, as the hon. Member for Amber Valley said, before the Government announced their decision. Now that the Government are unwilling to publish the analysis before they announce their decision, we clearly cannot do that.

The Sun has reported that the Government plan to raise the state pension age from 67 to 68 as early as 2035, which will affect everyone who is 54 and under, instead of 10 years later, as set out in current legislation. Is that the right thing to do? Well, we need to see the evidence. The key evidence is about future projections of life expectancy. As we heard from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), emerging evidence shows that the trend of rising life expectancy is not what it was before the pandemic.

One of the expert witnesses at this morning's meeting of the Select Committee said, "Mortality seems to have peaked, because one reason why there was increasing mortality was that the second world war lifestyle was ironically quite healthy for people, and the numbers are now going down quite a lot." We were discussing something else this morning, and I do not know what evidence the witness was drawing on there, but I do not know what evidence the Government will draw on either, because it has not been published and it should have been. There should be no delay in publishing it.

Cohort life expectancy statistics are produced every two years. A new set is expected this year. The latest, 2020-based projections show life expectancy at 65 still rising, but at a slower rate than in previous releases. Of course, the 2020 figures did not take any account of changes arising from the pandemic. The change in projection has prompted some commentators to call for the planned rises in the state pension age to be abandoned, or at least to be slowed.

Lane Clark & Peacock took the latest Office for National Statistics life expectancy projections and reran the 2017 calculations of the Government Actuary's Department. They concluded that any move from 67 to 68 would not be needed until the mid-2060s rather than

the mid-2040s, and certainly not by the late 2030s, as suggested by *The Sun*. They also suggested that the move from 66 to 67, which is currently scheduled to be phased in over two years from 2026, could be put back until the end of the 2040s. They went on to argue that if further ONS statistics show relatively lower life expectancy growth, that could imply further delays to planned increases, and perhaps even abandoning the planned rise to 67.

The former pensions Minister but two—I think—Steve Webb, who is now a partner at Lane Clark & Peacock said:

"The Government's plans for rapid increases in state pension age have been blown out of the water by this new analysis. Even before the Pandemic hit, the improvements in life expectancy which we had seen over the last century had almost ground to a halt."

Those are important public policy questions. They should be debated in Parliament and among the public before the Government announce their decision, so that that public and parliamentary debate can inform the Government's decision. We should not just see the evidence after the Government have announced what they plan to do, because changing the Government's mind at that point will not happen.

A wide public debate should take place now, but it cannot happen unless the independent review and the Government Actuary's report are published before the announcement is made. I ask the Minister to resist the temptation to keep the documents hidden for even longer and instead to remember the wise words of David Cameron, and to be open and publish those two key documents.

4.49 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). He is very knowledgeable about these matters, as his comments demonstrated; I thank him for them. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) for securing the debate and to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it, because statutory pension age and pension amounts are of such importance to my constituents in Dover and Deal.

For a person of my age, the statutory pension is like one of those Scottish mountains. It is an optical illusion: as we get ever closer, it seems that there is just that bit further to go. When I started my working life, my pension age was 60. When it was changed in 2010, I was already roughly two thirds of the way through my expected working life. Should the pension age be raised to 68, a woman of my age, at current rates, will have lost out on the equivalent of between £59,000 and £77,000. That matters because of the basis on which I began paying national insurance contributions when I started work.

The first point that I would like to raise on behalf of all pensioners-to-be is that pensions are an unusual area because the rules on grandfathering rights that are usually applied are simply not followed. Surely it would be fairer to use the basis that applied at the point at which people started to work and started to pay national insurance contributions. If someone's pension age is to be changed, it should be changed in the first third of their expected working life, not right towards the end. No one affected by a date change can go back in time to

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

take out an ISA, top up their pension or use their income differently, as they might have done if they had known that such changes were due. People affected by the changes might have made different decisions if they had known that they would have to work for considerably longer, and it might have made a difference to their quality of life at an older age.

Secondly, people might have made different career choices or made career changes if they had known that they would have to work for longer. Thirdly, the expected extra years of work—eight whole years, in the case of women of my age—may mean that people will need extra skills training and support during their working life. If the pension age is to be extended even further, budgetary consideration will need to be given to support for lifelong learning, with leave being given for skilling up and study being prioritised for people affected by the change.

For many people, the ages of 60 to 68 represent a period in which, in the eyes of bosses or fellow workers, they may be considered past the peak of employability. I am pleased to say that that is not the case for contributions in this place, but age discrimination in our society is very real. I suggest that no further changes should be made to pension age unless such age discrimination is firmly and clearly tackled.

If we want people to work later in life, we have to give them the tools, support and legal protection that they need to do so. That is all the more important because age discrimination in particular terms and conditions of employment is currently perfectly legal. If the pension age is to be extended, the law needs to be changed. Age discrimination, like any other form of discrimination, is humiliating, demeaning and damaging. We do not want to subject people to it by making them remain in work while such prejudice continues.

I have a constituent, Stephen, who at the age of 66—the current statutory pensionable age—is facing just such lawful age discrimination. He has worked for a very large Kent company for more than 30 years. He is an effective, respected and well-liked employee with a fantastic track record of work. When Stephen reached his 66th birthday, he did not get a birthday card from his bosses; he got a letter to the effect that it was not possible to sack him on grounds of age, so instead they were terminating his life insurance, his health insurance and all his other insurance benefits.

Stephen was doing the same job at 66, at 66 minus one day and at 66 plus one day, but now he does not get the same money's worth in relation to his contract of employment. If he falls ill, he cannot get the same access to speedy private healthcare that other people working for the company can. If—heaven forbid—he died, his wife would no longer have compensatory insurance. However, he is doing exactly the same job as someone else. It is the same job he did before, and the same job he will do the day after. The attitude demonstrated by the company communicates to him and to the wider employment community in Kent that it thinks a person who is older is worth less. We must tackle that issue if people are to stay in the workplace longer.

I have looked into the policy considerations that are sometimes put forward. The first, essentially, is that an older person does not need to work. As a woman who has been in the workplace for quite a long time now, I

remember a time when employers would say that a woman did not need to work, did not need to get the same bonuses as a man, and did not need to be offered overtime, because it was men who had families to feed. We have outlawed that, because equal pay at work is not about who is doing the work, but about what the work is. Allowing age discrimination, as we do now, sends a message that an older person is not worth the same as a younger one. The continual changes in the pension age also send a clear message that older people's safety, stability and security in managing their own lives are not a priority.

The second reason put forward is that it becomes more expensive for everyone—the premium for the company itself goes up—if older people are included in corporate benefits, or global benefits, beyond the statutory age. To apply that logic, would it be okay to disallow health cover in an employment context to someone who had a chronic condition that could give rise, or had given rise, to needing that policy? Of course not; we would say that that was discriminatory and wrong. At the heart of equalities law is the fundamental view that employers cannot discriminate between those they employ based on characteristics that are not relevant to whether they can carry out the job. By continuing a discussion of the type that has been happening about the pension age moving and whether people will be supported in older-age working, we are failing to address this absolutely dreadful discriminatory environment.

The third and final reason given is that a disincentive to recruit older workers would be created, because the costs I have mentioned would be higher for the company. I agree that we do not want to create disincentives to employing older people, particularly if we are to require people to work for years and years more than they had expected, but the argument sounds awfully similar to the well-known discussion about whether the cost of maternity leave would dissuade employers from employing women who become pregnant. We outlawed that, and we know that a woman can still add value, be productive and be effective when pregnant, so why are we making people work longer? Why are we raising the statutory pension age and communicating from this Parliament that it is okay to discriminate against older workers? It is not, and it is wrong—all the more so if the pension age is raised from 66 to 68, because we would be raising it above an age at which employers are already discriminating against workers, as I have illustrated. Unless we tackle age discrimination, we will continue to have an environment in which it will be very difficult for people who are working in older age.

As these pension changes are brought forward, I do not feel that enough has been done to support, encourage and incentivise employers to look favourably on an older workforce. For example, national insurance contributions could be reduced for older workers. Also, if people are excluded from benefits by reason of the current law, older workers should receive money or money's worth in cash or vouchers to make up for the work benefits that have been removed from them.

By way of conclusion, I am not persuaded by the arguments for increasing the pension age further or discriminating on the grounds of age. It is simply not acceptable. There is no justification for the treatment of my hard-working and loyal constituent Stephen with the discrimination he has faced in his workplace. If the

pension age is to be raised again and we are going to keep making these changes, forcing people to stay in work for longer, age discrimination must be tackled first. We should be taking steps now to change behaviours in the workplace to make sure that older people who now have to work longer will be able to do so and will be treated fairly and equitably. We should be outlawing this outdated and discriminatory law against older workers.

5 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing this debate. How to calculate the state pension age is an intensely technical topic, but it fundamentally impacts on people's lives, and what we have heard so far this afternoon illustrates that, because there is a great deal of consensus across the Benches. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) on her speech and the areas she covered.

Obviously, it is our job on the Opposition Benches to scrutinise the Government, and I do not expect the Minister to pre-empt an independent review process, but I absolutely agree with the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) that we should be publishing any reports and looking at this issue before the Government make a final decision in the public space. This debate is an opportunity for the Government to make a political statement to commit to some of the existing methodologies we have used to date for the state pension age, and primarily that means keeping it based on life expectancy.

We have heard significant concerns today that planned pension ages might be accelerated, and that does not fit with what we are seeing with life expectancy. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said in her intervention, life expectancy is not increasing. In fact, the evidence suggests it is falling, so far from seeing the retirement age going up faster, we should be seeing no change or at the very least a slowdown in planned increases.

It is highly technical, looking at actuarial tables to work out statistics, but it is important that we do not forget the faces behind the figures. In fairness, the WASPI women have made sure that we never forget the faces again. I am sure that every Member here, including the Minister and me, will have spoken with WASPI women in their constituencies about what they have suffered as a result of process failures with previous age increases. I have met many of the representatives who come to Parliament on fiscal event days. They often stand in the cold and damp waiting all day to be heard. I urge the Minister and Members across the House to meet them, if they have not done so previously.

Although this debate is about the future, I cannot mention the WASPI women without talking about their ongoing right for compensation. They have been waiting years now, and thousands have died without ever seeing a penny. The ombudsman is expected to report within a matter of months, but the only thing that has taken longer than their investigation is the Government's inability to decide to do the right thing and to promise to follow the results of that report. I hope the Minister will make reference to that in her closing remarks.

The Government must learn lessons from what has happened to the WASPI women. If we are going to see changes, they must be communicated early and fully. People must be able to plan ahead. Age UK suggests 10 years as the length of time in which people need certainty to plan for retirement, as the hon. Member for Amber Valley mentioned. I hope that the Government can continue to commit to that.

I said it was important to remember the faces behind the figures, and it is vital that the Government remember that life expectancy is based on averages, and that all people are not alike. There are already people struggling to work to 66 through no fault of their own. Manual workers, whether farmers or factory workers, are just more likely to struggle to keep up as the impact of a life of labouring catches up with them. The fictional police sergeant Catherine Cawood of "Happy Valley" may hopefully be reaching her retirement from the police on Sunday night in the concluding episode of the series, but she will be 56 when she does so. That is because we accept that police officers are not necessarily physically capable of being able to chase offenders or fight or do any of the physical things we expect. We may hope, however, that Catherine Cawood, as well as going to the Himalayas, can also continue to contribute in a part-time work capacity elsewhere.

Health problems for many mean that people cannot work full time. Part-time working is increasing, and many people have caring responsibilities. This is the generation of sandwich carers who take care of their parents, their children or grandchildren and, when needed, their partners. There is of course a benefit to the economy, and to older workers themselves, of continuing to work if they can. If that is the Government's aim, I implore them to see that increasing the state pension age, when we are not seeing a corresponding rise in health and life expectancy, is not the solution. People might be living longer, but they are not necessarily doing so in good health.

There are steps that the Government could take. I continue to champion the needs of unpaid carers, many of whom are in the pre-retirement age bracket. I welcome the Government's support for my Carer's Leave Bill, which will have its Third Reading on Friday, and look forward to their support as it passes through the Lords, but there is still much to do. Reforming carer's allowance, securing flexible working as a day one right, offering more training and respite for carers, and investing in local services such as day centres would all help, as would more re-training, as the hon. Member for Dover mentioned, and a greater understanding of what is keeping older workers out of the workforce. We need to ensure that there is a social security net for people who have paid in and who, for whatever reason, cannot manage those final few years. That would be more effective at encouraging people to work longer, even past retirement age, than just forcing people somehow to soldier on.

Of course, there is a balance to be struck. The pension age must be both effective and sustainable. I agree that it must realistically reflect how long people can expect to live after retirement. We all see adverts pop up on our social media about how to retire at 40, but we know the Government could not be expected to fund such a period. Knowing that there is a balance means also making the expectation of the state pension realistic. I want my children, and my children's children, to have it to look forward to one day. Our younger generations have suffered the outcomes of Brexit, of covid and of

[Wendy Chamberlain]

the cost of living crisis. Owning a house is a dream, not a reality for far too many. Future generations deserve the same promises, the same security as those that came before. We must not pull up the ladder.

I urge the Government to use this opportunity to reassure the House that they will follow the rules on determining retirement age by looking at life expectancy, protect those who struggle to work later in life and help those in work who can do so. Too often in recent years the Government have trailed potentially detrimental pension changes only to withdraw them later. Today's debate gives them an opportunity to make sure that that is not the case in future.

5.7 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I echo the appreciation of the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) for bringing the debate on the state pension age to the Floor of the House today. There is great concern that, according to reports, the UK Government plan to accelerate their current timeline for increasing the state pension age again, raising it to 68 by 2034. That means that those born in the 1970s or later could soon be told that a review of the increase in state pension age will further delay their retirement. If the Minister can tell us that that simply will not happen, we can all just go home and not worry about it, as the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) said. We would all be delighted.

It is bad enough that the state pension age is due to rise again from 66 to 67 by 2028. It is even worse that the women born in the 1950s had their state pension age increased with little or no notice, a move that has robbed them of tens of thousands of pounds of their hard-earned and expected state pension, throwing many of them into deep poverty and unnecessary hardship. That is all bad enough, but now we face the prospect of the Government planning to bring forward the increase in retirement age from 67 to 68 from 2046 to affect anyone now aged 54 or younger.

The Minister may say that no final decision has been taken, but how can anyone, having witnessed how women born in the 1950s have been treated, have any real faith that the Government understand how the increase in retirement age would have a disproportionate impact on those who have worked all their lives for poor pay? The UK already has one of the lowest pensions in Europe, and these plans will have an impact on millions of people, many of whom are already struggling financially. Age UK has said that

“any Government decision to accelerate the rise in Pension Age will condemn millions to a miserable and impoverished run up to retirement—and often beyond too”.

So many people are already in poor health by the time they reach their state pension and they are already suffering financial hardship.

As the hon. Member for North East Fife said, probably every one of us has spoken to women born in the 1950s, and when we do they tell us that the biggest UK Government swindle in recent memory was robbing their generation of their rightful state pensions at the age of 60. Many discovered, often by sheer accident, that their anticipated pension would not arrive until years later, as there was equalisation with men. The anger, sense of betrayal and disappointment was only

inflamed when UK Government Ministers bizarrely and insensitively insisted that this provided an opportunity for the women affected to train for new careers. Some of them then formed the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, which continues to campaign for the injustice against them to be recognised and remedied. They must be given the compensation that is their right and I applaud the work they have done, because those women faced delays of up to six years to access their state pension, one in four of them now struggle to make payments on crucial bills and one third are in debt, with single women the worst affected. So that we can avoid this happening again, will the Minister tell us what impact assessment the UK Government have carried out, or will carry out, on any further proposals to accelerate the rise in the state pension age to 68 by 2034 or, indeed, to accelerate it at all?

It seems to the people outside this Chamber who are worried about this or who have experienced this, as the WASPI women have, that this Government have developed a taste for robbing people of their hard-earned state pension. The website Interactive Investor calculates that bringing forward to 2034 the increase in someone's pension age to 68 could mean a lost year of full state pension of almost £17,000 for workers aged 46. Royal London insurance found that more than half of those aged 55 and over are likely to have the state pension as their main income, with 1.5 million of those in pre-state-pension years, and 31 % with no savings at all to fall back on. Many of them are also struggling with caring responsibilities as well as financial ones.

Pensioners relying on state pension as their main source of income are more likely to have already undergone a working life of low pay, and they are more likely to have health challenges in retirement and a shorter life expectancy. They are also the pensioners who simply cannot afford to retire early, even when health problems occur. Raising the retirement age even further will therefore have a disproportionate effect on poorer older people who will enjoy fewer retirement years.

A review of the state pension age in 2017 established that people should expect to spend one third of their adult life in retirement. As we know and as has been said, life expectancy in the UK is, at best, stagnating, which seriously undermines the case for raising the state pension age. I am afraid that those considerations will not have an impact on Government thinking and that the very logic they have used in the past for increasing state pension age—rising life expectancy—will not apply. If that is the case, I would remind the Minister that not only have life expectancy rates stalled across the UK, but they have actually fallen for the second year in a row in Scotland. Perhaps the Minister would like to factor that in when determining the state pension age. According to the UK Government's own argument and the logic they have used so far, the state pension age should perhaps even be falling.

The UK Government must abandon any further acceleration of the state pension age across the UK. I hope that all parties will oppose that and commit to continuing that opposition beyond the next election. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley said, if you keep tinkering with, accelerating and rising the state pension age, you create uncertainty and undermine the whole concept of a state pension, perhaps fatally undermining it for future generations.

Even talk of accelerating the state pension age feels like a grubby smash and grab of people's hard-earned pensions to try to fill the black hole in the UK's finances, which is a consequence of 13 years of austerity. That austerity started under Labour's Gordon Brown and has continued ever since, compounded by the damage of Brexit to which Labour is fully signed up, cynically and disingenuously pretending that there is such a thing as a good Brexit after all. Labour knows that, but it is so desperate to win seats in England, it will say anything. But the public are watching.

To raise the state pension age further is bad enough. To raise it even faster than originally planned as a cost-cutting measure is unforgivable. People in Scotland were told in 2014 that the only way to protect the state pension was to vote no to independence. Here we are nine years later, and the state pension does not support the minimum standard of living. Pensioners have already been short-changed by £6,500 on average, due to the state pension underpayments to around 237,000 older people, and a further 100,000 potential underpayments that have been identified, which will take a year to correct. Let us not forget how easily the Government discarded their manifesto commitment to retain the triple lock, the abandonment of which means that current state pension payments are £520 less than they otherwise would have been.

We must all learn from the huge injustice perpetrated on WASPI women—I applaud their campaign for justice—but we cannot permit even more people to be robbed of tens of thousands of pounds of their rightful state pension as life expectancy stalls or even falls in Scotland. Meanwhile, our Government desperately seek to fill their financial black hole because of their own incompetence, and therefore have decided to pick a fight over pensions. That is an outrage. In the dying days of this Government, as they thrash around seeking to pick the pockets of others to pay for their own economic mismanagement, we must say that enough is enough.

5.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Pensions are an incredibly important issue. People who have worked hard and contributed all their lives deserve a decent pension in retirement. The state pension has been a crucial part of all our lives in this country for a very long time. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing today's debate, and the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and Members across the House for their contributions.

I am sorry to say that there has been a certain amount of unhelpful briefing in the media about a possible change to Government policy on state pension age. I urge the Government to stop that, and to raise issues in this House rather than in the media. If Ministers are serious, they should discuss the future of pensions policy with the public and the pensions industry in a proper public consultation. The current speculation fuelled by off-the-record briefings is hugely unsettling for people who are saving for a pension and trying to plan for their future. Ministers should remember that families and pensioners are living through an unprecedented cost of living crisis and facing huge pressures on household budgets. The last thing that people need is further stress and uncertainty.

We are living in challenging times, with inflation rates that the country has not seen for more 40 years. To make matters worse, as the IMF reported earlier this week, the UK faces the worst economic outlook of any major economy. After 12 years of economic mismanagement by the current Government, we are stuck in a period of persistently low growth and, unfortunately, persistently high inflation. As a direct result of that mismanagement, the Government are now trying to cut public spending. They have reduced spending on the state pension before by failing to increase pensions in line with inflation until April this year. That means that pensions have failed to keep up with the huge rise in the cost of food and fuel that has hit pensioners in the last six months.

Independent research by the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association using data from Loughborough University showed the scale of the Government's failure. It showed that the basic state pension has now fallen below the cost of living. The PLSA put the basic cost of living for a single pensioner at £12,800, more than £2,000 above the basic state pension, which will be £10,600 in the financial year 2023-24.

The Government's mismanagement of the economy and their desperate attempts to cut public spending form the backdrop to today's debate. This is made even worse by Ministers' disregard for pensioners, the House and the public. The Government's pattern of behaviour is in stark contrast to the way in which Governments have conducted themselves in the past. As I mentioned earlier, there has been a long-standing convention that pensions policy is based on evidence and agreed by consensus. For example, when the evidence showed that life expectancy was increasing, there was a discussion about the impact on the state pension age, and it was agreed that it should be gradually increased. The UK already has one of the higher state pension ages among OECD countries.

Following extensive consultation about the impact of increased life expectancy in the 2000s, the Government established the Pensions Commission to look into the issue. As a result, and after a great deal of discussion, it was agreed that the state pension age should be raised. The Pensions Act 2007 provided for it to be increased from 65 to 68 in stages over the period between 2024 and 2046. I should stress that those increases were agreed at a time of steady rises in life expectancy. The current situation is somewhat different, to say the least. As we heard earlier, there is clear evidence of a stalling of the increase in life expectancy. Data from the Office for National Statistics on healthy life expectancy between 2018 and 2020 shows a downward trend in most regions of the UK, and the situation for some pensioners seems to be even worse, with a fall in life expectancy among some groups since 2010. We have heard several examples of that today, and there are others.

There is also clear and, in my view, deeply troubling evidence of local disparities, with gaps of about 10 years between the average life expectancy of some people—often those living in better-off areas—and that of their neighbours living in less well-off areas comparatively nearby. The full impact of the pandemic on long-term health is unclear, and there seem to be a growing number of older people of working age who are suffering from serious health conditions. That evidence needs to be considered carefully.

[Matt Rodda]

I appreciate that time is limited. Let me end by saying that the Government are letting down both pensioners and people saving for pensions. They have broken with the long-standing convention that pensions policy is developed on the basis of evidence, through consultation and discussion. I hope the Minister will address these issues in her speech. I know that she does prefer to consult, even if some of her colleagues do not always follow that approach.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) for raising this important issue, and all the other Members who have contributed to the debate.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that older people can live with the dignity and respect they deserve, and I absolutely reaffirm that the state pension is and will remain the foundation of state support for older people. As has already been pointed out today, changes in the state pension age have been made in a series of Acts by successive Governments from 1995—when the state pension ages of men and women were equalised—onwards, following public consultations and extensive debates in both Houses.

The state pension age is currently 66, and will increase to 67 in 2026-28. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), Labour legislated for it to increase to 68 in 2044-46, but, following the Cridland review of 2017, the current Government policy is to bring the increase to 68 forward to 2037-39. That is the baseline; we are required under law to review it every six years, and that is what is now being undertaken.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley, the coalition Government of 2010 to 2015 were committed to the “core principle” that people should spend, on average,

“up to one third of their adult life drawing a State Pension.”

They were also committed to giving individuals at least 10 years’ notice of any changes affecting them. The first review of the state pension age following the Pensions Act 2014 was undertaken in 2017, informed by both the Government Actuary’s report and the independent report undertaken by John Cridland. As I have set out, Cridland recommended bringing forward the increase in the state pension age to 68 from 2044 to 2026, as set out in legislation, to 2037 to 2039.

Sir Stephen Timms: The two documents from 2017 to which the Minister referred were published four months before the Government’s announcement. Why have the Government not published the documents before their announcement this time around, and will she do so now?

Laura Trott: I had a suspicion that the right hon. Gentleman might bring that up. As he rightly pointed out, I have written to him today to explain the rationale behind this, but I will confirm that both documents will be published in full. I look forward to discussing them with his Committee in due course.

Sir Stephen Timms: I just want to know why they have not been published. What is the public interest in keeping these things hidden?

Laura Trott: As I have said, they will be published in full. On the timing of publication, there is work going on in Government to undertake the review. Once it is finished the documents will be published.

The 2017 review was based on a recommendation to aim for “up to 32%” as the average proportion of adult life spent in receipt of state pension. The review used 2014-based life expectancy data. The Government accepted those recommendations, subject to a further review, before tabling the requisite legislative amendments. The savings from bringing forward this rise to 68 have already been included in published fiscal forecasts.

On 14 December 2021, the Government launched the second periodic review of the state pension age, and work is now under way to complete it, as required by legislation. The review must be published by May 2023, in accordance with section 27 of the Pensions Act 2014. At the autumn statement, the Chancellor committed to concluding the review in early 2023.

As part of the second review, the Secretary of State is considering evidence from two independent reports. The first, a report from the Government Actuary, assesses the latest life expectancy projections from all regions of the UK. There has been a lot of talk about life expectancy today, so I want to put on record the fact that the most recent projections from the Office for National Statistics show a slower rate of improvement in life expectancy than those that informed the Pensions Act 2014 and the Pension Schemes Act 2017. Nevertheless, despite the slower improvement rate, ONS projections continue to show increasing life expectancy over time, and the number of people over state pension age is expected to continue to rise. I can also confirm for the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) that the review will consider the latest recommendations, as well as a wide range of other evidence, before reaching any conclusions about the state pension age.

The second report that will be taken into account is an independent report by Baroness Neville-Rolfe, which will consider recent trends in life expectancy and the range of metrics that we could use when setting the state pension age, including the metrics mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley. We will publish both documents in full. With respect to the question of whether Baroness Neville-Rolfe will appear before the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, that is a matter for the Committee and for her.

Alongside examining the implications of the latest life expectancy data, the Government review is assessing the costs of an ageing society and future state pension expenditure, as well as considering labour market changes and people’s ability and opportunities to work up to state pension age, bearing in mind recent trends in life expectancy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley highlighted the position of those who cannot continue to work. The review will evaluate the impact of previous changes to the state pension age for all individuals, including those with long-term health conditions or disability. The Government continue to provide substantial support for people who are unable to work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) made some important points about age discrimination. The Government's business champion for older workers, Andy Briggs, spearheads the Government's work to promote the benefits of older workers and multigenerational workforces across England, influencing them strategically and by offering practical advice. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's points about discrimination are passed on to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

The review will aim to keep the right balance between affordability, sustainability and fairness between generations. The review has not yet concluded—it is very important to emphasise that, given some of the comments today—and I will not pre-empt its outcome. The Government are committed to ensuring that older people have dignity and security in later life, regardless of where in the UK they are living. The Government introduced further targeted support, including cost of living payments of up to £900 for the most vulnerable households and an additional £1 billion, including Barnett impact, to enable the extension of the household support fund in England in the next financial year. Since 2010, the full yearly amount of the basic state pension has risen by over £2,300 in cash terms. That is £790 higher than if it had been uprated by prices, and £945 more than if it had been uprated by earnings. For the first time, from April 2023, the full rate of the new state pension is worth over £10,000 per year.

Automatic enrolment is having a transformational effect on private savings. Over 10.8 million people have been automatically enrolled in a workplace pension, helping to deliver about an additional £33 billion into

pension savings in real terms in 2021 compared with 2012. The hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned the PHSO inquiry. She will know that that is ongoing, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment on it until it concludes.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the state pension continues to provide the foundation for people's retirement income and are proud of the support they have given pensioners since 2010. I welcome today's debate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley. As I have outlined, the Government take the setting of the state pension age very seriously. I look forward to being able to discuss this matter further—I am sure we will—when the Government finally publish their second review.

5.31 pm

Nigel Mills: I thank all Members for taking part in the debate and the Minister for responding to it. I do not think anybody spoke in favour of bringing forward an increase in the state pension age. I hope the Government will factor it in that, on a cross-party basis, there is not a lot of inclination for that. I hope we get to see the completed review in relatively short order, and that no decision will be taken until it has been published and there has been a chance for further consultation and consideration. I do not see any need for a rush, so I hope the Government will take a consultative approach. With that, I thank all those who took part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of raising the State Pension age to 68.

Sudden Cardiac Death: Young People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

5.32 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to speak on a genuinely important issue. What I am about to speak about was brought to my attention by my constituents, Stephen and Gill Ayling, who are in the Public Gallery today. They experienced the very worst thing that could ever happen to a parent when, sadly, their son Nathan died at the age of 31 in February 2019. While I was not fortunate enough to have known Nathan, we were close in age and we both went to the same local school.

Nathan lost his life to young sudden cardiac death after a problem with his heart went undetected all his life. Before his death, Nathan appeared fit and healthy. He played football and rugby regularly, and lifted weights and cycled. Stephen and Gill have previously described how they will never, ever be able to escape from the memory of when they found their son, who had died in his bed. As a parent myself, I cannot begin to grasp how utterly shattering that moment must have been. My condolences go out to them and to their family, and to all who knew and loved Nathan.

In the wake of Nathan's death, Stephen and Gill became involved with the charity Cardiac Risk in the Young, which provides heart screenings—I will come on to this later—for young people. Stephen and Gill founded a community group, The Beat Goes On, which is a wonderful name and a wonderful tribute to Nathan. As part of the group, Stephen and Gill raised £10,000 to fund private screenings on 10 and 11 January this year, providing tests for 186 young people in our community. Ten of those young people have been referred for further cardiac investigation. I commend them for all their hard work and put on the record my thanks, and the thanks of many in our area, for all they have done for our community in Scunthorpe.

Last summer, I tabled a written question to ask the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care what steps his Department was taking to increase the diagnosis rate of cardiac conditions in people aged 14 to 35. Once those conditions are diagnosed, it is often possible for them to be treated, either with pharmaceutical or surgical intervention or through lifestyle changes.

In the Government's response, I was informed:

"Since July 2021, we have launched community diagnostic centres (CDCs) to increase diagnostic activity and reduce patient waiting times. CDCs offer checks, scans and tests in community and other health care settings and delivered over 880,000 diagnostic tests... This will support Primary Care Networks to increase the detection of conditions such as heart valve disease."

While that answer is good news for some people, I would welcome any assessment the Government have carried out of how helpful those diagnostic centres are in relation to heart conditions in young people specifically.

I was also told:

"The diagnosis of cardiac conditions is based on the presentation of symptoms, rather than the age range of the patient"

or their genetic risk factors. That is a crucial point, and for young people it takes us to the crux of the problem. Research has shown that in 80% of cases of young sudden cardiac death, there were no prior symptoms of

a heart defect; no opportunity was presented to step in and intervene and potentially save a young person's life. As a result, families have lost sons, daughters, brothers and sisters—someone they loved.

Doctors have raised with me their concerns about a completely symptom-focused approach to young people. Aside from the fact that the overwhelming majority of people who have this condition do not exhibit symptoms, my understanding is that the symptoms that GPs are trained to look for are breathlessness, heart palpitations, dizziness, chest pain and losing consciousness. Those are common symptoms that can be attributed to other ailments, many of which will be more common in young people. As such, GPs could potentially misdiagnose a heart condition, perhaps providing medication—for anxiety or depression, for instance—that could aggravate an undiagnosed condition.

The best approach to take in healthcare is always a preventive one—a process that intervenes to stop someone suffering or dying. In cases involving young people, the best way to do this may be through proactive screening. The majority of conditions—but not all—associated with sudden cardiac death in the young can be identified on the basis of an electrocardiogram, or ECG, abnormality. That is the type of screening that Stephen and Gill, and other parents like them, and CRY fundraise and campaign for, sometimes resulting in follow-up tests. Approximately one in 300 people screened by CRY will be identified as having a potentially life-threatening condition, and one in 100 will be identified as having a condition that could cause significant problems by the ages of 40 or 50. Those conditions need to be monitored every three to four months, so that action can be taken when most appropriate.

As my hon. Friend the Minister knows, in 2019 the UK National Screening Council recommended against a systematic screening programme for cardiac conditions in the young. There is set to be another review by the end of this year. I would like to speak briefly first on the previous review, and then on the future one.

One of the reasons cited for not rolling out a screening programme was the continuing uncertainty over the true incidence rate of sudden cardiac death. To say that there was not a consensus on what that figure was would be a gross understatement. I cannot stress enough how important it is that we have accurate data on that issue, especially if it is influencing clinical or policy decisions.

In preparation for this debate, I spoke to representatives from CRY. They said that, just on the basis of the number of autopsies they are performing at their centre for cardiac pathology each year, we are disastrously underestimating the full extent of the problem. I want my language to be very clear, so I repeat that they say that we are disastrously underestimating the full extent of the problem.

In order to shed light on the issue, one of the stakeholders contributing to the review stated that it would be

"very helpful if the review outlined more specific research recommendations, providing potential researchers with a framework of the characteristics of a project that could address the uncertainty."

I have spoken to others involved with the review, who advised me that that framework was not in place. I would be grateful if the Minister could urge the UK National Screening Council to provide clarity, so that we can get reliable data that we can use to make policy decisions.

Without that, we risk having an unhelpful fog shrouding this issue; if we do not dispel it, we may lose more lives to undiagnosed heart conditions.

Similarly, there are questions about testing accuracy. Some stakeholders have asked for more specific research recommendations. In particular, it is really important to specify the test, or group of tests, that would enable simultaneous screening for all the potential causes of sudden cardiac death. Again, I ask the Minister to push for those recommendations to be laid down, so that the scientists can get on with the job that they do best.

Looking forward to the next review, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed a timeline for when this will be completed and when we should expect the findings to be published. It is important to note that several other countries are steps ahead of us when it comes to proactive screening programmes, and, although I appreciate that these might be out of scope of the review, I do think it would be a missed opportunity not to raise them. Several American sporting bodies—

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. My goddaughter, Sophie Pearson, passed away in 2006 at 12 years of age from cardiomyopathy. Sophie's parents spent many years helping to raise awareness and raise funds. I congratulate the hon. Lady on the work that she is doing and hope that the awareness that she is raising today will go some way in supporting families and avoiding unnecessary deaths of young people.

Holly Mumby-Croft: I am terribly sorry to hear what the hon. Gentleman said, and I thank him for his intervention.

Let me continue on the sporting aspect. Italy has introduced pre-participation screening. Although I appreciate that there are issues with extrapolating the data to the non-athletic population, one study in 2006 did show that screening led to an 89% fall in sudden cardiac death in that cohort.

I know that every Member in this House will be united in wanting to reduce the number of young people dying from undiagnosed cardiac conditions, and expanding access to the screening available will help to reduce that.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and pay tribute to her constituents who are with us today for doing so much to raise funding for screening in our area. She is talking about the important issue of screening, particularly in relation to young people and sporting activities. Is it not also important that we ensure that sports facilities have access to defibrillators for when cardiac arrests take place? She will know that, through North Lincolnshire Council, scores of defibrillators have been funded across our area. With the Government announcing a £1 million fund to expand defibrillators, is it not important that that fund also takes into account sporting clubs and the issue around young people and sudden cardiac arrests?

Holly Mumby-Croft: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know that he is very well placed to have a view on this matter through his work as a first responder in our community—something that he has been doing for a number of years—so I listen very carefully to him when he raises points around health and care.

I would be grateful if the Minister pushed the points that I have made in relation to the review, with scientists and stakeholders calling for more research to be done. I would also be immensely grateful if the Minister found time—I know that he is incredibly busy—to meet Stephen, Gill and myself to talk about this issue. That would be very much appreciated.

That takes me to the last point that I wish to make, which is once again to thank Stephen and Gill for the work that they have done. Their experience, and Nathan's experience, was a tragic one. Despite that, they have managed to do fantastic work in our community. I know that, along with me, everyone that they have helped through screening, such as those 10 people who have been referred for further testing, will be extremely grateful to them. I often say in this House, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we have many people to be proud of in Scunthorpe. The work that Stephen and Gill are doing puts them very firmly in that category, and I want to be clear today that they have both my support and my thanks.

5.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) for securing this debate on such an important issue. I am extremely sorry to hear about Nathan and about Stephen and Gill and, indeed, about the constituents of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). I would very much welcome the meeting that my hon. Friend described with her constituents, and we will set that up.

We recognise, though it is hard to understand, the devastation caused to families by the sudden cardiac death of a young person. Sudden cardiac death is an unexpected and sudden death that is thought to be caused by a heart condition.

The implementation of genomic laboratory hubs across England provides an opportunity to explore the systematic introduction of post-mortem genetic testing for SCD. Seven NHS genomic medicine service alliances play an important role in the support of genomic medicine. Those NHS GMS alliances are supporting several transformation projects, including a national project with the NHS inherited cardiac conditions services, the British Heart Foundation and the country's coroners.

The project will test the DNA of people who died suddenly and unexpectedly at a young age from a cardiac arrest, and their surviving family can also be offered genetic testing to see if they carry the same gene changes. In addition, a pilot project based in the NHS South East Genomic Medicine Service Alliance is aimed at people who have had an unexpected cardiac arrest and survived. They will be offered a genomic test to enable access to treatment, and further genomic testing will be offered to identify immediate family members at risk if a gene change associated with a heart condition is found.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe mentioned, screening programmes in England are set up on the advice of the UK National Screening Committee. These are not political decisions; they are decisions based on the best currently available evidence, and they determine whether the introduction of a screening

[Neil O'Brien]

programme would offer more good than harm. As my hon. Friend said, in 2019 the National Screening Committee reviewed the evidence to provide general screening, and concluded at that time that there was not enough evidence to support the introduction of a national screening programme.

Research showed that the current tests were not accurate enough to use in young people without symptoms, because incorrect test results can cause harm by giving false reassurance to individuals with the condition who may have been missed by the screening test, while individuals without the condition may receive a false positive test result that could lead to unnecessary treatments. The review found that most studies for SCD were in professional athletes, whose hearts of course have different characteristics from those of the general population. Tests can work in different ways in different groups of people. That is why it is very important that research is gathered in a general population setting, as to base it on athletes would not provide a good indication of what would happen if we tested all young people under the age of 39.

The UK NSC was due to review SCD in 2022-23, as my hon. Friend mentioned, but has been unable to do so for a variety of reasons to do with covid and competing priorities. I am unable to confirm this evening when the regular review of SCD will take place, but I am assured that it will take place as soon as constraints allow. I will write to my hon. Friend setting out more details very shortly, because I know how urgent it is to understand when that will happen.

In 2022, the NSC's remit was expanded to set up a research sub-group to keep abreast of ongoing research related to screening, and to identify research requirements and advice on mechanisms to address them. The committee has encouraged stakeholders to submit any peer-reviewed evidence it may have on incidence for review by the NSC via its early update process, but so far it has not

received anything. My hon. Friend asked a series of detailed questions and made a series of very helpful suggestions about how we change the process. The NSC will doubtless have heard the issues that she has raised in this House, but I also undertake to raise directly with the NSC all her very constructive points.

The consensus at present has been to focus on rapid identification of sudden cardiac death and automated external defibrillator use in people who suffer a cardiac arrest, in line with the NHS long-term plan. The Government continue to encourage communities and organisations across England to consider purchasing a defibrillator as part of their first aid equipment, particularly in densely populated areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) mentioned some of the excellent work that has been done in his local area on this front. At the end of last summer, the Government announced that all state-funded schools across England will receive at least one AED on site, with more devices delivered to bigger schools, boosting their numbers in communities across the country. In December, we also announced the community defibrillator fund, which gives communities matched funding and aims to install about 1,000 more defibrillators across the country. I know that many hon. Members in this House will want to take up that offer and are spearheading work to get more AEDs out into the community.

To conclude the debate and start the process that we will be going through, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe for raising this hugely important issue. We have heard some truly heartrending stories this evening, and I thank all those involved in The Beat Goes On and other similar organisations for their hugely important work. I promise that this issue will continue to get our utmost attention as a Government.

Question put and agreed to.

5.49 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 February 2023

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

Bee-killing Pesticides

[Relevant documents: e-petition 563943, Continue the ban on the use of Neonicotinoids; e-petition 569214, Overturn the decision to allow the use of neonicotinoid pesticides; e-petition 590309, Ban urban and garden pesticides to protect bees, other wildlife and human health; e-petition 606788, Overturn the decision to allow the use of neonicotinoid pesticides; and e-petition 618926, Save the bees: cut hazardous pesticides and support nature-friendly farming.]

9.30 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of bee-killing pesticides in agriculture.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. It is good to see so many parliamentary petitions attached to this debate, showing the true breadth of concern about the health of these essential pollinators. I am grateful to all the petitioners, who share my passion for bees. I hope that the debate does their concerns justice.

Before we start, I declare an interest: my family keep bees on their farm in Cornwall, and I am a patron of Pollenize, a fantastic community interest company in Plymouth that champions pollinator conservation. I also thank Buglife, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Wildlife Trusts, Green Alliance and the all-party parliamentary groups on bees and pollinators and on the environment for their help in my preparation for the debate.

Although my remarks today will focus on bees, we should remember that moths, butterflies, wasps and beetles are also pollinators, but as I said, I will confine my remarks to bees. I bloody love bees. They might be small creatures, but a lot rests on them. Today, up to three quarters of crops globally are pollinated by bees. The decline in bee populations has led to concerns about food security as well as the impact on biodiversity and ecosystems, but just last Monday the Government issued yet another so-called emergency authorisation for the use of Cruiser SB, which contains a bee-killing neonicotinoid pesticide, thiamethoxam, for the treatment of sugar beet seed for the remainder of this year. This is the third time that the Government have granted emergency permissions for that bee-killing pesticide to be used.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. The European Court of Justice, Europe's highest court, ruled that the use of bee-killing pesticides was not acceptable, even under emergency exemptions to protect sugar beet crops, which he mentioned. France has this year decided not to grant the exemption, but the UK Government have. Does he share my concern that the Government may be allowing our environmental standards to slip?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention on a point that I will come to. We are in the middle of a climate and nature emergency; we need all our policies, not just some of them, to reflect that, and authorising the use of bee-killing pesticides is not consistent with the declaration that this House has agreed to.

In this debate, I want to do three things. First, I will argue that the decision to authorise bee-killing pesticides for 2023 was wrong and should be reversed. Bee-killing pesticides are environmental vandalism. Secondly, I want to back our British farmers, so I challenge the Government and industry to do more to help sugar beet farmers, some of whom face financial losses and real difficulties because of an aphid-spread disease, the beet yellows virus. Thirdly, I propose again that future authorisations of bee-killing pesticides be subject to a parliamentary vote, rather than being quietly snuck out by Ministers.

I do not believe that there has been an emergency three years in a row; this is a plan to allow bee-killing pesticides to be used, with authorisations given annually. I sense some déjà vu here, because this time last year, the Government authorised the use of bee-killing pesticides for 2022. I held a parliamentary debate on bee-killing pesticides in this very room a year ago and was told by the Minister at the time that the authorisation was “temporary” and “exceptional”, but here we are again. It is a new year, but the same bee-killing pesticides have been greenlighted by the Conservatives.

It is four years since this became the first Parliament in the world to declare a climate and nature emergency. I want all of us, regardless of party, to focus on nature recovery, rather than on having to prevent Ministers from issuing death warrants for bees and other pollinators. One third of the UK bee population has disappeared in the last decade, and since 1900 the UK has lost 13 out of 35 native bee species. Habitat loss, land-use changes and other human factors are partly to blame, but so is the widespread use of neonicotinoids in agriculture and across food production. We know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs authorisation of neonics will accelerate that decline.

Thiamethoxam, or TMX, has been found to reduce colony health by harming worker-bee locomotion and potentially altering the division of labour if bees move outside or remain outdoors. It can cause hyperactivity in bees and affect their ability to fly. It is not just killing bees; it is depriving bees of the ability to function. One teaspoon is powerful enough to kill 1.25 billion honey bees, according to Dave Goulson, a professor of biology at the University of Sussex, who is also an expert book writer on the subject of bees. I encourage colleagues to look him up in the Library. Indeed, the former Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. and learned Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), told the Commons in December 2021 that there is a

“growing weight of scientific evidence that neonicotinoids are harmful to bees and other pollinators.”

Furthermore, the former Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), has said, “The evidence points in one direction—we must ban neonicotinoids”. It is rare that I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I do here, and I imagine most colleagues in the Chamber do as well. When we left the EU, the Government promised to follow the science.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): We should protect our wildlife wherever we possibly can, but I urge the hon. Gentleman to listen to the Minister on the science behind the derogation, given that East Anglia and my constituency of North Norfolk have a large and growing population farming sugar beet. We need to bring glyphosate into the argument. That is another product that we must look to ban, particularly because we know it has harmful effects for humans—it is carcinogenic—and is poor for our biodiversity. The EU is banning glyphosate later this year. What does the hon. Gentleman think about bringing the ban forward from 2025? I certainly want to hear the Minister's response to that question. We must move to a far more natural solution than glyphosate, which is extremely harmful.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come to the science and the process for approval based on scientific decisions in a moment, so I hope he will hold his horses on that point. He makes a strong point on glyphosate. Last year, I held a roundtable with environmental charities, farming representatives and scientists, including representatives of Cancer Research UK, to consider the impact not only of neonicotinoids, but of glyphosate. There are real concerns here, and if we are to make progress in achieving a more nature-based form of agriculture relying on fewer chemicals and pesticides, we need to consider the impact of these chemicals not only on nature, but on human health.

The issue is not only food production in the UK. Now that we have signed trade deals with countries that use neonicotinoids, glyphosate and other chemicals on a greater, more industrial scale in their food production, and we allow that food to be imported to the UK, we are seeing those chemicals in the UK food chain, and we might see even more of them in future, even though we might be taking positive steps to address them. That is an important issue, and I am glad the hon. Gentleman raised it. I look forward to the Minister's response on that point.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as he does every year on this topic. I hope he does not have to do so next year. We are focused on agricultural use today, but there is an issue with the use of glyphosate in cities. Does he agree that we ought to create pollinator corridors in our cities and prevent the use of pesticides, so we do not damage the health of our pollinators, and that councils need to be supported to go down that route?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I agree. Bee corridors and pollinator corridors offer an incredible opportunity to green many of our urban environments, and provide habitats not only for bees, but for other insects. Insect health might not be the sexiest of topics, but it is essential if we are to reverse climate decline and biodiversity loss.

There are superb examples across the south-west—in Bristol and in Plymouth—of bee corridors. I encourage everyone to support their local council in establishing bee corridors, especially at the point in the year when bee corridors do not look their best and plants start to brown; that is precisely when the biodiversity boost is greatest. How can we explain that to residents?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He has referred to the benefits of pollinator corridors, but in Torbay we have the wild flower garden, which used to be very formal planting right on the seafront. The wild flower garden was extremely popular with tourists and visitors.

Luke Pollard: It is a great loss to Government that the hon. Gentleman is no longer a Minister, but a great benefit to these debates that we have double the west country Members from Devon speaking on such matters. Wild flower meadows, however we brand them, are a really important part of restoring ecosystems. They demonstrate that the interventions needed to support biodiversity recovery are not always large or expensive. They can be in every single community where there is a patch of ground that can be planted with wild flowers, and are a good way of signalling intent, especially as regards the recovery of pollinators.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Brighton also has lots of lovely bee-friendly verges and so forth. Are we not just asking the Government to implement their own approach? Yesterday in their environmental improvement plan, they said that they wanted to put nature friendliness at the heart of all their policies. How is that coherent with the decision taken a few days ago? If the Government want to be consistent, they need to look again at the decision on bee-killing pesticides.

Luke Pollard: That is exactly right. If we are to have a proper nature-based recovery, and if the Government are to achieve their ambitions as set out in not only the Environment Act 2021 but the associated piece of legislation that this House has passed, we need them to follow their own procedures, and I do not think that they have in relation to the authorisation. I will explain why.

When we left the European Union, the Government promised to follow the science on bee-killing pesticides. How is that going? On 6 September 2021, the right hon. and learned Member for Banbury, then a DEFRA Minister, told the Commons:

“Decisions on pesticide authorisation are based on expert assessment by the Health and Safety Executive.”

Another DEFRA Minister, Lord Goldsmith, gave the same commitment, word for word, in the Lords that month. That surely means that bee-killing pesticides will be used only when the science shows that it is safe to do so. Right? Wrong.

The Government's own expert committee on pesticides concluded on 30 January this year, in a report that can be found on the Government's website, that the requirements for an emergency authorisation of bee-killing pesticides had not been met. It stated:

“On the basis of the evidence presented, the Committee agreed it supports the Health and Safety Executive's Chemical Regulation Division's assessment that it is unable to support an emergency authorisation, as potential adverse effects to honeybees and other pollinators outweigh the likely benefits.”

How can the decision have been made through expert assessment—on the science—as Ministers claim, if those very same experts say no to bee-killing pesticides? The decision to authorise bee-killing pesticide use is not

supported by the science, the politics or the public, so why are Ministers allowing bee-killing pesticides to be used again this year?

If Ministers are serious about neonic use being temporary and exceptional, I want the Government to provide more support for sugar beet farmers, so that they can invest in other reasonable control measures, such as the greater use of integrated pest management. I back our British farmers, and I know my colleague on the Front Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), will say something similar. They have had enormous upheaval over the past few years. The withdrawal from the European Union, the change in subsidy regimes, and the fact that it is now harder to export have hit our farmers hard, so we need to find support for them. While critiquing the Government's authorisation of bee-killing pesticides, I want to lend my support to those beet farmers, who, I recognise, face financial hardship if there is an aphid-spread infection in their crops.

How is best practice on crop hygiene, establishment and monitoring being shared with beet farmers? What investment are the Government making in the development of pest-resistant varieties of sugar beet and other crops? Why did Ministers previously say that the use of bee-killing pesticides would be temporary as new crop varieties would be coming up? What steps is the Minister taking to encourage industry to pay its fair share of the cost of transitioning away from neonic use? Sugar is big business and it is a high-value crop. We have heard before of funds designed to help farmers affected by aphid crop loss, so why grant authorisation again now if there are resources available for the farmers who are suffering from it?

The public will find it hard to believe that this granulated money-making machine is unable to give the sugar beet farmers that it relies on a fairer deal, so as to help them with crop failures, and so that they can develop a robust system of integrated pest management. It is welcome, and perhaps slightly curious, that although DEFRA last week gave a green light to the use of bee-killing pesticides, it simultaneously announced a new subsidy for farmers—the sustainable farming incentive—to encourage them not to use bee-killing pesticides. There is an easier way of preventing the use of bee-killing pesticides: instead of paying farmers not to use them, we could ban them, as Ministers promised to do, as we should be doing, and as other nations are doing.

I think we have stumbled on a new political truth: as long as the Conservatives are in power, whatever the science and their approval process says, they will approve the use of bee-killing pesticides. I challenge the Minister to prove me wrong on that. I did so last year in this very Chamber, and here we are again; bee-killing pesticides have again been authorised for use. More bees will die, and I predict we will be here again in 2024 unless Ministers have a change of heart. Each and every year until we get rid of that political truth, more bees will die. This is not temporary or exceptional; it is now a firmly established annual authorisation of bee-killing pesticides. This is my challenge to Ministers: prove me wrong by not authorising them next year.

Ministers need to provide more evidence of the impacts to inform the science. The reports from the Health and Safety Executive and the Government's own pesticides committee—the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides—

highlight a number of science holes in the evidence that they require in order to understand the impact of this authorisation on bees. Will the Minister respond to that?

Will the Minister report how much of the sustainable farming incentive has been used to lower the use of neonicotinoids? Will he ensure that there is not only catchment area science for any use of neonicotinoids, but field-edge studies for every field they are used in? At the moment, the evidence relates to selected fields and catchment areas, which are often too large. Will he ensure that there are catchment and field-edge water studies for every field that neonicotinoids are used in? Will he ensure that the cost of science is billed directly to any farmer using Cruiser SB, so that the taxpayer does not lose out?

The UK Expert Committee on Pesticides said that it would be beneficial to have an assessment of the quantity of active substances deployed in the environment as part of the suite of information used to determine whether the benefits of insecticide use outweigh the environmental risks. Will the Minister agree to do that?

Margaret Ferrier: The economic value of pollination to UK crop production is approximately £500 million a year. Does the hon. Gentleman think that the use of these toxic pesticides is short-sighted, particularly as bee numbers rapidly decline?

Luke Pollard: The use of bee-killing pesticides is short-sighted. It is designed to be a quick fix to help farmers who are in a real pickle. I do not doubt the seriousness of the problem, but the longer bee-killing pesticides are authorised annually, the easier it will be to authorise them annually for evermore, and the easier it will be to extend their use to other crops, because the precedent has been set. That is why this House must be firm that bee-killing pesticides should not be used and should be banned.

I would also like the Minister to look at the datasets available for the monitoring of the use of Cruiser SB. The UK Expert Committee on Pesticides highlighted that it can see evidence and data only from selected months, not for the whole year. Will he commit to providing data for the whole year to the experts scrutinising this policy? Will he update the House on the development of alternative resistant varieties of crops before any future authorisations are made?

Will the Minister publish in written form whether the Conservative party has received any donations from sugar companies that want to use Cruiser SB? I do not believe the accusation sometimes levelled at Ministers that there is a link between this decision and donations, but the accusation is made in debate on the subject, and the matter would benefit from the full glare of public scrutiny.

I do not want bee-killing pesticides to be used. I do not think they carry public support or confidence, and I want the Minister to explain why he has overruled the scientific bodies that the Government previously relied on for the rigour and relevance of their evidence on the use of bee-killing pesticides. The gap between green rhetoric and green delivery is now a gaping chasm when it comes to bee health.

[Luke Pollard]

My final ask is for a parliamentary vote on the use of bee-killing pesticides. I believe the Government do not have the public support for bee-killing pesticides. The majority of beekeepers and farmers, and all MPs, want greater scrutiny of that decision. My proposal to the Minister is that future authorisations of bee-killing pesticides should be subject to a parliamentary vote, in which MPs should have the genuine opportunity to weigh up the pros and cons of using neonicotinoids. If the Government want to continue the use of neonicotinoids—I believe that Ministers have now set out an automatic annual approval process—we need to make it politically impossible for that to happen without Parliament approving it.

Last year, I warned Ministers that, just as decisions to approve bee-killing pesticides are annual, this debate will also be annual. This is now the annual bee debate; it might not always be called by me but, as long as we have Ministers in power who believe that bee-killing pesticides have a place in agriculture, it must be part of the annual political calendar, and it must be a day of shame for Ministers who authorise bee-killing pesticides.

MPs from all parties have received correspondence from constituents, asking them to speak in this debate. Lots of colleagues in all parties wanted to speak but are unable to be here. The message about saving bees is cross-party, and it needs to be one that the Government hear loud and clear.

If we are to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, we need more than words—we need action. We need an annual moment of action: a vote to determine whether bee-killing pesticides can and should be used. If we do not have that, it will make securing a net zero, nature-positive future so much harder. Bee health is non-negotiable; our planet depends on it. We must ban the use of bee-killing pesticides.

9.51 am

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on—once again—securing this important debate, having also secured last year's Westminster Hall debate on neonicotinoids in response to the Government's previous so-called emergency authorisation.

I am deeply sorry that we keep needing to have this debate, particularly when the Government's rhetoric should mean that greenlighting highly toxic pesticides is unthinkable. Yesterday the Government published their environmental improvement plan, which aims to provide "a comprehensive delivery plan for the Government's approach to halting and then reversing the decline in nature."

That goal is very welcome and should align domestic policy with a commitment in the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework, agreed by almost 200 countries in December. However, it is in precisely that context that last week's decision on neonics is so utterly incoherent and inconsistent.

Sadly, this is not an isolated case of Ministers failing to live up to their own greenwash. Just last month, the Office for Environmental Protection reported that not one of the 23 environmental targets examined was on

track to be achieved, and 14 were clearly off-track. We also have the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill risks, under which we risk scrapping a staggering 1,700 environmental regulations overnight—vital laws that cover areas such as pesticides, food, nature, air and water quality, to name just a few.

Now we have the so-called emergency approval in England of this banned pesticide—a type of neonicotinoid—for the third year in a row. It is a poison so powerful that some have said that a single teaspoon is enough to kill 1.25 billion bees. It has been said that neonics affect the central nervous system of insects and bees' ability to forage and navigate. A recent study showed that just one exposure could affect a bee's ability to reproduce in future years.

Nature's decline is no more alarming than when it comes to insects. As we have heard, the UK has lost half its insects in the past 50 years alone. I say "lost" but I do not like that word, because we have not lost them; we have destroyed them—let us face up to what is going on here. More than 40% of the earth's remaining 5 million insect species are now threatened with extinction. The loss of these vital pollinators is truly terrifying to comprehend. It raises the question of how on earth the Government can say in one breath that they are halting—let alone reversing—biodiversity loss, when they are also pursuing such wanton destruction.

Of course, it is particularly alarming that this approval comes, once again, against the advice of the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides, which maintains that the risk to bees and other pollinators did not warrant the authorisation. As we have heard, the committee said:

"the requirements for emergency authorisation have not been met".

It could not be much clearer. The approval is also contrary to guidance, which is clear that emergency applications should not be granted more than once—the clue is in the name.

The Minister may attempt to argue that sugar beet does not flower, so there is no risk to bees, but that is plainly false. Neonics were banned for use on flowering crops in 2013, but were also banned for use on non-flowering crops such as sugar beet in 2018, when it became clear that their use was contaminating soils, streams and hedgerow wildflowers and, by extension, affecting bees. Flowering so-called "weeds" also grow in fields that attract bees, not just in the current year but in subsequent years, when neonicotinoids are still present in the soil.

I remind colleagues of the findings of the Environmental Audit Committee report on pollinators and pesticides from 10 years ago. I sat on that Committee and was involved in taking the evidence that went into the report. I particularly recall this recommendation:

"Defra policy on pesticides must be evidence-based. Where the available scientific evidence is either incomplete or contradictory, Defra must apply the precautionary principle."

Actually, I would argue that the evidence here is not incomplete or contradictory. Even if it were, DEFRA should apply the precautionary principle, but I think we can all agree that that the precautionary principle has been chucked out of the window when it comes to this decision and many others. So I ask the Minister quite simply: what is the point of the environmental principles policy statement, which was published just yesterday, if environmental principles are not applied in practice? I urge him to look again at this decision.

Before we left the EU, Ministers waxed lyrical about a green Brexit. The Minister is no doubt aware—and we have heard this from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier)—that the European Court of Justice ruled on 19 January that emergency derogations for neonics are illegal, so the rest of Europe will not be using these bee-killing chemicals. Is that what the Government mean by the so-called opportunities that Brexit provides? Will he now reassure me that the existing restrictions on neonics and other harmful pesticides will be maintained as part of the Government's review of retained EU law? They very clearly must be.

In conclusion, I want to probe the Minister on long-term solutions. As is patently clear, when we are the midst of a nature emergency, so-called emergency approvals of neonics every year are inappropriate and unsustainable, and they have to stop. We need an approach that safeguards both food production and biodiversity for the future. These things are not separate; they are intimately connected and dependent one on the other.

I welcome the inclusion of integrated pest management in the new sustainable farming incentive, with payments for insecticide-free farming. However, I am concerned that it could just end up being a tick-box exercise, where farmers complete an IPM assessment and produce a plan but are under no obligation to take practical action. Will the Minister commit to remedying that issue, too?

We need a much more concerted move towards IPM, where we use chemical pesticides only ever as a last resort, if at all, rather than continuing our current reliance on banned neonics. Will the Minister therefore commit to further support for IPM? Will he explain what alternatives are being trialled to prevent emergency authorisations in the future? And will the Government bring forward more investment in farmer-led research, practical advice and peer-to-peer learning?

9.58 am

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this really important debate and on his excellent speech.

As we know, last week the Government yet again approved an emergency authorisation for the use of Cruiser SB, which contains a neonicotinoid, on this year's sugar beet crop. That is despite the Health and Safety Executive saying that the risks posed to bees foraging on the pollen and nectar from flowering crops planted in fields of treated sugar beet posed "a potential concern". Furthermore, the independent UK Expert Committee on Pesticides has said:

"In light of the risk assessment conducted, a reduction in survival of honey bees and impacts on homing flight ability (which also influences survival of foragers) could occur."

The Government are ignoring the advice of their own experts, and I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us why.

It was the same last year when the Government granted authorisation for Cruiser SB, and a number of constituents who have written to me with their concerns were keen to point that out. Wirral West residents who have been in contact with me have also highlighted that

this latest move is completely at odds with the pesticide reduction targets the UK advocated less than two months ago at COP15, which aim to reduce by half the overall risk posed by pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by 2030. The Minister has even accepted that there is a degree of uncertainty as to the benefits of using Cruiser SB to address the identified danger to sugar beet production, and that there is a degree of uncertainty in relation to the risk to bees.

It is no surprise, then, that Friends of the Earth has described the decision as "incredibly brazen". It has rightly pointed out that the

"health of us all and the planet depends on"

the survival of bees and other vital pollinators. Just last month, a scientific study estimated that the sharp decline in the populations of many pollinators is already causing about 500,000 early deaths a year by reducing the supply of healthy foods. That is extremely concerning. As the Pesticide Collaboration points out, even minor traces of toxic neonicotinoids "play havoc" with the ability of bees to forage, navigate and reproduce, which has "catastrophic consequences" for the survival of their colony or populations. Its statement continues:

"A recent study showed that even one exposure of a neonicotinoid insecticide had significant impacts on their ability to produce offspring in future years."

Just one teaspoon is enough to kill 1.25 billion bees. It is even more concerning, therefore, that even with that knowledge the Government have gone against the advice of their own experts. Will the Minister set out what alternatives were considered before the decision to approve the use of Cruiser SB?

I praise the fantastic work done by all those involved with Flourish at Ford Way community garden project in Upton, in Wirral West. They keep hives that produce delicious honey, and all their gardening is done in a bee-friendly way. I thoroughly enjoyed a recent visit, when I was fortunate enough to witness at first hand how the beekeepers work with the bees and maintain the hives, and I gained an insight into the overall process of how they produce the honey. Flourish has been working with a local Upton women's group, which has been using Flourish's polytunnels to grow plants and flowers that are then placed in the village centre in Upton; bees visit those flowers to collect nectar and pollen, which they use as food for themselves and their larvae. When they move from flower to flower, they transfer pollen, which helps plants to grow, breed and produce food, thus keeping the cycle going. That is a great example of two groups coming together in Wirral West in a responsible way to benefit the local community and our environment.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing the debate. We all agree that bees are vital for the ecosystem. Bees have been the symbol of our city, Manchester, for 150 years. We have beehives all around the city, including at our cathedral, Manchester Art Gallery, homes and lots of other places, and they play their part in encouraging pollination. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) agree that supporting bees and pollinators in urban areas is also important in providing locally sourced food?

Margaret Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent contribution. He is absolutely right that it is important to encourage urban bees, but he also reminds us of the historic role and ancient history of beekeeping, which I discussed with the beekeepers in my constituency. It is important that we keep that in mind.

Finally, the Government should listen to the advice of their own experts and think again about their decision to authorise the use of neonicotinoids, which are so harmful to bees. I support the ban.

10.3 am

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this important debate—my first in Westminster Hall.

As Members on both sides of the Chamber have mentioned, it is well known that neonicotinoid pesticides can be very harmful to a wide range of insects and invertebrates, including, of course, our beloved bees. They are essential to the future of our planet, to the pollination of our crops and to our rich tapestry of biodiversity, yet in the UK, as we have heard, 13 bee species are extinct and one in 10 of Europe's wild bee species are under threat.

The Government's announcement of an exemption to the ban on neonicotinoids to treat sugar beet in England was ill-judged and wrong. I am concerned that the Government went against the advice of their own expert scientific advisers. Our understanding is that the use of neonicotinoids is mainly associated with sugar beet production in the east of England, but it is important to note that the chemicals can be washed into watercourses and can work their way into the food chain. As with most things in nature, there are always the ripple effects of consequences, chain reactions and things interlinked with one another. There is also a serious concern that the exemption for sugar beets will simply open the floodgate to the wider use of harmful pesticides.

Neonics can have consequences well beyond their site of application and, if used more widely, can put in danger vital efforts to recover threatened native species, including in my own constituency, where Chester Zoo is working hard with partners to create new habitats that encourage bees and other pollinators as part of its nature-recovery corridor in Cheshire. Similarly, the impact would be felt across the north-west region, where the zoo is assisting with the introduction of locally extinct species, such as the large heath butterfly.

I back our farmers, and I am concerned that sugar beet farmers are experiencing a difficult time. However, lifting the ban is not the answer. We must find a science-led way forward that protects our bees and safeguards our future biodiversity, but that also includes better support for the farming sector. In the middle of a climate and nature emergency, there should not be any ifs or buts when it comes to the health of bees. We must be prepared to make tough calls to address the ecological crisis and showcase environmental best practice, rather than allowing more bees and pollinators to be killed by neonics.

I lend my support to the call made by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for parliamentary approval for any future use of bee-killing pesticides. Will the Minister comment on the impact the

exemptions to the ban have had since its introduction and on the expected impact in the next few years? More importantly, will he admit that any lifting of the ban is a huge mistake and that the use of such harmful pesticides should be banned for good, especially in the light of the environmental challenges we face?

10.6 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for comprehensively setting out the issue before us—the use of bee-killing pesticides in our agriculture.

The issue matters very much to my constituents, and I know it matters to constituents across the UK, because we all receive large amounts of correspondence about it. The reason for that concern is that bees play a crucial part in our ecosystem; we must do all we can to protect them from the detrimental impacts of environmental alterations and climate change.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature list shows that as many as 24% of Europe's bumble bee species are now threatened with extinction, despite being worth a staggering £690 million per year to the UK economy. Bees are vital to our agriculture. One out of every three mouthfuls of food we eat exists because of pollination. Bees pollinate an array of crops, including apples, peas, courgettes, pumpkins, tomatoes, strawberries and raspberries. If we lose bees and other pollinators, growing many types of food would be extremely challenging. Our diets would suffer tremendously. The variety of food available would diminish and the cost of certain products would surge. Many argue that pollination provides one of the clearest examples of how our disregard for the health of the environment threatens our very survival.

Since 1900, the UK has lost 13 species of bee, and a further 35 are considered to be under threat of extinction, not least because of toxic pesticides, which we are talking about today, and climate change. No species of bee is protected by law. The contribution of honey bees to nature and food products is significant. As we have heard from a number of Members, up to three quarters of crop species are pollinated by bees and other pollinators, so bees are the ultimate symbol of a healthy environment in terms of our climate, our food security and our natural world. Bees could not be a more important factor in those areas.

When we look at what is happening in Scotland and what is happening in England, this is again a tale of two Governments. The Scottish Government launched its "Pollinator Strategy for Scotland 2017-2027" to make Scotland a more pollinator-friendly and sustainable place by protecting indigenous bee and butterfly populations. The strategy sets out how to make Scotland a place where pollinators can thrive and how those objectives can be achieved. Importantly, it raises public awareness about the value of Scotland's pollinating insects and the regulation of non-native species.

While that is going on, we have a UK Government who, as we have heard today, have no real sense of urgency about this important matter. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out that the UK Government have retained the pesticide, along with other neonicotinoids, banned in the EU in 2013, using the EU temporary emergency exemption. Measures

in the EU to protect pollinators, including bees, are in place, but the UK opted out of them. I echo the point made by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who is no longer in his place, about the impact of glyphosate and the need to address that issue.

For the third year in a row, the Government have authorised the continued use of thiamethoxam—I hope I pronounced that properly. The European Court has ruled against its emergency use, because it is known to be lethal to bees, wasps and other pollinators. It poses a danger not just to wild bee colonies, but to humans, as it is linked to a wide range of health challenges.

It was not so long ago that the former Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), declared:

“We cannot afford to put our pollinator populations at risk”—yet here we are. Members have reminded us that one teaspoon of pesticide is enough to kill 1.25 billion bees. The sensible way forward, in the face of the facts that we have heard today, is surely a total ban on bee-killing pesticides.

Many people, including SNP Members, encouraged the UK Government to make the Environment Act 2021 stronger by following Scotland’s example in areas such as air pollution, outlawing harmful pesticides and independent oversight of environmental protection, but sadly, that was to no avail. The reality is that legal requirements set out in the Act to halt species decline by 2030 will be as written on water if the UK Government do not step up and protect England’s natural environment and preserve its biodiversity. This matters very much in Scotland, even though it is a matter for the UK Government, because bees do not recognise borders, so bees across the rest of the UK are potentially harmed by what is going on.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the hon. Member give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will just finish this point. It is important that the Government prioritise the environment and protect farmers in international deals, because improving trade is one thing, but our natural environment must not be jeopardised by poisonous chemicals that result in the death of invaluable pollinators. There must be no regression on environmental standards and protections. I urge the Minister to follow the direction and example of both the Scottish Government and the EU in banning pesticides and protecting pollinators. During the Brexit debate, many of us warned of a divergence in standards between the UK and the EU over time, leading to—as everybody feared—the lowering of standards in the UK over a range of areas. We were told that that would not happen, that it was nonsense and that the UK would be liberated to make even greater progress, but today we see our fears about protecting bees coming true.

Margaret Ferrier: As the hon. Member mentioned, we have some good initiatives in Scotland for bee protection, such as the Cambuslang apiary project in my constituency. Does she agree that the project does incredible conservation work for bee pollination and populations?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. Local initiatives like that must be applauded and supported, but we need a lead from the UK Government on the level of pesticides and

pesticide use, so that we can support the very important work that bees do on our behalf, which many of us probably take for granted.

That brings me beautifully to my next point because, although many of us might take the work that bees do for granted, we have to remember the impact that they have on our crop production. We do not want to find ourselves in future in the same position as some fruit farmers in China, where wild bees have been eradicated by excessive pesticide use and the lack of natural habitats. That has forced farmers to hand-pollinate their trees, carrying pots and paintbrushes to individually pollinate every flower. It is simply not possible to hand-pollinate every crop that we want, but it shows the kind of nightmare scenario that we could end up in, and the impact that that would have on the food that we eat and on our survival.

This issue becomes more pressing with every passing day, as our bee numbers continue to diminish. I hope, when the Minister gets to his feet, that he will agree that it is indeed time for his Government to get busy and start saving bees, and to ban neonicotinoid pesticides before it is too late. As he has heard today, his Government need to follow the signs and remember bees and the Government’s environment improvement plan. Let me end by saying: the Government need to get themselves into a hive of activity and save our bees.

10.15 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Nokes. I am grateful, as ever, to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing yet another debate on this important topic, and for drawing attention to the attached petitions. As ever, his introduction was full and thorough, and I will echo many of his points.

I commend other Members for their contributions. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) hit the nail on the head in highlighting the contradiction between this decision and the Government’s wider aspirations. I very much enjoyed the account from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on the work done by Flourish, as well as hearing about the urban bee corridors that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned. A lot is being done on that in many places, including in my city of Cambridge, where Cambridge City Council is doing important work on it.

I was very pleased to hear the first Westminster Hall contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon). I must tell her that this is not an entirely typical Westminster Hall debate, because we did not hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I am sure that he will not mind me saying that—but we normally do. My hon. Friend made important points about run-off, which must be taken seriously.

So here we are again, Minister—last week, he was a great advocate of following scientific advice, but this week, it is all different. As many here have pointed out, the Government’s decision to issue an emergency authorisation to allow for the use of Cruiser SB—which contains thiamethoxam, a type of neonicotinoid—on sugar beet goes against the advice from the Government’s expert committee on pesticides and the Health and Safety Executive.

[Daniel Zeichner]

While the UK Government turn against the science, it is ironic that that comes just days after the European Court of Justice ruled that authorising derogations for the use of banned neonicotinoids was prohibited, stopping further applications for emergency use. That means that we are now an outlier, with lower standards than our neighbours. That is not a place that we should be, and it is not a place that Labour would be, because, for us, pollinator health is not negotiable. I said that last year and the year before, and it was as true then as it is now.

People will look back and ask why on earth this Conservative Government were so slow to act on the damage that is being done. Never mind worthy targets, never mind environmental improvement plans—this decision has been taken here and now. The attack on nature continues for as long as the Conservatives remain in power.

This is a long-standing debate and, as colleagues have pointed out, the Government have ignored the advice of the panel for three years in a row—they have ignored the science and the advice of the expert committee for three years. We have heard the advice, but I will repeat it: the committee advised against authorising a derogation on Cruiser SB because

“potential adverse effects to honeybees and other pollinators outweigh the likely benefits.”

Last week, the Minister said that he believed in science and supported the work of experts, but now that advice is being ignored. I simply ask: why, Minister? I suspect that part of his answer may be the rules that go alongside the use of the Cruiser SB neonicotinoid-treated seeds. A period of time has been specified that must elapse before flowering crops can be planted in the same field. Herbicides must also be used to remove weeds in the field to reduce the exposure of pollinators to insecticides—I am afraid that that provision also adversely impacts pollinators through the reduction of available flowers, but we understand the goal to reduce overall potential risk.

It will probably be said that the threshold that will allow for its use has been increased this year, from 19% to 63%. We all hope that that threshold will not be reached—it was not the year before last. The truth is, however, that we genuinely do not know whether that will happen or not; it will depend on the weather.

But we do know for sure that neonicotinoids are extremely harmful to the environment. They affect the nervous system of bees and other insects, leading to their death. I cannot resist repeating what everyone else has said about the 1.25 billion honeybees that can potentially be killed by one teaspoon of the chemical. We all know how critical bees are for pollinating crops. As the brief provided by the all-party parliamentary group on the environment pointed out, wild bees are responsible for pollinating between 85% and 95% of the UK's insect-pollinated crops. We also know that run-off into waterways and leaching into the soil and nearby wildflowers is a real threat, as the Bumblebee Conservation Trust highlighted in its brief on the impact not just on bumblebees, but on other animals and aquatic life.

We also understand the wider context, which is very difficult. Virus yellow is a cause of significant yield losses. The National Farmers Union reports that, for some, it is up to 50%. The most complex and serious is that spread by the peach potato aphid, and it is hard to

control. In 2020, the sector lost 40% of the national sugar beet crop, bringing down the five-year average yield by 25%.

Frankly, the weather over the past few months has been really difficult. We all remember the searing heat from last summer—the drought—that hit particularly hard in key beet areas along the A14 and around Bury St Edmunds. And then, just before Christmas, there was a very harsh frost followed immediately by a big temperature rise, resulting in a rapid, rotting thaw. It has been really difficult, and that has been added to by a new pest, the beet moth, which seems to be attracted from Europe by the warmer temperatures here.

The overall result is that we are short of beet sugar this year, with beet having to be imported by the processor. That is tough on the growers, tough on the processor and adds more costs up the supply chain. With beet becoming a less attractive prospect to many growers, British Sugar already had to pay more to encourage people back into production. None of that is easy, and there are consequences and costs to any decision. I appreciate that, for farmers, it too often feels as though the tools that they need for the job are being systematically taken away. That is very difficult, because nature does not compromise.

We have to look at alternatives, as British Sugar and the NFU acknowledge in their helpful briefings. There are high hopes for varieties resistant to virus yellows and there is potential for the use of gene editing to secure that resistance. I hope that the Government follow our advice on the regulatory structures needed to make that happen. I am told that there is already a variety resistant to two virus yellow strains, but it is expensive and there is a yield penalty. I am also told that yield protection insurance is available, but again, that incurs more costs. Those are difficult decisions.

There are things that we can do, some of which have been outlined by other Members. We can develop non-chemical approaches, such as boosting beneficial insects, cover crops, better rotation and maintaining good farm hygiene. There is evidence that some farms have had success by adopting such measures. We should move much more quickly on adopting integrated pest-management systems. Ironically, as has been explained, that was part of the sustainable farming incentive package that the Government announced last week, and we welcome that. So I say to the Minister: be bold on that, listen to the scientists and get away from falling back on neonicotinoids, which we know do so much harm.

10.23 am

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this debate, and I welcome the hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) to her first Westminster Hall debate. I also thank all Members who have made a contribution today.

The decision to grant the emergency authorisation has not been taken lightly and is based on robust assessment of the environmental and economic risks and benefits. Emerging sugar beet seedlings and young plants are vulnerable to feeding by aphids. Those transmit several viruses, known collectively as virus yellows, which

lead to reduced beet size, lower sugar content and higher impurities. Overall sugar beet yield can be reduced by up to 50% by the viruses.

We withdrew authorisation for use of pesticide products containing the three neonicotinoids on outdoor crops in 2018, in line with the EU decision. Since then, sugar beet growers have been adjusting to new conditions. In 2019 and in 2021, the virus threat was low and the crop was not significantly impacted. However, 2020 saw severe damage, with up to 24% of the national crop being lost. Imports were needed to enable British Sugar to honour its contracts.

The emergency authorisation has been issued with a strict threshold for use, so that Cruiser SB will be used only if there is a likely danger to the sugar beet crop. This year, the threshold has been set at a predicted virus incidence of 63% or above, as forecast by an independent model developed by Rothamsted Research. That increase reflects our improving understanding of the fit between the model used to predict virus incidence and real-world outcomes, and it means that the product is less likely to be used. The aim of the threshold is to ensure that Cruiser SB is used only if there is a likely danger to the sugar beet crop.

The forecast will be made on 1 March this year. It is only then that we will know for certain whether the seed treatment will be used this year. In 2021, the model predicted that the virus level would not meet the threshold, so the seed treatment was not used.

Samantha Dixon: On 1 March, will the decision be the Minister's or will it rest with others, and if so, who?

Mark Spencer: The decision will not be made by Ministers; the decision will be set by a threshold. Rothamsted Research has set that threshold and that model, and it will take into account weather patterns and levels of aphids and virus within the environment. The decision will be made based on that model, so I will not be involved in that decision, nor will any other Minister.

Members will be aware of the strict conditions of use that have been set as requirements for emergency authorisation. If that threshold is met and if neonicotinoid-treated seeds are planted, conditions will be put in place to mitigate risk to the environment, including to pollinators. The conditions include the prohibition of any crop that flowers before harvest being planted in the same field within 32 months of a treated sugar beet crop and compliance with a stewardship scheme, which requires monitoring to be performed to determine the levels of neonicotinoids in the environment. Full details of the key conditions of use have been published on gov.uk.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister tell us whether there has been any assessment of the success of the mitigation measures adopted in previous years?

Mark Spencer: We take into account all of that data when making these decisions. We take the best advice from the best scientists and make these decisions on their advice. My decision was informed by the advice of the Health and Safety Executive and by the views of the UK expert committee on pesticides and DEFRA's chief

scientific adviser on the scientific evidence. I also considered economic issues, informed by analysis from DEFRA economists.

Looking to the future, we do not wish to see the temporary use of neonicotinoids continue indefinitely. The development of alternative and sustainable approaches to protect sugar beet crops from these viruses is paramount. That includes the development of resistant plant varieties, measures to improve crop hygiene and husbandry, and alternative pesticides. British Sugar and the British Beet Research Organisation are undertaking a programme of work to develop these alternatives, which include yellows virus-specific integrated pest management techniques. The Government are closely monitoring the progress of that.

Caroline Lucas: The Minister will know that, since 1970, the UK has lost 50% or more of our insects. Whatever he is saying to us this morning, I do not think he is saying that risk is completely absent; he is balancing risks. Where does the precautionary principle come into his analysis and assessment, given that the risks that we face are so huge? Even if he thinks that the risk is small, none the less, if it happens and there is yet more of a collapse of our bee populations, we are in deep trouble.

Mark Spencer: That is one of the reasons why we have introduced the new environmental land management schemes, whose purpose is to change the way farmers grow crops and make them adopt those practices. We recognise how important bees are, and we want to work with farmers to improve the conditions for pollinators. We want to work with nature, rather than against it.

As hon. Members know, we continue our work on the agricultural transition, and we are repurposing the land-based subsidies we inherited from the EU. The hon. Lady makes the point that they did little for the environment and little for farmers. We will now have a new, ambitious system that rewards farmers and land managers for their role as environmental stewards, and that starts with the sustainable farming incentive.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister specifically address the precautionary principle? How did he apply it to the decision he made?

Mark Spencer: We have to balance all those factors and all the scientific advice, including the precautionary principle, in coming to this decision. It is not an easy decision to make. We have to consider lots of scientific advice on the risk to pollinators and to the sugar beet crop.

We have just published our indicative plan for the roll-out of the sustainable farming incentive standards, which includes the introduction of paid integrated pest management actions. That includes paying farmers to carry out an assessment and produce an integrated pest management plan; introduce natural methods of pest management, such as flower-rich grass margins or field strips, or companion cropping; and take steps to move towards insecticide-free farming. That will support farmers to minimise the use of pesticides and will incentivise the uptake of alternative ways to control pests.

Integrated pest management is at the heart of our approach to support farmers to practise sustainable pest management. We have already commissioned a

[Mark Spencer]

package of research projects that will enable farmers to access the most effective IPM tools available, and ensure that we understand changing trends in pest threats across the UK.

As I have outlined, the decision to allow the limited and controlled use of neonicotinoids on a single crop has not been taken lightly and is based on robust scientific assessment. We will continue to work hard to support our farmers and protect and restore our vital pollinator populations.

10.32 am

Luke Pollard: It is great that so many Members contributed to this debate and shared concerns about the Government's approval of Cruiser SB. I have to say I am a little disappointed that the Minister managed to avoid answering nearly every question posed to him. He did not say why he ignored the science in approving Cruiser SB. He did not say how he applied the precautionary principle to his decision. He did not answer any of the questions I posed to him about the science relating to field edge margins and catchment areas, and nor did he address the concerns about run-off raised by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon).

I say gently and politely to the Minister that this problem and this scrutiny are not going away. Bee-killing pesticides are wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, the time is running out for the Government to do the right thing before the next Labour Government do the right thing and ban bee-killing pesticides.

I say to the Minister politely that I do not think he has made a very good case for the Government's approval of bee-killing pesticides, but there is still a chance to put a letter in the House of Commons Library setting out why the decision was taken, why the science was ignored and, importantly, how the standards and principles set out in the legislation that his own Department passed in recent months apply to the decision. Why bee-killing pesticides have been authorised in the way they have been is incomprehensible, given the body of legislation, the documents published by DEFRA and the huge number of press releases issued by his Department talking about a nature-based recovery and nature-based solutions, which stand in stark contrast to the decision.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I think we have started an annual bee debate. I really hope that, this time next year, we will be able to talk about the other issues affecting pollinator health, such as the neonicotinoids in flea treatments for cats and dogs that pollute 99% of English rivers, rather than talking about a decision by Ministers to authorise yet again what seems like an annual and automatic approval for Cruiser SB in the face of Government advice that says they should not do that, public support for not doing that and political opposition to the decision. I really hope we will see better from the Government over the coming 12 months.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the use of bee-killing pesticides in agriculture.

10.35 am

Sitting suspended.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Diagnosis

11 am

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis waiting times.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes, and an honour to open this debate to recognise the importance of early diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and to draw attention to the current severe delay in the diagnosis of it.

An early diagnosis of ADHD will have a significant impact on an individual's life: on their development, self-confidence and self-awareness, and their physical and mental wellbeing. For someone with ADHD, a diagnosis can help them understand why they are struggling with life. It allows them to understand their impulsivity, hyperactivity, inattention and sensitivity to the simplest distractions, even to everyday noises.

Instead of having a life in which they feel lost and alone, they can find and understand themselves, and gain a feeling of belonging and control. It is believed that one in 20 adults in the UK has ADHD, according to ADHD Foundation, but only 120,000 have had a formal diagnosis. The charity says that that is because of a combination of poor understanding of the condition, stigma and delays in diagnosis.

Diagnosis is essential, especially when there is an identifiable link between ADHD and suicide: one in 10 boys and one in four girls who have ADHD attempt to take their own life. Early diagnosis can prevent those tragedies and offer an answer to those suffering from the condition.

Today's debate has come about because of the tenacity of a constituent of mine, Tanya Bardsley. She has been open about the amount of pain ADHD has caused her, her difficulty getting the condition diagnosed and, in particular, the added difficulty for girls and women in being diagnosed. She allowed herself to be filmed last year, and shared that in an ITV documentary, "Me and ADHD".

Today, Tanya is a very accomplished woman. She runs four businesses, a charity and a household, as well as being a mum and a wife. But it took her almost 40 years to understand her anxiety, depression and impulsivity. In fact, it took her to almost six weeks before her 40th birthday to get diagnosed. Tanya described her ADHD as like having

"17 TVs on in your head. You can't focus and there's lots of noise in your head. You feel like you're being smothered, overwhelmed, like you're drowning in life. You're living with this inner restlessness, which is exhausting and relentless."

So much was that the case that, even before Tanya was 15 years of age, she had tried to take her own life three times. From the age of 18, Tanya was given antidepressants for depression and anxiety. Tanya saw more than 20 doctors, who just kept changing her prescription, but the medication never worked. It was not until she eventually went to see a private psychiatrist specialising in anxiety that she was diagnosed with ADHD. Once Tanya got her diagnosis, she said,

"Finally, I know what's wrong with me. After years of struggling and on loads of different medications, it now all just makes sense. To be honest with you, I have never felt better."

Tanya's diagnosis was very late and that is why she made it her mission, along with others, to ensure that ADHD is diagnosed much earlier in life, in early years of education.

ADHD was first mentioned in 1902, when a British paediatrician, Sir George Frederic Still, found that some children were affected but that they could not control their behaviour in the way that a typical child could. He also noted that it was not because they were not intelligent; it was because they could not control themselves. Over the past century, the understanding of ADHD has increased, as have diagnosis and treatments. It is defined as "an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development."

In 2000, three sub-types of ADHD were recognised and are now used by healthcare professionals: combined type ADHD; predominantly inattentive type ADHD; and predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type ADHD. Six or more symptoms of inattention need to be proved for children up to the age of 16, and five or more for adolescents aged 17 or over and adults. Symptoms of inattention have to have been present for at least six months and have to be inappropriate to the person's development level—for example, often failing to pay close attention to detail; carelessness with homework, work or other activities; having trouble sustaining attention during tasks or play; often seeming not to listen when spoken to directly; often not following through on instructions; failing to finish chores or homework; and having trouble organising tasks and activities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for bringing the matter forward. I deal with this in my office every week of my life, so I am aware of the issue.

In Northern Ireland, which I know is not the Minister's responsibility, there is going to be a gap of £110 million in the budget. This is my point to the right hon. Lady: the first sacrifice is often special needs provision, the cutting of which cannot be acceptable because it presents a risk to children who simply need a little extra help at an early stage in life. The risk is that a different way of doing things will be overlooked and the children will be abandoned at the most vulnerable point in their education. The right hon. Lady has said, "Get the diagnosis early," and I agree with her. Does she agree that the Minister needs to respond positively?

Esther McVey: I do indeed, and I believe the Minister will respond positively. As well as early diagnosis in respect of inattention, which the hon. Gentleman and I are saying is important, hyperactivity and impulsivity also need to be seen and recognised.

The criterion is six or more symptoms of hyperactivity or impulsivity for children up to the age of 16, and five or more for adolescents aged 17 or over and adults. Those symptoms have to have been present for at least six months to the extent that they are causing disruption and are inappropriate to the person's development level. That means a person fidgets, taps hands or feet, squirms on a seat, often leaves a seat in situations in which remaining on the seat would have been expected, often runs or climbs in situations where that is not appropriate, is often unable to play or take part in leisure activities quietly, is often "on the go" and "driven by a motor", and talks excessively.

[*Esther McVey*]

In addition, the following conditions must be met: several inattention or hyperactive-impulse systems were present before the age of 12; several symptoms are present in two or more settings, whether that be the home, school or work, with friends or relatives, or during other activities; there is clear evidence that the symptoms interfere with, or reduce the quality of, social, school or work functioning; and the symptoms are not better explained by a different mental disorder.

Quite strict conditions must be met, and we know what the symptoms are. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, there needs to be an early diagnosis. Indeed, the stipulation is that the symptoms have to have been present before the age of 12, so we need that early diagnosis. To enable early diagnosis for a child, there needs to be a clear pathway for referrals from the school or GP to the specialist, but that is not working swiftly enough, although it is essential. The number of people in the UK affected by ADHD is 2.6 million, according to the ADHD UK website. Of those, 708,000 are children and 1.9 million are adults. More than 117,000 individuals receive a prescription for ADHD medicine.

I note that in the papers only this week, concerns were expressed by some in the scientific and medical profession about overdiagnosis, as parents and individuals go online to self-diagnose, but I would say that self-diagnosis possibly came about because people have not been able to see a GP or a specialist and they have gone online. Yes, there could be overdiagnosis, but the bigger concerns are underdiagnosis of those who need a diagnosis, and securing rapid access to a professional to establish what they have and what treatment they need.

I note, too, that the journey for girls and the outward signs for them are very different from those for boys. As such, ADHD tends to be picked up in boys and not so much in girls. The symptoms for boys are more well known. Boys display a sort of naughtiness—a disruptive way of acting, being the class joker or trying to disrupt others. That gets them noticed. However, the symptoms for women and girls do not involve being naughty; rather, they seem more as though they are “away with the fairies” or distracted. Because their behaviour is non-disruptive, they do not get the attention they deserve and therefore remain untreated.

ADHD impacts the lives of those living with it very differently, and they all cope with it differently. However, its impact is significant. Adults with ADHD are five times more likely to try to take their own lives than those without it. That is a tragedy in and of itself, and why a diagnosis needs to be made. Given the impact of ADHD on people's lives, Tanya and many others are calling for early diagnosis. Tanya was diagnosed when she went private, a luxury that most of my constituents cannot afford. The process usually involves a 60 to 90-minute consultation with a psychiatrist. There is not a scan or diagnostic test as such; people need to meet somebody who can look at their condition.

However, even if a referral is made by a professional, people risk being screened out. Thanks to ADHD UK, I have some local data on the screening out of referrals from the Cheshire area. The reason could be that, because screening is not part of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, people are

blocked from receiving an assessment. However, blocking people from an assessment, despite a qualified referral, does not make sense. As we know, it will stop people getting the care they need. In the last three years, 84% of girls put forward for assessment in one part of Cheshire were removed following a local health authority assessment, despite girls being known to be under-diagnosed and despite the higher suicide risks for young girls. To obtain that information, ADHD UK had to submit a freedom of information request to each integrated care board. That is how we found out.

The problem is significant, it is sizeable and it needs to be sorted out, so these are my questions for the Minister. First, will she meet me and my constituent Tanya Bardsley to discuss ADHD and what steps the Government can take to ensure earlier diagnosis? Secondly, will the Government start collecting national data, as is the case for autism, and introduce an ADHD wait list dashboard, as there also is for autism? I thank the Minister for her time today and ADHD UK for all its hard work in getting this data about Cheshire to me and, of course, to Tanya Bardsley.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this important debate. I believe there are two more debates on this issue next week in this Chamber, so she is leading the way in securing this debate, as a starter for that further consideration.

This is a really important issue. We know that people with ADHD have positive traits, strengths and abilities, such as creativity, resilience and the ability to hyper-focus. My right hon. Friend referred to her constituent Tanya Bardsley, who has shown that people with ADHD can be extremely successful, but there are also challenges, as she clearly set out, in living with ADHD and in getting a diagnosis, which is often necessary for people to get the support they need. I am not going to pretend that there is not a problem with accessing assessments at the moment. Many of my constituents also come to see me about that, and many have to go private to get a diagnosis. I fully acknowledge that that is not acceptable.

NICE, which provides the evidence-based guidance, says that commissioners and providers should have due regard for the evidence base when designing and commissioning services. However, my right hon. Friend highlighted a number of key issues that hamper how patients and their families access services. NICE does not actually recommend a maximum waiting time for a diagnosis, so there is no benchmark or gold standard to measure services against. That means that services sometimes struggle to meet what we would consider an acceptable waiting time for assessment. NICE sets out considerations about who should make a diagnosis and the criteria for diagnosis, but the long waits are due to the fact that there is no benchmark for the maximum waiting time.

The second issue that my right hon. Friend highlighted is a national dataset for ADHD assessment waiting times. There is no national collection of data and I note that she said that charities have gone to each ICB for data. In a way, it is encouraging that that data is there, but we need to pull it together nationally so that we

have oversight and, as she put it, a waiting list dashboard that we can see. That would be useful not only to see what is happening in terms of best practice but to identify any gaps in certain parts of the country that may have longer waiting times than others.

I am certainly happy to pledge to my right hon. Friend that I will look at that. We are doing so much work in this area at the moment. For decades, mental health services, including neurodiversity services, have been the Cinderella service in health, with physical health much more predominant. We are making the change now to achieve parity of esteem between the two services, but there is a lot of work to do to catch up, and having the data to be able to measure waiting times and standards is a key part of that.

As my right hon. Friend set out, diagnosing ADHD is challenging, because there is no definitive test for it. There are a number of indicators that could suggest an assessment is needed, but someone needs to be seen for that to happen. ADHD often exists in conjunction with other conditions, whose symptoms can overlap and mask those of ADHD. The NICE guidelines aim to improve the diagnosis of ADHD, as well as the quality of care and support that people with ADHD receive.

The NICE guidelines also recognise that ADHD is under-diagnosed in women and girls, and that the indicators are very different. In my work in mental health, we see the consequences of that in young women and girls being admitted to mental health in-patient facilities and having a higher rate of suicide. My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct in what she says.

There are a number of ways in which we are trying to improve access to assessment and diagnosis. Many children and young people seek diagnosis through child and adolescent mental health services, but there are pressures on those services too. We are providing funding to increase access; in the last financial year, £79 million was allocated, which allowed 22,500 more children and young people to access mental health services. As my right hon. Friend eloquently said, it is vital that a person gets a diagnosis as early as possible in their life, so that they get support as soon as possible.

We know that children with ADHD and other neurodiverse conditions such as autism can thrive in and out of school if they get the support they need. We have a trial under way in Bradford looking at an early diagnosis tool to help teachers, parents and others to identify the needs of those with neurodiverse conditions. If successful, that could be expanded across the country. I will update Members as soon as we have the results of the pilot, because we are keen to see improvements in

attendance, behaviour and educational outcomes in schools, as well as in the quality of life experienced by children and their parents. The tool is not intended to replace clinical diagnosis, but it should enable support to be made available earlier to children and their parents while they wait for an assessment and a diagnosis.

We also have the special educational needs and disabilities Green Paper, which sets out proposals to improve the outcomes of children and young people with SEND, including those with ADHD, and we will publish a full response to the Green Paper in an improvement plan imminently. Hopefully, my right hon. Friend will feel that that addresses some of the issues that she has raised today.

One of the best forms of practical support that I have seen is the mental health support teams that are now being placed in schools. There are currently 287, which support 4,700 schools, or around 26% of pupils. That figure will increase to 35% of pupils in April. The teams support teachers to identify children who may have ADHD, other neurodiverse conditions or mental health issues, and get them signposted and into the system much quicker. The service is making a real difference on the ground, and we are keen to expand it as quickly as possible. As my right hon. Friend said, children and young people with ADHD suffer higher rates of anxiety—nearly 50% higher than the general population—which is why we need to get that support in as quickly and easily as possible.

I acknowledge that we are not where we want to be with support for ADHD, whether on diagnosis, support or access to assessments. When we respond to the Green Paper, we will hopefully show that we are serious about changing that and making support more easily available. The Bradford pilot will hopefully improve access to services, but the key is getting the data. I commit today to look at the data on waiting times and at a dashboard, because we cannot plan services if we do not know how many people are waiting for an assessment and an ADHD diagnosis. I completely acknowledge that point.

I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend's constituent Tanya Bardsley. She sounds like an amazing woman—experts by experience are very valuable indeed. I know that there is more to do to improve access to ADHD assessments, but I hope that I have reassured my right hon. Friend that we take the issue seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Violence Against Women and Girls: Sentencing

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should not reference live cases during this debate. If Members wish to speak in the debate, they should bob in the usual manner. If there is a Division, I will suspend the sitting for 15 minutes, but if we can get back sooner, we can start again earlier.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sentencing for violence against women and girls.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and a great honour to open this debate on a matter that colleagues and I feel passionately about. I speak as the co-chair of the all-party group on women's health, and as a mum who feels passionately about ensuring that we create a country in which every little girl is safe to grow up without fear of violence against her. Effective sentencing is one of the tools we can use to deter perpetrators, and it also encourages victims of violence to come forward.

Sadly, violence against women and girls is still a reality across our whole planet. Before I turn to the UK and to Devon and Cornwall—my police area—I want to put on the record some truly horrifying statistics. A Safer Cornwall presentation to Cornwall councillors in December by the domestic abuse and sexual violence co-ordinator stated that globally, one in three women and girls experiences physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.

Violence against women and girls covers a range of unacceptable and deeply distressing crimes, including domestic violence and abuse, sexual violence, child sexual abuse, stalking, so-called honour-based violence including forced marriage and female genital mutilation, gang-related violence and human trafficking. Although men and boys also suffer from many of those forms of abuse, those crimes disproportionately affect women and girls.

One in three women will experience violence by a man they know, and women suffer an average of 35 assaults before they ring the police. The most dangerous time is when a woman is trying to leave an abusive partner. Abuse can often start or increase when a woman is pregnant, leading to trauma or worse for her and her unborn child.

Statistically, women go to 10 different agencies before they get any help. Where the mother is being abused, up to 70% of those fathers or stepfathers are also abusing their children. Less than 25% of domestic abuse is reported. Fifty per cent. of all rape is carried out by husbands or male partners, and two women are killed every week by a partner or an ex-partner. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is not here, for remembering each of those women killed and reading their names on International Women's Day every year. That serves as a powerful and sobering reminder that women and girls still face violence, even in our neighbourhoods. That violence can affect women

across all social and ethnic groups, and can leave the victim and her children with devastating scars, both physical and mental.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate. She is speaking passionately about these issues, which are close to my heart. I was a domestic violence lawyer for 23 years prior to entering politics, and I had to obtain many, many injunction orders to protect victims. Does she agree that domestic violence is abhorrent and inexcusable, as it crushes the victim's self-confidence and self-esteem, wrecks families and ruins lives? During many incidents, children are watching, learning and being devastated.

Cherilyn Mackrory: My hon. Friend, who has a wealth of experience on these matters, is absolutely right. That is why this is such an important debate. Although the title is "Violence Against Women and Girls", the violence affects all children who witness it or are subjected to it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. She is absolutely right that the violence is corrosive, because it leads to childhood trauma, and from that childhood trauma comes the next generation of violence. Does she agree that we need much better trauma-informed services across the board?

Cherilyn Mackrory: I agree, and later in my speech I come on to educating boys and girls on breaking the cycle of violence. The hon. Lady is right that we need to ensure that we manage their trauma to get them to that point. In the last year, 34,408 violent offences were recorded in my police area of Devon and Cornwall, which is about 3,500 more crimes than in the year before the pandemic. That is consistent with national trends, which show that 2.1 million violent crimes were recorded by the police in England and Wales—up more than 20% on pre-pandemic levels. Around 2.4 million people in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in 2022, and around one in five homicides was related to domestic abuse. There were 1,765 convictions in the year to June 2022, up a third from the year before. Convictions are up by 23%.

The language that we use in this place should ensure two things. First, victims of violent crime and abuse must be assured that the police, courts and society as a whole are on their side. That means stopping the dangerous language suggesting that this Government have somehow decriminalised rape. I am generally not the most political of my colleagues, and I like to work collaboratively across the House wherever I can, but when I hear those claims and similar accusations from Members at the Opposition Dispatch Box, as I have done several times in the last few months, my heart sinks. We need to encourage more women to come forward, and to have faith in the authorities. If I were to make a plea to the Opposition, it would be to cease using that language. Those claims embolden perpetrators, and I am certain that the Opposition do not intend that outcome when they say those things.

We also need to encourage and properly resource the good practice that has been shown to work around the country, so that arrests can be made quickly, and so that conviction and sentencing is based on clear evidence that is gathered swiftly, with as little further distress to

victims as possible. If there is to be an effective deterrent for perpetrators, the outcome has to be that victims are encouraged and nurtured when they come forward, and that convictions are swift.

In June 2022, Devon and Cornwall police published its violence against women and girls delivery plan, which has been developed in consultation with stakeholders. It is focused on building trust and confidence, relentless perpetrator pursuit and creating safer spaces in public, online and at home. Operation Soteria Bluestone, an approach pioneered by Avon and Somerset police, our neighbouring force, is now being rolled out in our force area. It aims to bring together criminal justice agencies and academics in order to deliver a more victim-focused and responsive approach, based on six key pillars of action.

Ahead of the introduction of Soteria Bluestone, Devon and Cornwall police launched Operation Gemstone in Plymouth. The six-month pilot is based on the findings of Soteria Bluestone, and provides four specialist investigative teams focused on rape and serious sexual offences in the city. Specialist teams have received bespoke additional training, benefited from improved supervision, and had enhanced engagement with the Crown Prosecution Service and partners, including independent sexual violence advocates, to address domestic abuse perpetrators' behaviours.

Devon and Cornwall secured £417,000 in funding from the Home Office for 2022-23 to support projects across the peninsula. These projects involve working with people who cause harm to address their offending behaviours and prevent future victimisation. The funding also enables community safety partnerships to deliver behaviour change programmes, which ensure that those who cause harm can access vital support for mental health issues, drug and alcohol addiction and so on. Often financial stress is a factor as well.

Our area has also recruited a new domestic abuse behaviour change strategic lead to deliver an 18-month project developing a new partnership strategy. That brings together partners to collaborate on improving the peninsula-wide approach to working with people who cause harm by domestic abuse, and to prevent sexual offending. We commission two services that work with sexual offence perpetrators.

The South West Community Chaplaincy also works with sex offenders who no longer pose a harm according to the probation service. The chaplaincy provides a mentoring service that helps practically as well as with the behavioural challenges of individuals, who are referred directly by Devon and Cornwall police.

Measures to increase physical safety in public spaces are important to combat the issue. That includes the £5 million safety of women at night fund, in addition to the safer streets fund, which focuses on the prevention of violence against women and girls in public spaces at night, including in the night-time economy. A new online tool, StreetSafe, provides women with a way to anonymously pinpoint areas where they have felt unsafe and to state why they felt unsafe there. It could be because of the lack of closed-circuit television or lighting, or because of the people they found around them. More than 15,000 reports have been submitted so far.

The Government have introduced a new national police lead on violence against women and girls; I suspect that the Minister will tell us more about that.

The lead will be the point of contact for every police force, so that best practice is shared around the country. Following the end-to-end review of how the criminal justice system responds to rape, the Government announced an ambitious action plan to increase the number of rape cases that reach court without compromising defendants' right to a fair trial. It includes plans for better data extraction technology that will, for example, reduce the time that victims spend without their phones; the aim is for the police to return devices within 24 hours. Too often, victims feel that they are being investigated and do not feel supported.

A new approach to investigations will be established that places greater emphasis on understanding the suspect's behaviour, rather than placing undue focus on the victim's credibility. More rape victims will not need to attend their trial; instead, a cross-examination video can be recorded earlier in the process, away from the courtroom. That is key, as it will mean that the victim's ordeal—physically, at least—is now over, and she no longer has to dread a courtroom appearance with an alleged perpetrator.

Over £170 million has been invested in victim services that provide more specialist help, such as rape support centres. That includes £27 million of national investment over two years to recruit more independent sexual violence advisers and independent domestic abuse advisers to ensure victims can access support. We need to ensure that the people offering that support are specialised and experienced, so that the victims get the right help; if they do not, it can take a lot longer for victims to recover emotionally from the trauma they have faced.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced measures to boost protections for survivors and clamp down on perpetrators. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 ended the automatic halfway release of prisoners sentenced for serious crimes. That includes rapists on standard sentences of four years or more. They will be required to spend longer in custody. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also creates a legal definition of domestic abuse. It clarifies that abuse can be not only sexual or physical, but financial, verbal or emotional, and, critically, that it is about patterns of abuse over time. Children are recognised as victims, as they also witness the abuse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said.

The definition of “controlling or coercive behaviour” has been extended to include abuse where perpetrators and victims no longer live together. We must remember that it was only in the 1990s that rape within marriage was made illegal. We are still on this journey, and we need to accelerate, because although we are doing a good job, the issue is so multifaceted that it will take a long time to get there.

The Government have introduced changes that will allow victims of domestic abuse more time to report incidents of assault or battery. Previously, prosecutions had to commence within six months of the offence. That requirement has changed to six months from the date the incident was reported, with a time limit of two years to bring a prosecution.

Sentencing must remain independent of the Government. However, this Government have ensured that the criminal justice system has the tools necessary to deal with offenders appropriately. The number of custodial sentences has been going up since 2018. The Government have

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

increased the maximum penalties for stalking and harassment—we have a new offence of stalking—and we have ended the early release of violent and sexual offenders from prison. Sentencing is a vital part of the solution. We will seek to transform the whole of society's response to prevent offending, support victims and pursue perpetrators, as well as strengthen the systems and processes needed to deliver our goals.

As part of their implementation of the violence against women and girls strategy, Devon and Cornwall police have launched their part of the national communications campaign, Enough. The second wave of the campaign started in October 2022. It focuses on a range of safe ways for a bystander to intervene if they witness violence against women and girls, helps to tackle barriers to intervening, and ensures prompt action. Also, across England and Wales, £55 million has been allocated to communities through the safer streets fund. Projects—some in Truro and Falmouth—include the education of night-time economy workers, extra closed-circuit television, and street lighting. All that helps us to change societal behaviours, so that no one thinks that violence is acceptable, people are given the confidence to go out at night, and victims have greater confidence to come forward.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady points out that it is important that women feel safe when they go out at night. An appalling thing that happens time and again—we are trying to do something about it in Parliament—is spiking. Will she join me in condemning spiking as one of the vilest forms of violence against women and girls?

Cherilyn Mackrory: The hon. Lady is again absolutely spot on. We have issues with that, particularly in Falmouth, where we have a big student population, as she does in Bath. It takes a lot of agencies to come together to get on top of spiking. She is absolutely right to ensure that it is part of this debate.

Those who commit certain offences with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, including rape, manslaughter and grievous bodily harm with intent, and who are sentenced to a standard determinate sentence of more than four years' imprisonment are now required to serve two thirds of the sentence in prison before automatic release, instead of half. That is an improvement, but colleagues across the House will agree, having heard me say “four years”, that we should be going for a longer sentence when someone has, in effect, ruined a person's life.

I support the appointment of a National Police Chiefs Council lead for violence against women and girls to drive a better policing response. It has been announced that we will add violence against women and girls to the strategic policing requirement, meaning that it will be set out as a national threat for forces to respond to alongside other threats such as terrorism, serious and organised crime, and child sexual abuse.

There are a lot of measures there, which are welcome, but a lot more needs to be done. Thirty-five per cent. of violent crimes are alcohol-related. We need to tackle that with more alcohol addiction programmes that target the behaviours that lead to violence, and pre-empt those behaviours at an earlier age. The education of boys—and girls, actually—at an appropriate age is a way to try to change inherited behaviours. We need to get better at that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady and others will have noticed a story in the press at the beginning of this week, I think, that said that four in 10 young boys watch pornographic material, which not only sexualises ladies, but shows violence towards them. That needs to be controlled, and we wish the Government to do that. Does she wish the Government to bring in legislation to ensure that access to such pornographic material is stopped?

Cherilyn Mackrory: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Minister might be able to clarify for us what part of the issue will be tackled in the Online Safety Bill, which covers some of it. I hope we also get clarification on what will be outstanding. I believe that the Bill is still in the House of Lords, and we are waiting for it to come back, but more work remains to be done. If it is not being done, perhaps we can ensure that it is done by the time the Bill is given Royal Assent.

I was just coming on to that subject. An Ofsted report found that nearly 90% of girls and nearly 50% of boys said that they or their peers were being sent explicit pictures or videos of things that they did not want to see “a lot or sometimes”. Children and young people said that sexual harassment occurs so frequently that it has become “commonplace”, and 92% of girls and 74% of boys said that sexist name-calling happens “a lot or sometimes” to them or their peers.

A survey of young people also found that 49% of boys and 33% of girls aged 13 to 14 thought that hitting would be okay in a relationship in at least one of 12 scenarios presented to them. As a society, we have lot of work to do to let people know that it is never acceptable to hit.

Finally, although I know Departments are working incredibly hard on this, there is some work to do to help with the court backlog induced by covid. We need to do a lot to help to reduce that; I know the Minister and his Department are working incredibly hard on it, and perhaps he will be able to comment and provide an update on where we are. There is probably more that we can do in the forthcoming Victims Bill, and I am sure the Minister will probably be able to tell us something—not everything—about how we will tackle a lot of these issues in the Bill as well.

Violence against women and girls is still a plague on our communities. Convictions and sentencing are increasing, but that is only a small part of a complicated picture. We all have a responsibility to help to end the violence, so that all little girls can grow up in a happier and safer world.

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for leading the debate and setting the scene so well. She is correct that what we see happening today with violence against women is horrendous. Just last week, we had a debate secured by the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) specifically on the subject of violence against women and girls in Plymouth. He put forward the example of a plan that they are introducing in Plymouth with the co-operation of the local council, police and other services as well.

By their very nature, these debates are never comfortable to be involved in, as we speak of horrendous things. I always bring in the Northern Ireland aspect and the horrendous figures in Northern Ireland on violent, sexual and verbal abuse. For that reason, I am here to engage with others on the state of our sentencing laws, what more we can do and, more importantly, how to protect victims from further trauma and heartache.

Murders in Northern Ireland are quite horrendous. In the year 2019-20, 21 women were killed; in 2020-21, 22 were killed; and in 2021-22, 24 were killed. Those figures underline just how bad things are in Northern Ireland. It is absolutely terrible to say this, but it is a fact: we have the worst murder rate for women in all the regions of the United Kingdom. The only place in Europe that beats those murder figures is Romania. We have a real issue to be addressed. It is not the Minister's responsibility, by the way, but I am asking for tougher sentencing laws—that will be my request off the back of the debate.

Look at the figures and what they mean. A young lady, Natalie McNally, was murdered just before Christmas, and no-one has yet been held accountable for that horrendous murder. She was stabbed multiple times, and she and her unborn baby were both killed as a result. Such things are truly very worrying. For victims of any crime and their families, a just punishment can provide some sense of safety, especially when it comes to physical, verbal or sexual violence against women and young girls. I cannot even begin to imagine the impact that those crimes leave on someone; they will bear it all their days.

Recently, I read of a story back home where a man received only 140 hours of community service in court for physically abusing his wife on two occasions. He had not learned his lesson from the first time, and he did it again. They slapped his wrist—I mean, really? I would expect a custodial sentence. The victim of that crime stated that she felt

“let down at the light sentence he received”.

“Let down”—those are just two words that I would use to describe that sentence. Another two words would be “insulting” and “unjust”. It clearly does not make that person accountable for what he did.

In December past, the Police Service of Northern Ireland arrested 39 people in a specific and focused Northern Ireland operation targeting violence against women and girls. Over 20% of crimes reported to the PSNI have a domestic motivation, and they can be as often as one every 16 minutes; in the time we take for this debate, we could have 15 or thereabouts.

Mrs Helen Grant: We certainly have more laws now to protect victims than we did 50 years ago and we also have more organisations to support victims. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we also need to do much more in terms of prevention?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. To be fair, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth mentioned that. We need to focus on that, and the Minister might give an indication of what will be done. It is right to say there is more focus on it now. As I said last week, I am of a generation that means that respect for ladies was at the top of my upbringing as a young boy in Northern Ireland. Perhaps some of our generation had a bit more

respect, or perhaps things were happening but we did not know about them. That could be the case—I do not know—but we need to look at bringing in strong prevention.

Allowing the police to investigate is one thing, but ensuring that a just and deserving sentence is given is the main factor in all of this. I am clearly asking for better sentencing. I do not want a slap on the wrist for a guy who thinks he can beat up his wife two times and it will not matter. He will do it a third time, and what has he learned? That is the question I am asking.

There is a direct correlation between repeat offending and prison sentences. The Department of Justice back home revealed that adults released from prison had a proven reoffending rate of 38.6%. I am all for rehabilitation in prison. I want to see people doing better and coming out with a changed attitude to life and to how they can contribute to society, rather than be negative towards it. But those figures are massive, and I have no doubt that a proportion of them feature violent crimes against women and girls. The figures in Northern Ireland already show that many people are facing custodial sentences for that reason.

Figures show that the same is the case for sexual assaults. Often, someone is convicted, serves a year or two in prison, is released and then goes on to ruin someone else's life. I sometimes find it difficult to read about some of those cases in the papers. I see the headlines and start to read, but the horror of what has happened means that many times I cannot continue or conclude that story. I tend to agree that if harsher sentences were introduced at the start for violent occurrences towards women and girls, greater rehabilitation could take place and criminals could realise their place in society as a civilian and not as an abuser.

In 2021, UK Victims' Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, called for all domestic homicides to be reviewed. I totally agree. She stated that that is evidenced by falling criminal justice outcomes for crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls, particularly rape. An important point I want to put on record is that women in domestically abusive relationships are more likely to raise a weapon to defend themselves against an abusive partner, which tends to attract, by the nature of the law of this land, a higher sentence than the initial abuse inflicted by the man. Can that be? That a lady who defends and protects herself, under great trial and violence, gets a higher sentence than the guy who was beating and trying to kill her. There is something not right with that and I cannot understand it. That information was gathered by the Centre for Women's Justice to ensure that courts recognise the necessity of sometimes using a weapon in retaliation when in fear for one's life, to defend one's life or those of one's children.

I met this week with the local police chief in my constituency. That is not the responsibility of the Minister, but I want to use this example to give the Northern Ireland perspective. We discussed the slashed policing budget. One of my immediate concerns is the need to ringfence the officers and support available for victims of domestic violence and abuse. The first point of contact must be a safe place, with trained officers who can help to ensure that the case makes its way to prosecution, and we need to ensure that police officers can provide that first point of support at any time of day or night. I do not say this to give the Minister a big

[Jim Shannon]

head, but he responds to our requests in a very positive way and I am sure that he will give us some reassurance, which is what we seek.

To conclude, it is important that we do all we can to shed light on the situation and support those whom the issue directly impacts. Blatant evidence and numerous first-hand accounts show that not enough is being done to ensure that criminals who commit violence against women and girls are sentenced accordingly. I want to see tougher sentences. I want to see those people chastised and in jail for the terrible crimes that they commit. Some of the figures are abhorrent. To tackle the issue, we must consider what impression the current sentences make, and clearly they are not doing much at the moment. I call on the Ministry of Justice and Home Department to consider the issue for review to ensure that women and girls get the assurance that they require and that criminals get the punishment they deserve.

3.1 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) on securing this important debate. I am also pleased to see that the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), will respond.

Tackling violence against women and girls has been, and rightly continues to be, a key focus for the Government, and indeed for all of us across this House. There is a long heritage of legislation brought about by Conservatives in this area, which includes the Children Act 1989, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and my own small and very discreet Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act 2022, also known as Sian's law, which was greatly assisted by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust.

All that legislation contains steps and measures designed to protect people and underpin our growing toolbox for tackling violence against women and girls. Having sat on the Women and Equalities Committee and the Bill Committee for the landmark Domestic Abuse Act, and having regularly engaged with my local police, my local domestic abuse refuge—Family Help—and the night-time economy in Darlington, I am aware of the need for us to do more to protect people, so I welcome today's debate.

I welcome the fact that Darlington has been successful in multiple bids for money from the safer streets fund. That has enabled Darlington Borough Council and Durham constabulary to take more action to help safeguard people in our night-time economy. Indeed, the hub at Number Forty, which is open from 9 pm to 3 am on Friday and Saturday nights, provides a safe space, and was again helped by funding from the safer streets fund. For those who have concerns about spiking, including a number of constituents, whom I am due to meet shortly, who have been victims of that offence, that is a hugely important and reassuring service. The tests that are available at Number Forty are also available through the police, and they have been funded through the safer streets fund. As with any offence, apprehending the

perpetrator is key, and so too is the sentence handed down. I would welcome the Minister's comments on sentencing for spiking offences.

I also praise the work of those in the CCTV control room in Darlington. Last May, there was an incident in which two men were spotted preying on an intoxicated woman. Camera operators from Darlington Borough Council became suspicious when they spotted the two men sitting with the woman; they continued to monitor the situation, and witnessed the men touching the woman inappropriately. The operators immediately rang for police assistance, and officers arrived at the location within minutes. I praise their diligence and swift action to protect that woman, which led to the conviction of the two perpetrators, who were given sentences of 22 months each.

Although capital spending on projects is essential, education is also essential to break cycles of abusive behaviour, which see children of families experiencing domestic abuse become perpetrators and victims in adulthood. Further investment in perpetrator programmes can also help to break those cycles, and the role of sentencing in acting as a deterrent is also crucial. We have done some great things, but it is clear we still need to do more. I look forward to the Minister's response, particularly about what further plans the Government have for tougher sentencing for violence against women and girls.

3.5 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) on securing this debate and leading it in such a comprehensive way. It is a complicated and difficult issue. It is as old as the ages, and this is the time when we should change it. I am pleased there is cross-party consensus that we need to do more and better, but hopefully we are getting on to the right path to tackle this insidious and awful situation that still continues.

According to Rape Crisis, five in six women who are raped do not report it. Charging and conviction rates are among the lowest ever recorded. In my local authority of Bath and North East Somerset, police have logged a record number of sexual offences. However, the justice system is failing women and girls in this country. It is a well-known national scandal that only 3% of rape cases have led to charges against the perpetrator. If we are to improve sentencing outcomes, we need to improve conviction rates.

Female victims of violence are put under a microscope. They are subjected to what Big Brother Watch describes as "digital strip searches". Victims fear that they have no choice but to hand over their private data, including social media messages, call records, photos and even things that they have deleted. The Centre for Women's Justice reported one woman fearing her case would be closed if she refused to provide that very invasive data. She was asked to provide medical and counselling notes over the two-year investigation. That is a disgraceful invasion of privacy, and victims should not be subjected to it. No victim of violence should be put under such scrutiny. The invasive process will only dissuade victims from pursuing their case through the criminal justice system.

The “Operation Soteria Bluestone Year One Report” quoted one officer who believed cases of rape and sexual offences were “pink and fluffy”. He avoided them in favour of burglary and robbery cases. The report also found that some serving officers do not think sexual offences should be a priority for policing. Those officers are more than just bad apples. They are part of a rotten culture of misogyny that undermines sentencing. The Operation Soteria Bluestone report argues that a microscopic focus on victims’ credibility creates “conditions of virtual impunity for predatory men.”

Women’s Aid has warned that violent men are being handed lenient sentences that do not reflect the severity of their crimes, which we have already heard about. It is not fair to the women who deserve justice. We need a whole system change to shift this victim-blaming culture.

Fortunately, we are seeing some progress in creating that culture shift. I commend the work of Avon and Somerset police in that area. I recently visited the Operation Bluestone team in the police force to see the good work they are doing. By changing their investigative focus from the victim to the perpetrator, they have tripled charge rates and brought more cases to the Crown Prosecution Service. Avon and Somerset police are showing that it is possible with a dedicated, well-resourced team and the right leadership. Unfortunately, the team is constrained by the risk aversion of the wider criminal justice system, with charges only brought against a perpetrator when there is a guaranteed conviction. When I visited the police, I heard that they were focused on putting a very solid case forward to the Crown Prosecution Service, so that they got a conviction, but the CPS said, “Bring more cases to court, even if the chance might be 50:50, because if we have more cases coming to court, we have more cases that can possibly lead to a proper conviction.”

Cherilyn Mackrory: My concern—and I am happy to hear the hon. Lady’s side of this—is that if the evidence is not conclusive and a case gets put forward to the CPS, there is a potential for the victim to have to go through the trial only to not get a conviction. I can see both sides of the story.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. This is a good debate about how we best get justice. I totally understand the trauma that victims face if they have to go through repeated processes and there is not a firm conviction at the end. That can be very traumatising, but there seems to be evidence that we get to more perpetrators, and that is what we need to do. We must get the message out to violent men that we are going to go after them.

It is important that we follow exactly how this works. I understand that there are pilots of specialist courts for these types of crime, where victims are treated much more sensitively, with an understanding of the trauma they are facing. For that reason, these specialist courts are so important, and I hope the Minister will talk about how they work and how we can learn from good practice.

Avon and Somerset police is showing what is possible with a dedicated, well-resourced team and the right leadership. Unfortunately, as I said, the team is constrained by the risk aversion of the wider criminal justice system, which means that cases with substantial evidence often

get overlooked, allowing perpetrators to escape justice. Another thing that I learned during my three hours with Avon and Somerset police was that if there is such a focus on the victim, it gives time to the perpetrator to eradicate all their evidence. That is not only unfair; it adds insult to injury in these cases.

The police—certainly Avon and Somerset police—have learned from that and are changing the culture. They are also incredibly data-focused. As I understand it, by going back through historical data, they can now identify repeat offences that previously could not be captured. Avon and Somerset police is doing a wonderful job, and I wish that everybody in this room had a police force that did so well.

One step forward would be to expand the pilot of specialist courts, which would help to clear case backlogs and ensure that victims’ experiences are respected. These changes are essential for women and girls to receive proper justice. I am following the progress of the Ministry of Justice pilot programme with interest, and I am really interested to hear from the Minister about it.

Women and girls need to know that violent and abusive perpetrators are being brought to justice. As it stands, women are not getting the justice they deserve. Sentencing is part of the problem, but to even get to that stage, women must be given the confidence that the system is not stacked against them.

3.13 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing this incredibly important debate. It is so important that we in this place speak about how best to end violence against women and girls.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the shocking statistics on the murders of women in Northern Ireland and the need for tougher sentencing for perpetrators. The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke about some of the things that are happening in his constituency to tackle violence against women and girls and acknowledged that more needs to be done. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about low charge rates and a system that often feels like it is failing women and girls. She also talked about the really good work that Avon and Somerset police is doing.

In 2021, the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa triggered an outpouring of public anger and a demand for change, but that change has been slow to happen. It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through an age in which violence against women and girls is at an epidemic level. The most recently published annual data shows that 177 women were murdered by men, 70,000 women reported being raped—although we expect the true figure to be much higher—and almost 2.5 million women were victims of domestic abuse. Far too often, women are not safe at home, at work and on our streets.

We see a continued downward spiral in charging, prosecution and convictions for domestic abuse. Rape convictions are at a record low: little more than one in 100 rapes result in a charge and summons. I hear what the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth says about the Opposition’s language, but I am afraid it is the inaction of her Government, not the words of Opposition Members, that is letting victims down. Much more needs to be done.

[Ellie Reeves]

For crimes such as stalking and harassment, all too often offenders receive sentences that do not reflect the suffering and the impact on the victim's life. Women are being let down and offenders are being let off. If the public are to have confidence in the criminal justice system, we need appropriate sentences to deter potential offenders and deal just punishment for serious crimes. That is why, back in 2021, Labour outlined what needed to be done in our "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" Green Paper.

Sentencing for domestic homicide seems to treat women as a different class of victim. Men who kill their partners often receive a far lesser sentence than those who kill others, despite the fact that the homicide has often taken place in the context of years—sometimes decades—of abuse. Seventy-two per cent. of female victims die in their homes, yet the law sets out a 10-year disparity between the starting point for a murder in the home and that for murders in other settings. It is almost as if being in a relationship with the victim serves as mitigation for the offender.

The case of Poppy Devey Waterhouse highlights that. She was just 24 when she was murdered in December 2018 by her ex-boyfriend. The couple had split in October 2018, but continued to live in the same flat in separate rooms. Poppy was due to move into a new property, but three days before that her killer stabbed her to death with a knife from the kitchen, inflicting more than 100 injuries. Poppy's killer received a sentence of just 16 years, but if he had taken the weapon to the scene of the crime—deemed an aggravating factor—he would have received a much longer sentence. As Poppy's mother Julie Devey outlined, that sentence ignores the fact that Poppy's killer had no need to bring the weapon to the scene: he had knowledge that knives were already in the house and could be used for the attack.

Julie has campaigned on this issue and believes that the sentencing guidelines are simply wrong. She says:

"The savagery and violence of the attacks seem to count for nothing in the eyes of the law and this is infuriating".

She wants domestic murder tariffs to reflect the severity of the crime, rather than the location of the killing. That seems a wholly just change, and I have heard Government Members speak eloquently and persuasively about it. I hope to see that covered in the sentencing review.

Labour called for a review of sentencing for domestic homicides and domestic abuse almost two years ago. Shortly afterwards, the Government announced their own review. It was originally due for completion in December 2021, but the report was delivered to the Justice Secretary last June, and we are still waiting for the review's findings. In that time, we have been through three Justice Secretaries, and I am concerned that in the chaos and carousel of changing Ministers, this important matter has got lost. I hope the new Minister, who I know takes ending violence against women and girls incredibly seriously, will push this up the agenda so we can finally see change.

I turn to one of the most heinous crimes: rape. There is no statutory minimum sentence for rape, only a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. In 2022 alone, four rape convictions were referred to the Attorney General's Office through the unduly lenient sentence

scheme, with initial sentences ranging from two years and four months to six years and six months. One was for the rape of a child under 13; the sentence was increased from two years and four months to four years and four months. These truly appalling crimes are receiving truly lenient sentences. For too long the trauma inflicted on a victim by rape has not been fully recognised by the sentence, and this must end. That is why Labour would introduce a new statutory minimum sentence of seven years, which better reflects the seriousness of the crime.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned the scourge of spiking, which is deeply concerning. Despite a surge in reports of spiking to the police in recent years, there have been no more than 66 prosecutions in any year since 2010, and there were only 512 prosecutions in total between 2010 and 2020. The conviction rate has plummeted, with just 0.56 convictions per prosecution in that period. Under pressure from Labour, the Government have agreed to conduct a review into spiking, which we welcome.

Peter Gibson: I am grateful to the hon. Member for continuing to raise the issue of spiking. It is key that we identify the perpetrators of this offence. It is no good people coming forward and reporting it without us being able to prosecute, convict and sentence those people carrying out this heinous crime.

Ellie Reeves: I absolutely agree. These terrible crimes need to be taken with the utmost seriousness by the police. They need to be properly investigated, with all the evidence gathered, and prosecuted so that we see criminals convicted. We also need to ensure that when criminals are convicted, they are given sentences that reflect the severity of the crime.

I welcome the review to find out how widespread spiking is and who is being targeted, but it does not explicitly cover sentencing. It must. We need to introduce tougher spiking laws to deter people from committing this awful crime, as well as seeking to introduce tougher sentences by referring the issue to the Sentencing Council for new guidance.

Peter Gibson: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. She calls for additional offences. Could she specify what offences are required over and above those already on the statute book that deal with the offence of administering a poison through either a drink or an injection?

Ellie Reeves: We seek tougher sentences that act as a deterrent. There are horrific stories of spiking both by injection and by a drink. The rise in spiking by injection is deeply concerning, but the very low level of prosecutions and the sentencing do not seem to reflect the scale of the problem. In our review, we would ask the Sentencing Council for new guidance on sentencing for these crimes.

Finally, some crimes are so abhorrent that Labour believes the offender should never come out of prison. Labour would ensure that any offender found guilty of the rape, abduction and murder of a stranger received a minimum custodial tariff of a whole life order, with the effect that they spend the rest of their life behind bars.

Toughening sentences alone will not fix the failures in the system that are letting women down. That is why Labour has outlined a much wider action plan. We would roll out a domestic violence register to prevent perpetrators

from going town to town to find new victims. We would bring in specialist rape courts in every Crown court across the country to end the unacceptable court delays and to prevent victims from being retraumatised by the court process. We would introduce legal advocates for rape survivors to support them every step of the way, from reporting a rape at a police station right through to trial. That would drive up standards and prevent victims from pulling out of their cases because they feel the system is working against them. We would put Jade's law on the statute book, suspending parental responsibility in cases where one parent murders another.

It can no longer be considered good enough for the Government to say that tackling violence against women and girls is a priority when their actions, I am afraid, sometimes say otherwise. Recent polling showed that seven in 10 women consider action to stop sexual harassment, rape and domestic abuse inadequate. Nine in 10 women said that imposing tougher sentences for these crimes would be an effective way of making the country safer for women and girls. We cannot afford for our laws and their enforcement to send a signal that violence against women and girls will be tolerated. That is why Labour in power will make sure that sentencing provides justice for victims, and with our wider action plan on violence against women and girls, we will finally make tackling this a priority.

3.25 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson—let us see how far I get before the Division bell rings.

It is noteworthy that the tone of the debate has been extremely constructive and, in that context, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing it. When there is other business in the main Chamber, there is always a risk regarding the quantity of Members present in this Chamber, but that has been made up for by the quality of the contributions from all Members.

Violence against women and girls is never acceptable. I note the dedication across the House to ensuring that women and girls feel safe in our communities and that offenders who commit these heinous crimes, which have such a devastating impact on the lives of victims and survivors, receive just sentences that reflect the nature of their abhorrent behaviour. Of course, I share that sentiment.

As happens perhaps more often than not, I agree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), on a number of points, but I gently disagree and take issue with her suggestion of inaction from this Government. She knows the Government's strong record since 2010 in passing legislation to tackle a range of offences relating to violence against women and girls and in investing in the systems at police, CPS and court level to ensure that this is about not just a criminal-law framework but making sure that the system is responsive.

In that context, I pay tribute to the shadow Minister and her party. Just as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) highlighted, for example, the Children Act 1989, I will mention the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the first iteration of which I helped to

draft and introduce in 2019 with my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). We also have legislation tackling modern slavery and upskirting and strengthening sentences against stalking and harassment. However, I pay tribute to the Opposition, because when they were in government they, too, made great strides forward in tackling these offences—the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 springs to mind. It is important to recognise the cross-party work on these issues, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), because between 2010 and 2015 her party played its full part in that.

Tackling violence against women and girls is a priority for this Government and for the Prime Minister. I just paid tribute to the Opposition and, actually, it is important at this juncture to pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), for all the work that she did in this space both as Home Secretary and as Prime Minister. The Government are committed to addressing this complex issue from multiple angles, reflecting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth set out, the breadth of offences that could be considered in the space of violence against women and girls, while seeking to keep victims at the heart of all that we do. We are taking an ambitious, holistic approach to the issue of violence against women and girls, seeking to prevent such crimes from occurring and to improve outcomes for victims when they do.

I must be clear, as Members would expect me to be, that sentencing decisions are rightly a matter for our independent judiciary in individual cases. The Government, however, have a role in ensuring that the sentencing framework is just, proportionate and fit for purpose. We regularly review and scrutinise the maximum penalties for criminal offences to ensure that the courts have sufficient powers and flexibility to address all types of criminal behaviour appropriately. Of course, we take account of the views of victims, stakeholders and the wider public to inform our decisions. As always, I am grateful to Members for setting out their perspectives in the debate, reflecting not only their parties' positions but, I suspect, what they glean from regular contact with their constituents.

We have seen an increase in average custodial sentence lengths for a range of offences in this space. Since 2013—we often go from 2010—in the case of all sexual offences the average custodial sentence length has increased. The average length of a custodial sentence for the rape of a female aged 16 and over has increased. Average sentences for taking, possessing or distributing indecent images of children—that can shade into this space—have increased. For sexual activity with a family member under the age of 17 where the offender is over the age of 18, average sentences have increased, as they have in the case of voyeurism and the abuse of children through pornography and prostitution. So, over that period of time, we have seen an increase in the average sentences handed down by the courts for those crimes.

As I alluded to with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, violence against women and girls does not relate to any single criminal offence but encapsulates a wide range of behaviours from domestic and so-called honour-based abuse to sexual offences and murder. Many offences that are typically associated with violence against women and girls already carry

[Edward Argar]

high maximum penalties, as I have alluded to, including life imprisonment. For example, in the year ending June 2022, the average custodial sentence for adults convicted of rape was more than 10.5 years.

When deciding which sentence to impose, the courts take into account all the circumstances surrounding an offence, including any mitigating and aggravating factors. Provisions in the sentencing code must also be taken into account, as well as sentencing guidance issued by the independent Sentencing Council. In 2018, the council introduced an overarching guideline on domestic abuse that ensures that when any offence is committed in the context of domestic abuse, the court must consider that when sentencing, which can lead to tougher sentences.

The shadow Minister was right to highlight the apparent disparities in sentencing between murders—often with a knife—in a domestic context versus a street or other context. I suspect that the increase in the tariff for those who bring a knife to the scene was designed to tackle street knife violence and knife crimes, but its impact has been apparent disparities in sentencing for homicide, which is essentially an equivalent crime. I will turn to that in a moment.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for what he is saying. In my contribution, I gave the example of a lady who, after multiple beatings and abuse, may reach for a knife to protect herself. The sentence for that lady doing something to protect herself would be higher than what the perpetrator would get for attacking her. Will the Government look at that?

Edward Argar: One should always be cautious about generalising a particular crime from particular circumstances. When there is a particular set of circumstances, as the hon. Gentleman set out, a judge will be able to consider the context—the aggravating factors and mitigating factors—in determining appropriate sentencing. I am therefore a little cautious about drawing a general point from the scenario he sets out, because judges do have at their disposal the ability to recognise context as either a mitigating factor or an aggravating factor. I have faith in our independent judiciary to consider that when sentencing.

Of course, all that is not to say that the law should not be reviewed and updated. To that end, the Government have commissioned a review of the sentencing of domestic homicides to ensure that the law deals properly with such cases. That review, as the shadow Minister highlighted, was undertaken independently by Clare Wade KC. I am currently considering the recommendations made in that context. She rightly said that they were delivered a little late, but there were understandable reasons for that and we are now taking our time to consider them.

The shadow Minister was both kind in her comments and asked for reassurance that I would consider them expeditiously. I think I have summarised her position correctly, and I will certainly do that. I am keen that we bring forward the review and our response as swiftly as possible. It is an important and complex area of law, and I want to ensure that we give due care to considering all the implications of any proposed changes, or, indeed, what is in the review, before we bring forward a response.

I am sure Members will agree that victims must be confident that dangerous and serious offenders will serve an appropriate period of time in prison. That is why the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which came into force last April, ensures that those convicted of some of the most serious sexual and violent crimes, such as rape, manslaughter and attempted murder, spend a longer proportion of their sentence in prison. This better protects the public and gives victims the confidence that justice is being served. If an offender is given a discretionary life sentence, they will serve longer in prison before becoming eligible to be considered for release by the Parole Board. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth made the point about the shift to two thirds of that sentence rather than a half, which she was right to highlight.

I must reiterate that the landscape of violence against women and girls is varied and complex. It is not sufficient merely to seek a solution through increased sentences alone—I do not think any Member who has spoken today would suggest that was the only solution—which is why the Government have already taken target measures to prevent and address these appalling behaviours and support women and girls who are victims of such crimes. That is absolutely vital. The hon. Member for Bath said we need to look at this with a whole-system approach. It is not just about sentences: it is about police, victim support services, the CPS, the court process, and then, upon conviction, sentences and protecting the public.

Last year, the Home Office published the cross-Government tackling violence against women and girls strategy, and a complementary tackling domestic abuse plan. The strategy and plan aim to transform society's response to prevent offences, support victims and better pursue perpetrators, as well as strengthen the systems and processes in place that are needed to deliver those goals.

As part of the implementation of the strategy, the Government allocated £125 million to communities across England and Wales through the safer streets fund, and invested another £5 million in the safety of women at night fund. That funding has supported the delivery of a range of initiatives that seek to improve the safety of women in public spaces, including preventive policing to identify vulnerable individuals and potential perpetrators, safe-space initiatives, taxi-marshall schemes to help to ensure that women travel home safely, and education awareness programmes in night-time economy venues and higher education establishments. I will come to that in a moment.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth alluded to, Cornwall Council has been awarded £664,802 through the fourth round of the safer streets fund, to support the delivery of a range of interventions that aim to tackle violence against women and girls and antisocial behaviour. I pay tribute to her local council, her local police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, and her new chief constable, Will Kerr—who was sworn in last December—for the work they are doing on specialisation in tackling violence against women and girls.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington touched on the work being done by the safer streets fund in his constituency, and its success. If appropriate, I might have the opportunity to visit and meet him and the team at the hub at Number Forty to talk about their work locally.

Peter Gibson: The Minister is always welcome in Darlington. As it is the birthplace of the railways, all rails lead there.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and may well take him up on that. I hope to be able to visit him in Darlington. I pay tribute to him for his work on Sian's law, and his dedication and determination. We all know what a challenge it is in this place to see a private Member's Bill to fruition. I pay tribute to him for what that law will do to improve people's lives and safety. His constituents should be proud of him for what he has achieved with it.

Interventions being funded include the delivery of training for night-time economy venues, including Stamp Out Spiking workshops, bystander training and awareness-raising initiatives for students. In that context, it is an appropriate moment to briefly touch on spiking, which was raised by a number of Members. This is where my memory may fail me, but it is my understanding is that it is covered under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, in the context of administering a poison. That Act carries with it a maximum period of imprisonment of five years for that offence.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington alluded to, the challenge is catching the perpetrator, given the context of how such offences are often committed. There is the challenge of proving it and also, I suspect, an element of awareness-raising needed about the nature of the offence, so that there are more reports, enabling the police and others to better intervene.

Cherilyn Mackrory: The Minister is right that gathering evidence is absolutely key to getting a conviction for spiking. That is why, as part of—I think—the safer streets fund, kits are now available for night-time economy workers so that if somebody reports that they have been spiked, the testing can be done there and then, which will often help to lead to a conviction.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to highlight, for want of a better way of putting it, the innovation and thought going into finding ways to tackle what is a complex offence.

We have invested more than £230 million in implementing the domestic abuse plan, including more than £140 million spent on supporting victims and more than £81 million on tackling perpetrators. We have doubled funding for survivors of sexual violence and for the national domestic abuse helpline this financial year, and further increased funding for all the national helplines that it supports. In 2021-22, more than 81,000 people received support from Home Office-funded VAWG helplines.

As I have alluded to, we passed the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which introduced a range of measures, including —[*Interruption.*]

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division, so I have to suspend the sitting.

3.41 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Edward Argar: The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a range of measures, including a new wider statutory definition of domestic abuse, which recognises all forms of abuse beyond physical violence. It also created a new criminal offence of non-fatal strangulation, extended the offence of sharing private sexual photographs and films with the intent to cause distress—so-called revenge porn—and extended the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour to cover post separation. The majority of those measures are already in force.

Some hon. Members have alluded to the Online Safety Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament. There are some challenges with the scope of that Bill; parts of the Law Commission's report into these offences will not fall within scope, which limits what can be done in this context. However my starting point, notwithstanding the complexity of the Law Commission's report, is that where we can, where it is within scope and where it is possible—I think the DCMS Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said this on Report—we should implement at least some of its recommendations in a way that does not inadvertently have negative impacts. It is a complex package, and large parts need to be taken as a whole, but where we can take individual measures and use this legislative vehicle—we all know the challenges of finding a legislative vehicle for a whole package—I am keen that we do that so that we make at least some progress even if it is not 100%.

In the rape review action plan, published in 2021, the Government looked at how the entire criminal justice system responds to rape. We recognised that in too many instances, it simply has not been good enough. I take a particular interest in the rape review action plan, not just because it is a key part of my ministerial portfolio but because when I last covered this portfolio in 2018-19—I was Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle was at the Home Office and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) was Solicitor General—at the direction of the then Prime Minister, we looked at commissioning exactly that. I pay tribute to Emily Hunt for her work on that.

Our ambition was to more than double the number of adult rape cases being referred, charged and reaching court by the end of this Parliament, and we are making steady progress on our ambitions set out in the rape review action plan. The latest data show that the number of cases referred, charged and reaching courts has increased. In April to June 2022, there were 901 adult rape police referrals—more than double the 2019 quarterly average—and suspects charged by the CPS were up by two thirds on the 2019 quarterly average. In July to September 2022—a slightly different period of time—there were 467 adult rape Crown court receipts which, again, is more than double the 2019 quarterly average.

I will touch on two aspects of the comments of the hon. Member for Bath. I will pick up her points about Operation Soteria and Avon and Somerset police in a moment, because I had the privilege of visiting them recently. I would just be a little cautious. She referred to how we guarantee more convictions. The only reason I am a bit cautious is that we cannot guarantee convictions. We can guarantee charges, and I think that is what she meant—bringing more cases to court. I do not think it is the case that the CPS will pursue a case only when there is a guaranteed conviction, because it cannot

[Edward Argar]

guarantee that in any case. However, it has to meet the two tests for Crown prosecutors—the evidential test and the public interest test—in order to bring a prosecution. Due to the nature of these offences, those tests can be challenging.

Wera Hobhouse: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying that. I am glad that he corrected the record, because I was obviously going a bit free range. It is absolutely true that these institutions are independent. We cannot guarantee anything, but it is about increasing conviction numbers, and that is what we are here to talk about.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I suspected I knew what she meant, but I wanted to be clear for the record. To ensure that victims are adequately supported, the Ministry of Justice is also quadrupling the funding for victim and witness support services, which includes funding to increase the number of independent sexual violence advisers, ISVAs, and independent domestic violence advisers, IDVAs, by 300, to more than 1,000 by 2024-25.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Argar: I will just finish my point and then, of course, I will give way. In that context, we are recommissioning the rape and sexual abuse support fund to March 2025. In December 2022, we launched a new 24/7 support line for victims of rape and sexual abuse, meaning every victim now has the option of accessing free, confidential support, wherever and whenever they need it.

Jim Shannon: I welcome the Minister's commitment to extra support officers; I think he referred to about 1,000. Whenever there are delays in rape cases, for those people traumatised by the physical action against them and who may be fearful, I want to seek assurance that, when it comes to those extra staff, direct contact is made with those with a case pending, to ensure that physically and verbally—the two aspects met in relation to their cases—they do not feel let down by the service due to the delays. That is where I am seeking help.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman almost reads my mind. I was about to turn to a number of key elements that I believe have to form part of the response. Legislation forms a part, but it is very easy to say, "We must change the law." This is not just about altering law; it is about a whole system response. A key element, as the hon. Gentleman highlights, is the support available in a timely manner, to ensure people get the physical and emotional support they need, and the support through the criminal justice process, to understand what is happening and their rights, and to know they have someone they can trust who is there to talk to. He is absolutely right to highlight that.

Alongside the law and the support that needs to be in place, we need to look at how the different parts of the system work together, particularly the CPS and the police, as the hon. Member for Bath mentioned. She touched on Operation Soteria, which seeks to do that with the police and the CPS. I had the privilege of meeting the

hon. Lady's force recently. I was in Avon and Somerset and met the fantastic Chief Constable Sarah Crew, to hear about its stats.

Avon and Somerset was the first of the forces to embark on the Operation Soteria programme. There are now 19 forces at different stages. It is an academic deep dive designed to look at how to better improve outcomes at each stage of the system and to create a national operating model that other forces can adopt. Among the pillars of that work is close partnership working between the police and the CPS, so that both elements of that system understand what the other is doing, and what is required to have the best chance of a successful charge and court case, while understanding the impact on the victim and trying to minimise the intrusion.

In that context, I looked at the work being done around forensics and how to move to that target of 24-hour turnaround for a victim's phone when data is needed from it, and to ensure that what is taken is proportionate and is done, as it has to be, with the victim's consent and full understanding. It is up to them and they are in control of that process. The hon. Lady also touched on the importance of data in understanding the analytics and what forces can do in that space.

Crucially, the programme looks at the importance of specialist officers investigating the crime, and supporting them emotionally with the work they do, which is incredibly stressful. Lastly, the key element the hon. Lady touched on is the focus on the perpetrator's behaviour, rather than what has often been seen by victims in the past as an over-focus on their behaviour. Operation Soteria has huge potential in this space, but as hon. Members know, it is not the only element. It is a part of the solution, but no one thing alone will solve this problem.

Finally, several hon. Members touched on education, and attitudinal and cultural change. We have seen similar debates in this House in the context of the police in the light of the Carrick case, but more broadly it is about educating men and boys, and changing attitudes. This is perhaps more in the context of the Online Safety Bill, but yesterday I watched the incredibly powerful documentary "Asking for It?" by Emily Attack, in which she talks about her experiences. Of course, no woman is asking for it, but she bravely talks about the online abuse that she receives and the attitudes that it demonstrates. I pay tribute to her for her powerful and moving documentary, which shone a light on exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth has been talking about: the need for an attitudinal shift among not just men and boys, but society as a whole.

To conclude, in May last year we published our landmark draft Victims Bill, alongside a wider package of measures to improve victims' experiences in the criminal justice system. The Bill signals what victims can and should expect from that system by enshrining the overarching principles of the victims code in primary legislation. We carefully considered the Justice Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report and responded to it on 19 January, agreeing with a number of its recommendations to further strengthen the Bill. I look forward to the Bill being brought before the House for debate, and hopefully passage, as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I hope I have reassured my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth that the Government recognise and share her view about the importance of this issue. We are carrying forward our ambitious plans to tackle violence against women and girls. I have heard the points that have been raised and I will reflect upon them carefully. I look forward to updating the House in due course; I suspect we will have further debates.

4.27 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory: I thank all colleagues for their detailed and thoughtful contributions to what is an important debate for many people around the country. Some people perhaps suffer in silence without coming forward. I want them to feel empowered to come forward, because the agencies and the people who are supposed to be looking after them are there, and the processes are in place if they need to get a conviction in their case. It is important to send out the message loud and clear from this place that the Government are taking action, and the police, Crown Prosecution Service and the courts are working as quickly and effectively as they can to ensure that justice is done in all these cases.

It was difficult for me to write a speech without mentioning specific cases, but I purposefully wanted to do that. I know that all MPs present will have heard cases in their own constituencies because that is how prevalent violence against women and girls is in our country. If we speak with one voice in this place, we will do the most important thing, which was the Minister's final point. We will change society's attitude towards violence against women and girls from childhood onwards, so for future generations it will no longer be the scourge that it still is today. I know that we can do that on a cross-party and collaborative basis. I thank the Minister and I look forward to hearing from him on future developments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered sentencing for violence against women and girls.

EU Funding: Northern Ireland

4.30 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): In a moment, I will call Claire Hanna to move the motion. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the hon. Lady to wind up at the end.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered replacement of funding from EU programmes in Northern Ireland.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this issue and, I hope, get clarity for a number of third sector partners and other groups in Northern Ireland and, potentially, areas of opportunity for them. It feels like a very long time ago, but during the EU referendum campaign there were assurances that Northern Ireland would not lose out, doing well, as we did, out of the EU funds, which were based on need. We know that the phrase "take back control" resonated with many people, but it appears to mean taking back control from some of the funds that have traditionally underpinned progress in Northern Ireland and from local decision makers, and handing it directly to London, without any sense of a strategy that local groups can try to support.

In March last year, in the early stages of the community renewal fund, I had a Westminster Hall debate, in which various eyebrow-raising allocations from that scheme were addressed. I am afraid that several of the reservations that people had about process, strategy, co-ordination and transparency have been borne out. It is worth saying that these concerns are not held just by groups that are applying for funding or by my party. The Northern Ireland Executive, as was, adopted the position that the best delivery mechanism for the shared prosperity fund would be via existing structures. Invest Northern Ireland, our economy arm, was very clear that it believed that the funding would be best delivered in conjunction with the programme for government. And the think-tank Pivotal and other respected commentators and business voices made the same point. People are up for change. They understand that it is a reality, and they roll with the punches. But it has to feel transparent, and there has to be a sense of fairness and coherence and that there is more to these allocations than just the whim of Ministers in London.

As I said, Northern Ireland was a net beneficiary in the EU. That is not a secret and is not anything to be ashamed of. Those allocations were made on the basis of need and, in many cases, were a counterweight to the obvious challenges that Northern Ireland faced and to decades of capital underinvestment. That is not just a historical issue: in 2021, the average capital spend per head in Northern Ireland was £1,325, compared with a UK average of £1,407. Of course, all that has contributed to a failure to attract quality investment and foreign direct investment, and decent jobs. That is reflected in our rates of economically inactive people, which are substantially higher than those in other regions.

The founder of our party, John Hume, said many times that the best peace process is a job: the best way to enable people to have hope in their futures and see beyond the things that have divided us in our region is to have meaningful employment—a reason to stay, to get up in the morning and to work together. Those were

[*Claire Hanna*]

the opportunities that we saw in European participation, and that is why we continue to work so hard to protect our access to political and economic structures. Funds beyond the block grant, the EU funding as was and the promised successor funds, have been billed and are needed as additional, and they should be an opportunity to realise some of those ambitions, to remove barriers to employment and, in particular at the moment, to allow people to take advantage of the opportunities that the current very tight labour market offers. Unfortunately, that is not what we are getting.

Time is obviously short, so I want to focus on the loss of the European social fund and the European regional development fund and on the replacement, the SPF, and to touch on the levelling-up fund. It is worth clarifying that, as well as those assurances back in 2016, during the referendum campaign, the Conservative party manifesto in 2019 committed to replacing the ESF in its entirety. Northern Ireland got an average of £65 million a year from the ESF and ERDF in the period from 2014 to 2020, with Northern Ireland Departments having the power to manage that in line with UK strategy. That allowed them to align projects that they funded with regional and local strategies, ensuring complementarity and targeted outcomes.

The scenario now is that the UK Government and Northern Ireland Departments are essentially two players on the same pitch, in the same space, delivering the same sorts of projects. That has a built-in inefficiency and means that the results are less than the sum of the parts. That overlapping inevitably applies to monitoring, too. How are we supposed to measure the impact of different interventions in areas like skills if the scheme is only one part of an equation in which all the other Departments are trying to do similar things? It seems that it will be impossible to disaggregate that. The governance is sub-par and the quantum is less, too.

By comparison with the ESF and the ERDF averages, the allocation for the shared prosperity fund in Northern Ireland is £127 million over three years, so we are losing on average £23 million per year from that scheme. That has created this massive gap for funded groups, many of whom just cannot hold on. It is not like in the civil service; people have to be put on protected notice or face closure. Again, there is nothing co-ordinated about any of this. It is not even the survival of the fittest—that the strongest and best organisations will continue—because it is largely the luck of the draw on where organisations are in their funding cycle. Again, this is one more downside of the abandonment of devolution. Engaged and responsive local Ministers could monitor the situation and be flexible and creative with in-year allocation, match funding and bridge funding. They could, in short, protect us from the deficit created by Brexit and this devolution override.

I want to touch on how all this affects specific groups. The NOW Group is a highly regarded project that works across Belfast and further afield, supporting people who are economically inactive because of a disability get into employment. It has 17 years of ESF funding and runs high-profile facilities. If anyone has been in the café in Belfast City Hall, they will have seen NOW Group workers. They help hundreds of people with disabilities into all sorts of sectors, including leading corporates

and the knowledge sector. It is a safe bet that any credible funder will keep backing a project like this, but the assurances are just not there. Reserves cannot last forever and, of course, smaller organisations will not have such reserves. In that project, 52 people are at risk of being put on notice and another 800 people with disabilities will be left with no service.

Mencap in south Belfast and far beyond has run ESF projects on social inclusion for decades and was well on track to exceed the target set by ESF of supporting 13,000 people by 2023. It is concerned by how limited the scope of SPF is compared to what they were able to do under ESF. The East Belfast Mission described well what is at stake:

“Our programmes have a long track record of being more successful than government initiatives”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the debate forward. I work with the East Belfast Mission regularly in my office, so I understand its work and its success rate from the people it helps in my constituency. The mission tells me, as I told the hon. Lady, that without this funding stream it will not be able to continue to have the success stories it has and that that will hurt individuals and families. Like the hon. Lady, I look to the Minister for some assurance that the funding it has received over the past few years can be continued. With that, we can help more of our people over the long term.

Claire Hanna: The mission itself captured that. It talks about its staff being based in local communities with lived experience that helps them understand the specific difficulties people face. It says:

“Many of the people we work with have faced societal and generational barriers to employment, through illness, trauma or other issues. Our projects help break the cycle and raise up our host communities.”

It says that if it loses the fund, it will not be able to provide certainty and will

“lose irreplaceable experience which has been built up over decades.”

This is not just a Belfast issue by any stretch of the imagination. Dozens of projects across Northern Ireland, particularly those supporting younger people, women and minorities, are at risk. First Steps Women’s Centre is a vital part of the community sector in Mid Ulster, working to integrate new and minority ethnic communities, providing crèche facilities to support women back into work and signposting people to other partners who can help them with the multitude of issues they may face.

I want to specifically ask the Minister how the Department ensures that the projects it is funding are aligned with Northern Ireland’s democratically agreed priorities—agreed by the Executive with all five parties—absent a formal role for those Departments. How do the Government propose that groups, such as those I have described, that are facing this essentially bureaucratic gap are supposed to address it? If the gap is not going to be addressed, what are the people who use those services supposed to do instead?

I want to address the widespread concerns about the levelling-up fund. It is a mighty slogan—who does not want to see things levelled up?—but unfortunately, like a lot of slogans of the last few years, it struggles a bit when it comes into contact with implementation. People perceive it as pitting communities against one another,

with distant Ministers picking winners seemingly at random. Again, the initiative started badly for us. The initial allocations fell short of the promised 3% of the UK pot. That target was laid out in the strategy document, which seemed to acknowledge the traditional capital shortfall in Northern Ireland but has failed to address it. The fund was initially conceived as a scheme for England with a Barnett consequential, but it has evolved to be more centralised than was promised.

The same paper highlighted the issues that there would be given the fact that local governance structures in Northern Ireland are different from those in Britain, but it has failed to develop a more collaborative approach to mitigate those issues. The same overlap and duplication issues with the SPF pertain here, despite requests from me and others to consider the north-south dimension and co-ordination on this issue. That misses real opportunity to maximise value by co-ordinating with the Irish Government, who have, for example, a £400 million capital fund in the Shared Island unit.

Lessons from the first round of levelling up, which were very well telegraphed, do not appear to have been taken on board for round two. Although the projects that got the nod last week are no doubt good news for the relevant communities, nobody has any clue about what the winning ingredients in those bids were, or how others might have similar success in future applications. We are advised that the Northern Ireland bids were assessed against three of the four criteria set out in the prospectus, namely strategic fit to the economic case and deliverability.

The winning bids are in the public domain, but the other applicants are not. In the interests of transparency, reassurance and learning for future schemes, will the Minister therefore share details of the original Northern Ireland shortlist of projects and their ranking, as presented after the assessors' moderation meeting? Will she also advise what, if any, additional considerations informed the Minister's decision? Can she clarify whether the funding decisions were taken by the Minister alone? It has been suggested by some applicants—I have struggled to confirm this—that the gateway pass mark that was used in England, Scotland and Wales was 75%, and that that was dropped, after applications were submitted, to 57%. I hope that the Minister can confirm whether that is the case.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. In my constituency of Strangford, an application was put in for the Whitespots park, an environmental scheme at Conlig. It is shovel ready—the boys could start it tomorrow—but we have missed out on two occasions. She is expressing her concerns over what is happening in her constituency; I echo those and support her in what she says.

Claire Hanna: That again illustrates the confusion that people have about what was selected. Will the Minister confirm whether any criteria additional to those specified were applied? Were they applied consistently to all projects? Will the transparent list that she will publish include any changes in ranking that occurred as a result of new criteria?

Again—for future learning—it was announced that there will be a round three of levelling-up funding. An enormous amount of work goes into the applications, including, as people will know, many thousands of

pounds on proposals and engaging the strategy board. Will the Department therefore develop a reserve list from round two applications? That could prevent some groups from having to run up the same professional fees and pouring in the same time, particularly when they are being left in the dark about the criteria. Further, can the Minister clarify what consultation was held with the Northern Ireland Departments and other funding bodies to address the overlap in applications under levelling up and other schemes? Finally, does the Minister think that the spread of applications in Northern Ireland is appropriate?

A lot of these issues are very technical, but they are vital to achieving the things that we all want to achieve for Northern Ireland and for progress. They are also vital to people having some faith in this progress—that they have not had their eye wiped, essentially, by funds being promised, removed and not adequately replaced. That is not the case at the moment. People see this as a net loss from what we enjoyed before Brexit, and that should concern the Department.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We have until four minutes past 5, but it is not essential to take up all the time.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Robertson. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) for securing this important debate, and for the constructive way in which she has engaged with the Department and I on the UK shared prosperity fund. I know that she is and has long been a committed champion for the many voluntary groups, businesses and communities in her constituency that have previously benefited from, if not relied heavily on, EU funding. She has been a keen advocate to ensure that that support continues under the UK shared prosperity fund.

The hon. Member mentioned the NOW Group, and I am pleased that she did. As she knows, the NOW Group has been in receipt of ESF funding, and has also recently accessed the community renewal fund as well. We have worked with Maeve Monaghan, the CEO of the NOW Group, to help to design the UK shared prosperity fund planning as part of that partnership group. Hopefully her feedback there has definitely been helpful, and she feels that it has been taken on board as we have designed the programme.

In my response, I hope I will be able to provide some clarity on the next steps regarding the roll-out of the UKSPF in Northern Ireland; the steps we have taken so far to engage charities and community groups currently in receipt of Government support; and the progress we are making in our ambition to level up communities in Northern Ireland and, indeed, across the whole of the United Kingdom. I will make reference to the levelling-up fund and address as many of the questions she raised as I can. I am not sure my hand was working fast enough to write them all down, but if I have missed any I will follow up in writing following the debate.

As hon. Members will know, we published the prospectus for the UK shared prosperity fund back in April last year. It sets out how the fund and its £2.6 billion of

[*Dehenna Davison*]

funding will work on the ground. Effectively, it will replace the European regional development fund and the European social fund with a simpler, smoother and less bureaucratic approach to supporting communities right across the UK. We all know that bureaucracy is something that community groups have raised with us, so as a Government we have very much taken that on board.

In that sense, it is fair to say that the UKSPF is a central pillar of the Government's levelling-up agenda and our ambition to bring transformative investment to places that have gone overlooked by successive Administrations for too long. We want to use the funding to support people in skills, helping the unemployed move into high-skilled, high-wage jobs—I know that is something specifically mentioned by the hon. Member for Belfast South in her speech. We also want to use the funding to help the growth of local business and invest in communities and places to help to build pride in place. We know that having pride in the place that someone lives and has grown up in is a crucial part of the wider levelling-up agenda.

For Northern Ireland, that means £126.8 million of new funding for local investment and local priorities up to March 2025. Crucially, that fulfils the promise we made that the UKSPF would match the funding allocated to Northern Ireland through EU structural funds.

I know we have set out how the approach will work in some detail already, both in the prospectus and previous spending rounds, but I will quickly recap it for everyone here. The UK shared prosperity fund is set to ramp up over the coming years, so that total domestic UK-wide funding of the ERDF, ESF and UKSPF will at least match receipts from EU structural funds. It will reach £1.5 billion per year across the UK in 2024-25, when Northern Ireland will receive £74 million. It is important to note that before that date, when ERDF and ESF funding is still being delivered—albeit in smaller amounts—the UK shared prosperity fund tapers in for Northern Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales too.

I need to put on the record that the Government fully recognise the need for the funding to be properly tailored to the projects and organisations that add real economic and social value in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Belfast South mentioned some of the projects in her own constituency, and I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for talking about how one of those organisations, the NOW Group, has helped his own constituents. We all know that a good, local charitable organisation can do wonders for our communities, and that is specifically why we are so keen to support them through this funding.

To ensure that we tailored the funding appropriately, we ran a comprehensive programme of workshops and engagement with Northern Ireland partners last year. That included businesses, voluntary and community groups and councils, so that we could collect the widest possible views on the priorities for the fund and how it could best work in concert with other opportunities in Northern Ireland. We also established a partnership group comprised of all the organisations I just mentioned, along with the higher education sector and the Northern

Ireland Office, to advise us on how the fund could be best utilised. We have built further on that engagement since then.

Throughout the process, we have offered the Northern Ireland Departments the opportunity to formally participate in shaping the fund, but, sadly, that has not proven possible.

Claire Hanna: Does the Minister know why that has not proven possible? It is because under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which is essentially the constitution of Northern Ireland, the Department is not equality-screened—unlike the Northern Ireland Office and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. It is not able to legally operate and to run equality impact assessments, which are the law in Northern Ireland. That problem was telegraphed, but the Department has not taken adequate steps to address it. That is why those Departments have not been able to be involved.

Dehenna Davison: I will follow up in writing on that point. Having spoken to Sue Gray, one of our super officials, who has been outstanding in her engagement, I know how closely officials have been working with the Northern Ireland Finance, Economy and Communities Departments, maintaining regular contact as our plan has developed. That engagement continues.

Where have we got to? Drawing on insights from the partnership group, and from wider engagement, we published an investment plan just before Christmas last year. That sets out how Northern Ireland's allocation will be spent and the impact we expect it to have. It supports the leading needs and opportunities in Northern Ireland, addressing high levels of economic inactivity, promoting entrepreneurship and innovation and strengthening pride in place. I am pleased to say that the plan has been given the seal of approval by our partners on the ground and is now being implemented.

Our first competition, for £42 million, which is roughly a third of the total UK SPF allocation, is focused on helping more economically inactive people into work. Many MPs, Assembly Members and other stakeholders have rightly made the case for prioritising this funding and the voluntary and community organisations that deliver it. I am sure the hon. Member for Belfast South welcomes this provision and the benefits it will bring not just to the organisations that receive it and the individuals they will help, but to Northern Ireland's wider economy.

We are also working with councils in Northern Ireland to bring forward early communities and place projects, as well as a joined-up service for entrepreneurs seeking to start a business and create jobs. Pending further discussion with the Northern Ireland civil service, we may also commission Northern Ireland Executive Departments, or their arm's length bodies, in the design and delivery of the fund. I am sure hon. Members will join me in encouraging their fullest involvement.

Part of this work is about ensuring that we mitigate issues for organisations as the European programmes we have discussed draw to a close. That issue has been raised with me by organisations not just in Northern Ireland but all around the UK; it is something that our Department and Ministers in other Departments have been incredibly focused on. With that in mind, we have been able to reprofile the SPF by moving funding from

2022-23 to 2023-24, so that it better reflects funding needs. I know that this is an issue that my predecessors were asked to consider by many partners in Northern Ireland, and I am pleased we have been able to make real progress in this area. It demonstrates something crucial, which is that SPF is not a fixed fund; it can and should flex to meet the evolving needs of the people of Northern Ireland—and it has been designed to do so.

It goes without saying that we will continue to engage with partners, including the Northern Ireland Departments and hon. Members on both sides of this House, on the design and operation of the fund, so that it delivers for businesses and communities in Northern Ireland and throughout the Union.

If we take a step back from the UK SPF to talk about other funding, which the hon. Member for Belfast South did with regards to the levelling-up fund, Members will know that Northern Ireland Departments have always provided funding alongside the European regional development fund and the European social fund. While we recognise the challenging budget circumstances Northern Ireland faces, the funding provided by UK SPF is only ever part of the answer. It is right that the Northern Ireland Departments continue to invest in provision that they have previously supported; that is something I think all of us would encourage.

The Government also want to play their part, making sure we are contributing towards building a brighter Northern Ireland. That is why, alongside the UK shared prosperity fund, we have used a wide range of other funds to spur growth, regeneration and investment. Those include: the community renewal fund, which backs 30 locally led, innovative projects to the value of £12 million, and the community ownership fund, which has so far supported six local communities in Northern Ireland to take ownership of assets at risk of loss, with a spend of £1.3 million. There are other important schemes and investments, such as £617 million for city and growth deals covering every part of Northern Ireland, and our new deal for Northern Ireland providing £400 million to help boost economic growth, invest in infrastructure and increase competitiveness. We are also investing £730 million into the Peace Plus programme, ensuring a total budget of almost £1 billion—the biggest peace programme to date. Through that package of investment, we will achieve significant, visible and tangible improvements to the places where people work and live.

Jim Shannon: The Minister mentioned £400 million. I do not expect an answer today—it might not be possible—but how much of the new deal money has been used or set aside?

Dehenna Davison: I do not have an answer to hand, but I will commit to follow that up and provide that information.

I will touch on the levelling-up fund, because we do not have much time left. Questions were raised about the shortlist, rankings and considerations. Much of the information around the considerations has been set out in the technical note that has been published. That will provide some information, and I am happy to provide a link.

The hon. Member for Belfast South asked about consistent application. Ministers were keen to ensure there was consistent application of the decision-making

framework to ensure that they were not cherry-picking the winners. It was designed to reflect the scores and value of the projects that were selected. She also asked whether the decision was made by me alone, as a Minister. She knows that the fund is a joint fund across multiple Departments, ergo that was not the case. Various Departments are involved in the decision-making process.

The hon. Lady asked about round 3 of the levelling-up fund. We have indeed committed to a round 3, but I am not yet able to provide more details about that fund, because the conversations are ongoing and decisions are yet to be made. However, as soon as we have made the decisions and announced how round 3 will work, I will share that information with her.

I want to conclude by saying a huge thank you to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. I hope this is the start of more constructive engagement between us as we both fight for what is best for the people of Northern Ireland.

Claire Hanna: I have been kept right on the Standing Orders, but I thought I would get back in. I appreciate the Minister's approach and her enthusiasm. As I said, I do not doubt that the projects and other things that are being funded are laudable, but they are not additional to what we had. They are less than what we had, which was less again than what we needed. They are not equality-screened in Northern Ireland's traditional way, so people do not have confidence in that regard. Ultimately, the fundamental question is: who decides, and on what basis? Frankly, I am none the wiser after this discussion, and that is what is concerning people.

Even if the shortlisting is not published, we all know the 10 projects that got the results. However, there are concerns that the published criteria were not applied in a very direct way overall, as the Minister will be aware. I know these things are not always straightforward, but the metrics are clear—they are in the public domain. I am sure most Members have poked around in the Bloomberg data about different constituencies and how they are performing relative to 2019 and relative to one another, and that will show that, in most cases, Northern Ireland constituencies continue to fall behind, including those that did not receive any levelling-up funding, while constituencies that were ahead are staying ahead. I am none the wiser, and I hope we can have a follow-up meeting, but it is not just a case of me being satisfied about transparency; it is also about those who have applied and invested hours and thousands of pounds in producing good applications. We are no more confident that detached Ministers' have not decided.

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I should have said that, as part of my package on the levelling-up fund, full written feedback will be provided to all applicants, which I hope will provide some guidance on where bids perhaps fell short. There is also the option of follow-up meetings with officials from my Department to go through that in more detail, which I hope will satisfy some of the concerns around the scoring.

I will quickly wrap up now. Again, I thank the hon. Lady for her commitment to helping to improve the prosperity of not only her constituents but the whole of Northern Ireland. As the Minister for Levelling Up, I am committed to that. If all parts of the UK are not

[Dehenna Davison]

firing on all cylinders, the UK as a whole is suffering. Ultimately, we need to make sure that every region and every community is levelled up and can benefit from the maximum opportunities and value of that community for the sake of our entire nation.

Question put and agreed to.

Artificial Intelligence: Intellectual Property Rights

5 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): The debate can technically run until 6.04 pm.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential impact of artificial intelligence on intellectual property rights for creative workers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am delighted to have secured a debate on such an important and dynamic topic.

The rapid rise of artificial intelligence seemingly knows no bounds. Each week, a new AI tool is launched that drives further change across business, science, the arts and everyday life. When I applied for the debate, no one had heard of ChatGPT, but now it is writing speeches for the Chancellor. AI can undoubtedly bring significant advancements across a variety of fields, from aiding medical diagnoses to predicting environmental disasters. AI is transformative. It goes further and faster than humanly possible. Quite rightly, it has been identified as one of the UK's key growth industries, and it is vital that Government policy supports digital innovation to position the UK as a world leader in this field.

But just as AI brings many benefits, it also carries significant risk. AI is rapidly permeating the creative sector, creating visual art, prose, music and film at a pace and cost that humans are unable to match. For creatives, the risk of AI-generated material flooding the market gives rise to significant regulatory and ethical challenges, but these can be overcome, or at least mitigated, with well thought out and considered policy that balances the legitimate concerns of creatives with the need to foster digital innovation. I am therefore pleased to bring this debate to Parliament to discuss those challenges on the record and to give a voice to the millions of creative workers across the UK whose careers will be impacted by AI.

We have all seen how quickly AI can redefine industry norms. We must start exploring how we balance our digital and creative future. What is the outlook for our musicians, journalists, visual artists, publishers and performers in an increasingly computer-powered world? With the help of the Chamber Engagement Team, I conducted a survey of over 200 creative workers to hear how AI was impacting their work. Many said that their work, which they own the copyright for, had been used without their consent by AI companies. One respondent, Richard, noted that, in recent weeks, almost 600 of his copyrighted images had been scraped off the internet to train AI platforms, for which he has not received a single penny. Another survey respondent, Henry, said:

“Why should an AI company be able to blatantly copy and capture the ‘essence’ of how I compose music and monetise it, for free?”

This bypassing of copyright has resulted in creatives feeling that AI is undermining their skills and devaluing the creative process, as well as having a detrimental impact on their income.

The respondents to my survey are not alone. A significant volume of active legal battles regarding AI and intellectual property is currently going through the courts. Intellectual

property rights and copyright laws are fundamental to the success of the UK's world-leading creative industries. They not only protect the integrity of original work, but provide a revenue stream to ensure that creatives can make a living from their work. Copyright therefore has both an economic and a moral importance for creatives. But rather than looking to ensure current protections are upheld and enforced, last June, the Intellectual Property Office published proposals for an all-out exception to copyright for text and data mining in order to promote AI, with no opt-out for rights holders.

Under these proposals, companies across the world would be able to use UK creatives' material to produce clean, new material that they could sell and even obtain copyright for without having to gain permission from the creator or pay for a licence. This would see a huge transfer of value from individual creatives to tech companies and strip creatives of the opportunity to refuse or grant permission for the use of their work by AI companies, placing thousands of jobs within the creative sector under threat.

These proposals to dramatically widen the text and data mining exception have been met with staunch resistance from the creative community, which has emphasised not only their economic harm but the damage that the erosion of intellectual property rights will do to industry as a whole by stunting future creativity. UK Music has referred to the text and data mining exception as "music laundering". Equity, the trade union, has said that the proposal

"could be a huge assault on the property rights of performers."

The Publishers Content Forum has said that the proposals would disincentivise further investment in high quality data. The Design and Artists Copyright Society, which represents visual artists, has warned that

"this change will have far-reaching detrimental consequences".

It has urged the Government to

"look again at how the policy objectives"

of supporting AI-driven technologies

"can be better met without undermining creators' rights."

After hearing evidence from some of those groups and many others, the Lords Communications and Digital Committee found that the IPO's text and data mining proposals were "misguided" and advised that they be dropped "immediately". I was therefore encouraged yesterday to hear the Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), tell the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that she was "pretty confident" that the text and data mining exception would not be going ahead as proposed last summer.

As the Intellectual Property Office falls within the remit of the Minister responding to the debate, I am hopeful that he will confirm that the Government will not proceed with the all-out exception to copyright. That news would be welcomed across the creative sector, but a number of questions remain to be answered. Why were the proposals ever signed off? Who asked for them? What issue were they trying to solve? On what basis was it deemed necessary to adopt such a broadbrush approach? What evidence is there that the copyright exception will benefit the UK economy in general and the promotion of AI specifically?

If the proposals are indeed not proceeding as originally intended, how will the Government ensure that stakeholders are thoroughly consulted on alternative proposals to avoid a repeat of last summer? How will Parliament be consulted to ensure that the correct balance between promoting our creative sector and developing AI can be achieved? Both sectors are strategically important to the UK.

Many of the creative workers who responded to my survey expressed a clear desire for robust enforcement of current copyright protections, with any form of open access text and data mining arrangement offered on an opt-in basis for creatives. One respondent, Ian, said:

"If musicians and composers wish to sell their rights to software companies to train their systems then that is their right, but the default should be that it is illegal to use any music without permission, and it must be enforced robustly."

There does not seem to be a shortage of free data online. Google has this week revealed a new AI tool that is able to generate music from a short textual description using only work that is not protected by copyright. Other survey respondents advocated stricter rules relating to copyright infringement and tougher legislation to improve copyright protection of individuals and companies.

What is the solution? How do we balance the legitimate concerns of rights holders with the need to foster an environment that stimulates innovation in AI? The answer cannot simply be plucked out of thin air. It needs to be worked out in detail after careful discussion between Government, officials and stakeholders from across the full breadth of the creative sector.

The creative industry, like all sectors, will have to adapt to accommodate AI, but the industry is capable of and already making progress with that. Creatives have largely accepted that AI-generated content will have its place in the market, and they are already using AI to enhance their work by driving efficiencies and extending their reach to new markets. It also gives rise to a number of new licensing opportunities to generate value for creatives. However, a solid regulatory framework is essential to protect their rights and ensure that they can take part in value creation and retain control over their work.

My team and I have spoken to a number of bodies across the creative sector, whom I thank for sharing their insights. It is clear that the passion that drives our creative industries is still well and truly alive. That is not to say that the creative industries will not face challenges from technological advancements. AI can operate faster and more efficiently than humans, but it will never be able to draw on the lived experience of humans.

The arts bind us together as a society. They create a collective identity and a shared cultural experience. The connection drawn between reader and author, listener and songwriter, and artist and viewer cannot be replaced by a robot. The value, beauty and joy of the arts is that they reflect the human experience. How sterile and lonely our lives would be if human life were only to be captured on servers and in pixels. How deprived we would be if algorithms served us up only what they thought we wanted to hear and see and we no longer had the opportunity to encounter something completely different.

We must also remember that creators are individuals who often dedicate their lives to their craft. History teaches us that as manual workers are replaced by machines,

[Sarah Olney]

skills atrophy as demand for them falls. People work hard to develop a skill because they hope to earn a living from it. If the economy no longer demands skills in the creative sector, they will start to decline.

Amy, a composer who responded to my survey, said:

“We train for many years, often at our own expense, to develop and hone our skills in order to share our music. Yet with every week that goes by, we see our music being devalued at every turn. We should be embracing musicians, composers and artists, not trampling over them with the click of a button.”

If creative industries no longer present a viable career option, we risk deterring future entrants to the sector and depriving future generations of creative skills. Another survey respondent, Oliver, noted:

“AI threatens having a creative industry that continues to breed and create new ideas.”

We must embrace, rather than resist, AI developments. Unleashing innovation in AI is central to economic growth, but that objective cannot be pursued at the expense of creatives. We cannot let AI replace the human creators who have built our world-leading creative industry, nor can AI content be produced off the backs of hard-working creatives without their consent. I urge the Minister to confirm that the Government will not proceed with the text and data mining exception proposed last summer, and I would welcome his assurance that all relevant stakeholders will be properly consulted in the development of alternative proposals to balance the needs of our creative and digital economy.

5.11 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I do not wish to speak for a long time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on her excellent opening speech. She made some powerful and important points.

Last year, I was briefly the Minister for tech and the digital economy, and this issue came within my remit. It sits between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister's Department, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I was surprised then, and I am surprised now, by the result of the Government's consultation. The recommendation that was made is the most extreme of the options considered. It is unsurprising when we read the responses that, on the whole, rights holders complained that the general exemption was a bad thing, and researchers and developers who wanted to do it thought it was a good thing. However, the Government's response seems to completely dismiss the concerns raised by rights holders and entirely favour the people who wish to exploit this data for their own benefit.

It is quite clear that people are seeking to extract value from data that other people have created in order to create products and tools from which they themselves will benefit commercially. There are already lawsuits in the music industry between musicians who claim someone else has listened to and copied their work and sought to benefit from it commercially. For example, someone could take the back catalogue of every track ever written by the Beatles to learn the techniques and methods. From that, they could create new music composed in the same style, as if the group was at its peak of writing

and recording today. They would do so without the consent of the rights holders of that content, and they would make money out of it for themselves.

We can easily see how that kind of passing off could occur at scale, without any licence or exemption, or any benefit for the original creators. We should be concerned about the impact that will have on the creative economy. Many experts believe we are already very close to the day when AI will be capable of creating a new No. 1 download track or even a hit movie.

Sarah Olney: The example of the Beatles is an excellent one that we can all relate to. However, the Beatles have already generated a great deal of wealth from that back catalogue. Does the hon. Gentleman not think it would be a greater threat to new and emerging artists, who perhaps have not yet achieved the reach of the Beatles, that their copyright could be breached and their music replicated before they have even had a chance to establish themselves as an artist and as the correct owner of that work?

Damian Collins: The hon. Lady is completely right. It has an impact on new artists in two ways. First, they are competing against AI-generated generic music from legendary artists. Secondly, the technology could be used to spot new and emerging artists who may be gaining in reputation and popularity, to quickly copy their style and techniques by analysing the data and text from their works, and creating new works from that. It opens the door to the machines really taking control of the creative process, to the detriment of original artists.

The important point of principle is that when people have created works, they should have the say on how those works are exploited. It is detrimental for another organisation that sees value in that work to take it, mine it, create something from it and claim it as its own. It would be rather like saying, when radio launched, “Well, we don't really think that we should pay artists any money for playing their music on the radio because the radio creates a new audience for their work; more people are likely to buy records as a consequence, and charging for music would inhibit the growth of radio and radio stations, which have a huge benefit to the country.”

As technology has developed, we have decided to recognise that, with technological advances, we must reward the creators as well. Their work is exploited through those technologies to entertain and engage people, and it has a value too. If we deny them access to that value, we will restrict their work and the future work that will come from it.

I think that it is very important that there is at least an opt-in or an opt-out. The Intellectual Property Office cites other jurisdictions in the world where exemptions exist. In its preamble, it cites the EU as one of them, but what it does not say is that there are pretty fundamental differences between the way that it works in the EU and the proposals for the UK. The IPO has also taken the most extreme option of having very general exemptions.

It is very important to think about the remit of AI, because we can already see how important AI will be to shaping people's experiences of content. Probably the best live example of AI at work today is in the way that people play video games—the way that they are designed around the user as they play them—or the way that content is recommended to people on social media platforms.

That is AI-driven recommendation tools learning from the things that people like and engage with—how long they look at things and what they listen to—and pushing new content at them based on that.

When we think about metaverse and virtual-reality experiences, that will all be based on machine learning and data mining to create new experiences for people. If people doing that mining can benefit from the creativity of others to create those experiences and create those new images, and can do so without any recourse or compensation to the original creators, then that is a big power shift in the creative economy, away from creators to people who drive systems—away from the artist to the data broker and data miner.

As we see the central role that AI will play in shaping people's experiences in the future, it would be a big mistake, at this point, to completely cut out the creatives and see their data and content exploited by somebody else without any compensation at all. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. This is an urgent issue that requires a new think.

5.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for setting the scene so well, and the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for contributing so well. When I listen to them, I am very aware that their knowledge of this subject is much greater than mine. However, I wanted, as I always do, to try to give a Northern Ireland perspective on it, because of its importance to creative workers and the creative sector.

The lockdowns were incredibly hard for so many businesses, but the creative arts were the forgotten business. I am pleased and proud to have been a member of Ards Borough Council for some 26 years prior to coming here. We had a massive focus on the creative arts. We promoted them greatly and got much out of them, as did our communities. During the covid crisis, for some three years, our musicians, actors, playwrights and theatre workers were unable to go to work, and the only way of keeping things going was to put those things online for people to enjoy and get a taster of.

Prior to the lockdowns, it was estimated that the creative industries—which are not quite the same as, but strongly overlap, the culture and heritage sectors—made up around 5% of businesses in Northern Ireland, employed around 25,000 people and accounted for 2.7% of Northern Ireland's total gross value added, contributing some £1,088 million. That is no longer the case, as the lockdowns have decimated the sector. The hon. Member for Richmond Park put forward the case for the sector and the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe reiterated its importance, as will others who speak. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister will say.

Thankfully, the lockdowns have ended, yet the threat to the creative industry has not lessened. Indeed, the proposals have escalated the threat. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park has put it so well:

“These proposals would be damaging to creative workers, such as in the music and publishing industries, as AI companies would be able to use their works without permission or payment. This would lead to a huge transfer of value from the creative industries to AI companies and also potentially damage the competitiveness of our world-leading creative industries”

That is the thrust of the issue. I am sure that the Minister will, as always, give an excellent response; perhaps he can solve the concerns and worries that the hon. Member for Richmond Park and others have. I look forward to that. I am given to understand that the Government and the Minister are taking this matter seriously. I know that there was a ministerial response to a question from the hon. Member for Richmond Park in December last year, yet it is right and proper for the importance of the issue to be underlined once more in Westminster Hall today.

For any computer system to be able to shred through data and text and circumnavigate the proper methodology is tantamount—I will use a Northern Ireland example, and we all know the product—to allowing someone to walk into the Tayto factory and steal the ingredients for the world's best crisps, which of course Taytos are, and then say, “Well, they shouldn't have put the ingredients on the outside of the packet!” I am being a wee bit facetious, but I am trying to illustrate the point in a way that all can relate to. The information is there, yet for someone to be able to walk in and take the specific ingredients without paying is not acceptable, and never can be.

I will conclude, because I am conscious that the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) wants to speak. I am on record as being supportive of our creative industry, and this protection must be in place. I know that the Minister has been listening carefully; he always responds to the questions that we pose, and I am pleased to see him in his place. I know that he will ensure that the Government enhance protection for the only source of income that many creative workers have. A world without art is a world without light, and the Government must ensure that the light continues to shine brightly from the shores of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together.

5.21 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am mindful of the need for the wind-ups to take place, so I will try to be brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on introducing the debate and rightly stressing that there is a balance to be struck. AI will bring huge benefits to our society and to the cultural sector—indeed, the sector has been using it for many years—but it needs to have rules. We cannot have an ideological move towards tearing up rules with a deregulation agenda. Every industry needs regulations, whether they are electricity regulations or financial regulations. They benefit not only consumers and, obviously, the workforce, but companies, which get a degree of certainty about the areas in which they operate.

Colleagues have looked at some of the technical aspects and some of the specific effects on the industry. I want to put the issue in a slightly broader context. The music industry, which has rightly drawn attention to a number of the difficulties here, is one of the wider cultural industries in this country. It forms an enormously powerful ecosystem that is important not just in and of itself, and not just because of its economic benefits, but because of its wider societal benefits. It is one of the things—it is certainly not our weather—that makes the UK an attractive place to visit and work, not necessarily just in the cultural industries, but particularly in industries

[John Spellar]

with more mobile international talent. Where are those people going to work? Would they rather work in Frankfurt or in London, Manchester or Edinburgh? These are very important considerations for the UK more widely.

This is not just about the technical side; the creatives are the key. Why did Disney recently change its chief executive? Because it felt that it was getting out of touch with its creative talent. Rupert Murdoch, a practitioner of realpolitik if ever there was one, famously said that “content is king”. By bringing those things together, we form a creative ecosystem that feeds on itself. That is why so many film companies are coming to the UK—because they are able to call on such a wide range of talent. It would be extremely unwise of us to create a deregulated sector, causing those considering where they should locate to ask, “Is my content safe there? Are there other jurisdictions where it would be better protected?” Those are the sorts of issues that we need to be discussing and focusing on.

We should also recognise that, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, it is not just those at the top. Key to the Planning (Agent of Change) Bill, which I introduced, was that nobody started by playing the O2; they started off in small venues and they built up. But people need to be able to sustain themselves. They need to be able to get an income so that they can move from playing part-time in the pub at the weekend to become semi-professional musicians, failing sometimes but then coming back. Not everyone makes it, and others decide it is not for them, but there are those who come through, which is why we had support from so many major stars for that campaign.

I urge the Minister to see that this is important not just for audiences or performers, but for the country. We see adverts at airports about “GREAT” Britain. One of the things that makes us great is our creative sector, across the board. We should be very careful about undermining what has been, for several centuries, one of its fundamental protections: the ability to protect one’s creative content, in order to benefit financially but also to have control over how it is used and to prevent it from being misused.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. I call John Nicolson, who has five minutes.

5.26 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing the debate.

As I was preparing for the debate, I was thinking about the pace at which artificial intelligence is advancing. All of us, I am sure, have seen news reports these last few weeks of free-to-use artificial intelligence sites being able to muster, at inhuman speeds, reams of error-free text or digital images in response to a simple command from a user. Vain social media users—some of them politicians, perhaps—were asking bots to touch up their profile photos. Students had been asking AIs to write their university essays. So I thought, “Why not?” I asked an AI to write me a speech about the impact of AI on the creative industries.

I discovered that I could tell the AI what tone I wanted for the speech. I was offered a choice of “poet” or “philosopher”. I went for philosopher. The AI got into its stride. “In the past,” it wrote,

“creative tasks, such as writing, editing, and design, were completed by humans, often with the help of specialised software and tools.”

“Humans.” “In the past.” It is almost chilling, Mr Robertson.

My automated pal continued. It was on a creative roll and it wanted to talk about creation. I quote:

“One of the most significant impacts of AI on the creative industry is the potential to automate”

—a split infinitive, you will notice—

“many of the creative tasks that were previously done by humans.”

Back to me again. I am not sure about other hon. Members, but I think creativity without the creative process—without the humans—just seems so soulless. On the upside—this must be music to the ears of some free-market zealots—my AI speechwriter continued:

“This automation of creative tasks can drastically reduce the cost of labour and increase production rates. Not only can AI automate creative tasks,”

it concluded,

“but it can also provide valuable insights and analysis that can help inform the creative process. AI-driven algorithms can analyse large amounts of data and provide insights into customer behaviour, audience trends, and market needs.”

So it seems it is not just creative jobs at risk; AI has already automated tech lobbyists.

Speakers have already focused on the impact of copyright, whether on established geniuses or on musicians who aspire to great careers. Could it be that AI in this context is just a euphemism for automated plagiarism? By its nature and design, AI is derivative. The algorithms driving the AI, and many others, are used to trawl the web, sucking up music, words and images that it reimagines or conflates according to preset guidelines. That all happens in a matter of seconds with little or no regard for copyright and the moral rights of the original creators.

What do we risk losing when we take the human out of humanities, if we fail to safeguard the art and livelihoods of our creators, or if we sacrifice spontaneity for speed? What would become of the poetry of Jackie Kay, the paintings of Alison Watt or the music of Julie Fowlis? Would their art ever have been imagined by the electronic soul of an AI non-being? I think we all know the answer to that.

5.30 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing this vital debate on the potential impact of artificial intelligence on intellectual property rights for creative workers. I thank all the Members who took part and observe that although each Member who spoke before the Front-Bench speeches was from a different political party, they were united in condemning the proposals, and for very good reasons.

From the Brontë sisters to the Beatles, from Jane Austen to Arlo Parks, from David Bowie to Sam Fender, we are and have always been a country of creators. More than 3.2 million people in the UK are employed

in creative sectors, and Government figures estimate that our creative industries contributed £115 billion to our economy before the pandemic. It is a great pity, then, that the Government's creativity seems to be limited to finding excuses for their misbehaviour and their lack of active engagement in our great industries. To the Conservatives, it appears that regulation is a dirty word, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) pointed out, the right regulation can support and enhance our great industries. The digital may present a new technological frontier, but our creative industries and the AI sector do not need to be in conflict with each another. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) emphasised, AI can support and has huge potential for the creative industries, but creators need the ability to enforce their rights over their work.

The IPO's proposals include the introduction of a new copyright exception in order to promote AI, as we heard. That would remove the need for a licence and cut the opportunity for performers or creators to be remunerated for their work and talent. The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's report on the future of the creative industries called that proposal "misguided" and asked the Government to halt the proposals. Not only would they undermine the basic principles on which our creative industries are based, but they could enable international businesses to scrape content created by others and users for commercial gain without payment to the original creators here in the UK. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it could very much undermine our competitiveness in this key area. Last week, the singer, Rick Astley, filed a lawsuit against another musician for the impersonation of the classic hit, "Never Gonna Give You Up". We are talking about a charter for the automation and industrialisation of such impersonations. I fail to understand why the income of our artists, musicians and creators is being risked in that way.

As part of Labour's industrial strategy, we will shape and regulate AI technologies for the public good, increasing productivity, delivering better public services and improving the quality of life for all. That is how we grow our AI sector, not by throwing creators and artists under a bus. The UK is already well positioned to benefit from the transformation that AI can bring, but we need to look ahead to future risk, such as the potential for opaque AI systems to diverge from our intended objectives.

What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the next Adele or the next Stormzy does not have their work stolen and sold by an algorithm? For what reason has the IPO—for which he is responsible—not held discussions with the music industry, and will it now do so following this debate? What discussions has he had with the Minister responsible for the creative industries to assess the impact of the proposals? Finally, did the IPO make an estimate of how much the proposed exception will contribute to the economy, whether in AI sectoral growth or in creative industries' loss? If the Minister is going to say that it will not go ahead, which I would welcome, he still has to explain why he allowed our important creative industries to languish in such doubt and uncertainty, and to promise that in future he will take a more active role to ensure that technological change supports our great industries.

5.35 pm

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (George Freeman): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and to have the chance to put the record straight in answer to the sensible points and questions made in the debate.

I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). Had the debate not been scheduled, I would have hoped for someone to secure such a debate in order to give me a chance to explain the situation. I also thank all colleagues from across the House, from all parties, who have spoken this afternoon. I think we have covered most of the points.

It is a particular pleasure for me not only to be back in this role as the Minister responsible for AI, the Office for AI and the Intellectual Property Office, as part of my wider role as Minister for science, research, technology and innovation, but as someone who years ago ran a very basic AI drug discovery business. I mean, it was very basic: it was an algorithm with an elastic band connected to it compared with the technologies of today. It deployed basic early AI to look in the pharmacopoeia of "failed medicines" to find those that are actually dream medicines for certain segments of the population, trying to reprofile them.

I have therefore seen for myself how AI, properly deployed in an ethical framework, can be a huge driver for not only drug discovery, but better medicine and public services. I am also from a family with a lot of interest in the creative industries—my wife is a musician, artist and writer, my brother works in film and I have published a book—so I am very aware of the balance that has to be struck and that colleagues across the House have spoken about this afternoon.

I think it is fair to say, as a number of colleagues have, that AI is coming at us as a transformational technology at a pace that we have not had to deal with before in Government. The pace, the halving of technology cycles, and the speed at which it is maturing and reinventing itself are creating some big and interesting challenges for established industries, new industries that are taking shape and creators across all the different spheres of the creative industries. We need to get the balance right.

In case the Division bell goes or we have some other interruption, let me make it clear that when I returned to office, the Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), and I met promptly to look at the issue. We have written around to make it clear to other Ministers that the proposals were not correct, that we have met with a huge response, which should have been picked up in the pre-consultation before the proposals were announced, and that we are looking to stop them.

We will have a rather deeper conversation with the all-party group, whom I met yesterday, and with experts in both Houses and in the industry—creators, platforms, publishers, broadcasters and digital intermediaries—to ensure that we do not rush precipitately into a knee-jerk move that is wrong. We must try to anticipate the challenges that are coming and to get a regulatory framework in the UK that can keep pace with the pace of the technology and the issues it raises.

[George Freeman]

I reassure the hon. Member for Richmond Park, who secured the debate and asked a specific question about this, that we will not be proceeding with the proposals. I will go on to answer the question that I know the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) is going to ask me, which is, “How did this happen and what are the lessons from it?”

John Spellar: I thank the Minister for that welcome announcement—I presume it was an announcement? I understand that this has to go through a number of stages of inter-departmental consultation, but could he give any idea of when a definitive policy will be produced?

George Freeman: Theses have been written on whether it was an announcement with a capital “A” or a small “a”. I do not think I could be clearer that the two Ministers concerned agree that the proposals submitted, approved and published did not meet with the expected support. I hasten to say that they were published after I left Government, and it was a period of some turmoil. One of the lessons from this is to try not to legislate in periods of political turmoil.

The key bit of the right hon. Member’s question is: when will we see proposals? My strong instinct is that we should draw breath, take a chance to go through all the feedback from the last few months, and then, in rather more deep consultation with all the various interests, see if there are proposals that might command the support that is needed.

John Spellar: I am sorry to be pedantic. The Minister refers to discussions between him and the Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), which is enormously welcome. As he is speaking from the Dispatch Box, is that now Government policy?

George Freeman: The right hon. Member is well aware, as a veteran of these things, that for something to be a formal announcement on policy, a Government write-round has to go through the various Committees. That process is under way. Until that is done, I cannot formally confirm that it is collective responsibility Government policy, but the two Ministers concerned say that the proposals have not met with the support that was expected. [Interruption.] He has just said that that is good enough for him. I hope that it will be good enough for all those listening.

As colleagues have highlighted, the real issue is how we get the balance right. That is why AI is considered by the National Science and Technology Council, our senior Cabinet Committee, which is chaired by the Prime Minister and looks at the big issues that science and technology raise. I sit on that, and it is there to grapple with the big geopolitical and ethical issues that some of these technologies are raising. That is why we are working this year on both a creative industry strategy, led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and an AI regulatory strategy, which will set out our approach to regulating AI.

As the global AI revolution accelerates, we need to be aware that we are working in a global environment, and to set a regulatory framework that does not drive AI

creators and investors out. We are a leading AI nation. We have an opportunity to set the regulatory framework in a way that reflects the values that this country is respected for all around the world. I think the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) knows me well enough to know that I do not believe that there is a huge dividend from scrapping all the regulations that were put on the statute book during our membership of the European Union. There is, however, a very strong case for clearing up our regulatory statute book; there is an awful lot of dead wood and daft regulations. It can be very unclear.

I have led the charge in my party for saying that a lot of the Brexit regulatory opportunities are to set the frameworks in new and fast-emerging areas, whether it is AI, autonomous vehicles, nutraceuticals or satellites. The creation of regulatory frameworks that command the confidence of both consumers and investors helps to position this country as a global testbed for innovation, drives international markets, attracts investment and establishes the UK’s leadership in standards.

As Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, I am passionate about our leaning into that sort of leadership, as well as getting rid of some of the dafter regulations, such as the one that says that coffee machines have to turn off after 30 minutes. I do not know which Committee passed that, or nodded it through one day a few years ago. The truth is that our regulatory framework is incredibly complex for regulators, innovators and investors to navigate.

Chi Onwurah: I think the Minister will find that rather than our leading the way on AI regulation, both the US and the European Union have already made strides in AI regulation that it would be good for us to respond to. I wonder whether he inadvertently made an announcement with regard to the National Science and Technology Council, which he said the Prime Minister has chaired. Previous Prime Ministers have chaired it, but it was my understanding that the new version was not going to be chaired by the Prime Minister. Is it chaired by the Prime Minister?

George Freeman: Unless an announcement has been made in the last few weeks that I have missed, yes. He has the right to depute the chairmanship of a particular meeting, but the point is it that it is the senior Committee of Cabinet dealing with science, technology and innovation. I am delighted that the Prime Minister reinstated it very early on—as soon as he took office.

The argument of the Intellectual Property Office last summer, presented to Ministers in good faith, was that if we look at what is going on around the world, there are other jurisdictions that have moved quickly to put in place similar text and data mining exemptions—in the EU, the US, Japan and Singapore. They are structured differently, but all are wider than the current UK exemptions. I do not want anyone to think that we were going out on a massive limb; we were making a move that was in the spirit of that made by other countries. There is an irony here, in that we were an active player in helping to shape some of those EU regulations. The challenge and opportunity for us, now that we are out of the EU, is to take the ambitions that we were pushing when we were in the EU and reach them more quickly and agilely—possibly even more digitally—in a new regulatory framework outside.

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend is right that there are exemptions in other jurisdictions, but none is as wide as the ones that we have set. The most comparable jurisdiction is Singapore. While Singapore has many great qualities, it is not a net exporter of music, nor does it have a creative economy on the same scale as ours. We have been discussing the Intellectual Property Office's response to a consultation, in which it recommended introducing these measures. Am I right to take from what the Minister said that the Government are now minded not to introduce these measures, and so that for the time being, the status quo prevails until such other proposals may be considered?

George Freeman: That is exactly right. I will come to some of the lessons from that in a moment, but I am happy to confirm that.

In the consultation carried out by the Intellectual Property Office, a number of consultees made the case that UK copyright law was too restrictive, and was impeding investment in AI. The point was made about text and data mining exemptions in other countries, but I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe. He has a distinguished record in these affairs as a former Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and through his career. The regulations must be proportionate and reflect the economy that we are regulating. We have an incredibly strong digital creative industry and non-digital creative industry, and we must ensure that that is appropriate.

We heard rights holders arguing that no change should be made in the UK, and we also heard not just the big AI and tech firms but researchers in the life sciences and social sciences making the case that many of them were increasingly finding problems, not with negotiating with the obvious rights holders when it was clear who they were, such as universities, but with material available on the internet. They were finding it difficult to find the person to get permission from them, and that was holding back research, especially when working with multiple rights holders. While I am happy to concede that the proposals perhaps were not correctly, fully or properly drafted, there are some issues that are still worth pursuing. The Intellectual Property Office was asking the right questions, but it is more complex than the original proposals suggested. That is why we have committed to continuing that consultation.

Yesterday, I was with the all-party parliamentary group. I have instructed the Intellectual Property Office to share its analysis of the consultation findings, so that we can sit down together and go through what the issues are that we still need to deal with, and can get the balance right. As was said by a number of colleagues from across the House, when I say "get the balance right", there is clearly a difference between those small and sometimes voiceless creatives—whether analogue or digital, but particularly if they are not in the digital creative economy—because some may want to completely opt out and say, "I just never want to see my image turned into an avatar, ever." People need the ability to just opt out. People also need the ability to license, to be on the front foot, and to negotiate terms, which happens.

What the Intellectual Property Office picked up on from both sides is that there is a middle ground: there are those without a strong organisational platform through which they can set out the terms on which they are

prepared to have their material accessed, and there are digital creators using intermediary AI technologies to create digitally, which is a legitimate activity, and who are struggling to find that interface and make it work. It is in that space that we particularly need to look to get the balance right between our creative, digital and AI sectors. Many in those sectors are small, extraordinarily dynamic and entrepreneurial.

In Coventry, I recently met a fantastic, almost underground coding community of teenagers doing amazing things. We need to be careful to ensure that the creative industry can flourish, and that the rights of the creators, who may or may not want their material to be used, are not trampled over. If they do want their material to be used, that takes us to a second issue: fair remuneration. I have stood here and discussed this with the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) before. There are issues about rights and about remuneration. How should we ensure that small creators are properly remunerated? There are issues that we need to deal with. As a number of colleagues have said, this is about the balance between rights, responsibilities and remuneration in the world of digitalisation of content and creativity.

There are two big lessons from last summer. One is that data is important. I have started a conversation with the Intellectual Property Office to ask if we could not do more to ensure that we have better datasets on exactly what the situation is with new, emerging revenue streams, new providers and new creators. The industry is moving very fast, and when it comes to which bits of the market are working well and which are not, there is a slight lack of data on which to base policy. Creating market conditions in which everyone can have confidence is the real challenge for the Government and for me as Minister.

I tentatively suggest that there may be another lesson, which is that we should harness the power of digital technologies and digitalisation when doing consultations. I am not quite suggesting that we should have run the AI-ometer over the consultation responses, but given the number of analogue Government processes, harnessing smart intelligence systems may provide us with a good way of identifying better clusters of feedback in consultations, and help to democratise the process of consultation. It is a slightly left-field point, but I am trying to signal that as we think about these industries, we have to ensure that we are not just talking to the same people, but driving new methods of consultation to keep up with the pace of the industry.

I have probably detained you, Mr Robertson, and other Members long enough. I hope it is clear that we have listened and heard, and we are absolutely committed to making sure that we get this right. Although the Government need to be on the front foot in anticipating the regulatory framework and getting it right, the proposals have clearly elicited a response that we did not hear when they were being drafted. We have taken the responses seriously. The Minister responsible for this area—my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster—and I have made it clear that we do not want to proceed with the original proposals. We will engage seriously, cross-party and with the industry, through the IPO, to ensure that we can, when needed, frame proposals that will command the support required.

5.54 pm

Sarah Olney: Thank you for your excellent chairing of the debate, Mr Robertson, which it is a pleasure to wind up. I am delighted to hear that the Minister has committed, as far as he is able, to withdrawing the current proposals, and that he will consult widely with all parts of our creative industry before putting forward any further proposals. I am sure everyone in this room looks forward to hearing what those are.

This debate has, perhaps, been a reflection of why our creative sector is such a stronghold of the British economy. We have been debating this cutting-edge technology in the ancient surroundings of Westminster Hall. That really points out the context and the source of so much of the uniqueness in British creativity, across all parts of the UK.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for bringing his expertise and experience in this area, which really contributed excellently to the debate. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for his contribution. I found it rather

chilling, actually, that the phrase that sprung out at me was “software and other tools”—presumably those other tools are paintbrushes and musical instruments. It highlights that we cannot allow our human input and skills to be swallowed up by AI and, as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire said, the very derivative nature of what we will be served up as a result.

I thank not only all Members who participated in the debate, but all the industry sector groups who spoke to me and my team about the issues they are experiencing, and particularly the artists, musicians and performers who responded to the survey. It has been incredibly useful to really understand this issue. I am particularly grateful to Megan Harding, in my office, who brought all this together and helped me with the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential impact of artificial intelligence on intellectual property rights for creative workers.

5.56 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 1 February 2023

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Register of Overseas Entities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): The Minister for Business, Energy and Corporate Responsibility, my noble Friend Lord Callanan, has today made the following statement:

The register of overseas entities is a vital new information tool for our law enforcement agencies and is part of the Government's comprehensive and ongoing programme to tackle and prevent economic crime and illicit finance.

The Government legislated for it within weeks of the invasion of Ukraine and, with the assistance of Parliament, expedited the regulations needed to launch the register, which opened on 1 August 2022.

Yesterday marked the end of the six-month period for overseas companies and other legal entities in scope to register. By 5 pm yesterday, about 19,665 overseas entities were successfully registered and there were approximately 5,054 pending registrations that were submitted before the deadline. As such, the UK now has a valuable new database for law enforcement and others to access.

Throughout this period Companies House has been working closely with the three UK land registries to ensure that overseas entities are aware of and comply with the new requirements. Companies House sent 57,000 notice letters to all entities in scope in August, including duplicate letters to those that had multiple contact addresses recorded at the land registries. In October 2022, HM Land Registry issued a notice letter to the entities registered in England and Wales to alert them that a restriction notice had been placed on their land. In early January 2023, Companies House issued further reminders to those that had not yet registered.

Companies House has endeavoured to ensure that it has the best possible information about those that have not yet complied, matching registrations against data from the land registries. While some entities may have changed their name, not updated the land registry records or may no longer exist, Companies House continues to research and to work with company registries in those jurisdictions with the highest number of in-scope entities to determine the status of all unregistered entities.

An estimated 7,000 overseas entities have not yet complied with the provisions of the register. From today, those entities will find that they cannot freely lease, charge or dispose of their land. This is a significant and effective sanction for non-compliance. Data about unregistered entities may also provide valuable information for law enforcement.

Companies House is now assessing and preparing cases for additional enforcement action. These cases will be prioritised using an intelligence-led approach and Companies House will work with those entities making a genuine attempt to comply. Warning letters

will shortly be issued to all unregistered overseas entities. Those wilfully failing to comply may find themselves subject to financial penalties or criminal prosecution.

The Government are also announcing that, through an investment of up to £20 million of allocated spending on economic crime, new anti-money laundering intelligence teams will be created to tackle the misuse of UK companies, corporate entities and property. Intelligence analysts and data scientists will be recruited over the coming months. They will play a key role in supporting the prevention, detection and disruption of money laundering, terrorist financing and kleptocracy through identifying, analysing and disseminating intelligence about high-level threat actors and enablers of those activities, to a wide variety of law enforcement and regulatory agencies. There will be a strong focus on networks controlled from overseas, for example those operating from former Soviet states. The new functions will be based within Companies House and the Insolvency Service, and will work closely with the National Economic Crime Centre and their private sector partners. The teams will use and support the existing powers of both agencies and new powers being introduced by the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill.

[HCWS538]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Transfer of NHS Digital into NHS England

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Lord Markham) has made the following written statement:

Today, NHS Digital legally becomes part of NHS England, to create a single, central authority responsible for all elements of digital technology, data and transformation for the NHS.

Laura Wade-Gery was commissioned by the Government to lead an independent review of how we can ensure digital technology and the effective use of data is at the heart of transforming the NHS.

Her report "Putting data, digital and tech at the heart of transforming the NHS", published in November 2021, recommended merging the functions of NHS Digital into NHS England, to provide a single statutory body for data, digital and technology to provide the right leadership and support to integrated care systems.

NHS Digital, since its creation as the Health and Social Care Information Centre, has been a powerful force for change in the NHS and guardian of its key data IT and data systems. These will be transferring to NHS England, together with its expert staff.

All the protections of people's data which existed in NHS Digital will apply in NHS England. Rigorous internal controls will continue to ensure that data is used and shared safely, securely and appropriately to deliver high-quality care, understand and protect the health of the population, effectively plan and improve services, and research and develop innovative treatments, vaccines and diagnostics.

This is an important step in bringing together in a single place, the essential systems and programmes to digitally transform the NHS, and to harness the full potential of data. This will enable health and social care services to use digital and data more effectively to deliver improved patient outcomes and address the key challenges we face.

[HCWS539]

Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 1 February 2023

TREASURY

Non-domestic Energy Support

The following are extracts from a statement on non-domestic energy support on 9 January 2023:

James Cartlidge: Only a few days ago we heard from the BBC that in 2022 we had a record level of wind production in this country producing electricity: almost 27%, with just 1.5% from coal compared with 43% from coal in 2013.

[Official Report, 9 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 320.]

Letter of correction from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) during the statement on Non-Domestic Energy Support on 9 January 2023.

The correct statement should have been:

James Cartlidge: Only a few days ago we heard from the BBC that in 2022 we had a record level of wind production in this country producing electricity: almost 27%, with just 1.5% from coal compared with 43% from coal in 2012.

James Cartlidge: It may be that, because of the huge amount of support that has been needed by our country, particularly since the pandemic—we have seen £400 billion-worth of support, and potentially close to £100 billion on energy—a figure such as £5.5 billion does not look as large.

[Official Report, 9 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 322.]

Letter of Correction from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) during the statement on Non-Domestic Energy Support on 9 January 2023.

The correct statement should have been:

James Cartlidge: It may be that, because of the huge amount of support that has been needed by our country, particularly since the pandemic—we have seen £400 billion-worth of support, and potentially close to £100 billion on energy **and cost of living**—a figure such as £5.5 billion does not look as large.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 1 February 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	325	ATTORNEY GENERAL—continued	
Access to Justice.....	326	Support for Ukraine's Judiciary	329
Criminal Justice System: Backlog.....	331	Violence against Women and Girls:	
Domestic Abuse: Prosecution Rates.....	332	Prosecution Rates	325
Legislative Competence of the Scottish			
Parliament	332		
Prosecution of Hate Crime	333		
Roles of Lord Chancellor and Law Officers	327	PRIME MINISTER	333
Serious Fraud Office: Prosecutions for		Engagements.....	333
Fraud and Bribery	332		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 1 February 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	16WS
STRATEGY	15WS	Transfer of NHS Digital into NHS England.....	16WS
Register of Overseas Entities.....	15WS		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 1 February 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	3MC
Non-domestic Energy Support	3MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 8 February 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 1 February 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 325] [see index inside back page]

Attorney General
Prime Minister

Hillsborough Families Report: National Police Response [Col. 345]

Answer to urgent question—(Chris Philp)

Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 [Col. 361]

Statement—(Dr Coffey)

Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) [Col. 378]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Scotland (Self-Determination) [Col. 379]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Neale Hanvey)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

UK Infrastructure Bank Bill [Col. 382]

Programme motion (No. 2)—(Scott Mann)—agreed to
As amended, considered
Read the Third time and passed

Backbench Business

Raising the State Pension Age to 68 [Col. 411]

Motion—(Nigel Mills)—agreed to

Sudden Cardiac Death: Young People [Col. 431]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Bee-killing Pesticides [Col. 93WH]

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Diagnosis [Col. 113WH]

Violence Against Women and Girls: Sentencing [Col. 119WH]

EU Funding: Northern Ireland [Col. 142WH]

Artificial Intelligence: Intellectual Property Rights [Col. 152WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 3MC]
