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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 2 February 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 2 February 2023*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Public Procurement

1. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reform public procurement.

[903398]

2. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with relevant stakeholders on the potential impact of the Procurement Bill on (a) economic growth and (b) innovation.

[903399]

#### **The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):**

The Procurement Bill is being considered in Committee in the House of Commons. The Bill will create a new public procurement regime that will make it simpler, quicker and cheaper for suppliers, including small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises, to win public sector contracts. In developing the proposals for the new procurement regime, the Cabinet Office has worked with hundreds of organisations, and economic growth and innovation have been at the forefront of our minds.

**Stephen Hammond:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He will know that UK major projects have had, at best, a mixed history of both procurement and contract management over a long period. How will this Bill embed external expertise in the procurement process and IT productivity systems in the contract management process?

**Alex Burghart:** My hon. Friend is right to raise that question. The Cabinet Office is producing comprehensive guidance and a programme of training for contracting authorities, with support for sharing best practice. This will complement efforts that the Cabinet Office is already making to support commercial best practice, including through the contract management capability programme and the provision of a suite of playbooks that provide advice on sourcing and contracting.

**Duncan Baker:** My residents in North Norfolk often think that Westminster is a long way away from them. Can my hon. Friend tell me how the Procurement Bill

will enable businesses in my constituency—there is an incredible range of talent and innovation there—to bid for the £300 billion-worth of services that the Government procure every year?

**Alex Burghart:** I am pleased to be able to tell my hon. Friend that the Bill includes a specific duty on contracting authorities to recognise the particular barriers that SMEs face. Other measures will also benefit SMEs, such as the strengthening of prompt payment requirements, with 30-day payment terms applying contractually throughout the public sector supply chain; a single digital platform, so that bidders only have to submit their core credentials once; and new transparency requirements.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive answers to the question. Wrightbus in Northern Ireland is an example of where we could contract domestic companies and expand our economy, as opposed to going international. What steps will the Cabinet Office take to ensure that we prioritise domestic contracts within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the devolved Assemblies?

**Alex Burghart:** I cannot comment on the specific contract that the hon. Gentleman raises, but he will know from the debate we had in Westminster Hall the other day that the Bill introduces provisions that will mean that contracting authorities publish their pipeline and can publish advance notices of procurement, which will enable businesses and suppliers to get ready for local contracts.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, the Procurement Bill in its current form does very little to prevent a repeat of the VIP scandal that, sadly, contributed to almost £10 billion-worth of personal protective equipment being written off by the Government. We know that sunlight is often the best disinfectant, so will the Minister support our amendment to ensure that any Minister, peer or senior civil servant involved in recommending suppliers under direct award must publicly declare any private interest in that supplier's success?

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Lady will know from the many debates we are having on this subject that transparency is a key element of our new regime, which replaces the old, outdated EU regulations and will ensure that there is sunlight throughout the procurement process, from start to finish.

### Ministerial Code

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [903400]

17. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the level of compliance with the ministerial code. [903417]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):** The Prime Minister expects all Ministers to act in accordance with the code and demonstrate integrity, professionalism

and accountability. He has appointed Sir Laurie Magnus as the independent adviser on Ministers' interests to advise on matters relating to the code.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am tempted to use a word favoured by the Deputy Prime Minister in response to that, but I will not. I am not interested in when people were formally informed or notified about things. I would just like to know when the Prime Minister knew about the bullying allegations against the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab)—was it before he appointed him as Justice Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister?

**Oliver Dowden:** I am sure the hon. Lady was in the House yesterday and heard what the Prime Minister said, which was that as soon as he became aware of formal complaints against the Deputy Prime Minister, he took action. That action involved appointing Adam Tolley, who is a very experienced employment KC, to look into those allegations. It is appropriate that we have a proper process, and the trigger for a proper process is a formal complaint.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** It is all fine and well to talk about a "proper process", but there are reports that staff working for the Deputy Prime Minister felt physically sick and even suicidal as a result of the alleged bullying. Does the Minister accept that in any other workplace the Deputy Prime Minister would have been suspended, pending investigation? Why is it one rule for the Deputy Prime Minister and one rule for workers anywhere else?

**Oliver Dowden:** The Government take any complaints of bullying and harassment very seriously. That is precisely why the Prime Minister appointed Adam Tolley to conduct this investigation. Opposition Members have constantly asked me when we are going to appoint an independent adviser so that we can have a proper process, and now that we have appointed one and we have a proper process, they say that we should perfunctorily sack the person. They cannot have it both ways.

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab):** Trust in politics matters, and Ministers have a responsibility to uphold standards. The list of Ministers' interests on the website is currently 247 days old and has not been updated since last May. It is not even an accurate list of Ministers, by a long way. Can the Government not be bothered to update it, or is there something to hide? Does the Minister agree that there is absolutely no reason why Ministers' interests should be less transparent than those of any other Member of Parliament?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the hon. Lady will have seen, the Prime Minister has appointed an independent adviser, who is going through those Ministers' interests. I can assure her that before May they will be fully published, in accordance with the rules.

**Fleur Anderson:** I, like many others, was surprised to see that it took the head of the investigation into Richard Sharp's appointment at the BBC a week to realise that there was a conflict of interest and recuse himself from the role. What will the Minister do to tackle this chumocracy around the Prime Minister? Is it not time he adopted

our proposal for an independent integrity and ethics commission to finally restore the accountability and professionalism that the Government promised?

**Oliver Dowden:** I was involved in the appointment to which the hon. Lady refers, as the Secretary of State. We had a clear and transparent process, with independent selectors choosing that person. Indeed, the matter was looked into by the Select Committee, which found that it was an excellent appointment. The Government stand by the appointment, and Richard Sharp, as the chairman of the BBC, is doing an excellent job.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** Transparency International's corruption index has recorded a sharp fall in the UK's score. This has been affected by factors such as the VIP lane and the claim that 40 potential breaches of the ministerial code were not investigated. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree with the international business leaders that under his Government, the UK is more corrupt?

**Oliver Dowden:** I completely disagree with the assertion from the hon. Lady. This Government have upheld high standards of transparency, and we have advanced transparency since we came into office. The idea that this country could be compared to the sort of states to which she refers is completely preposterous.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I did not refer to any states. When will the Prime Minister appoint the anti-corruption champion? This vacancy has gone unfilled for seven months. Given the sharp fall in international views of the UK's level of corruption, when will this person be appointed?

**Oliver Dowden:** I simply do not recognise the kind of caricature being pushed by the hon. Lady. Of course we will make that appointment, but this Government have taken steps throughout their time in office to increase standards of transparency and accountability.

#### Scotland Act 1998

4. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the use of section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 on the constitution. [903401]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** Alas, I am a mere junior Minister and I rarely get to talk to my illustrious Cabinet colleagues, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government used section 35 very carefully and very reluctantly, in order to preserve the balance of powers between our countries.

**Patrick Grady:** If the Government were so determined to resolve their dispute with the Scottish Government, they would publish the amendments that they say would make the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill acceptable to them. Is not the reality that the Tories are prepared to veto and undermine the elected Scottish Parliament because they never really wanted devolution in the first place?

**Alex Burghart:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, section 35 of the Scotland Act is part of our constitution. He will also know that it is now for the Scottish Government to bring forward a Bill that addresses the adverse effects set out in the statement of reasons. Once again, the nationalists do not wish to take responsibility.

#### Support for Veterans

5. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support veterans and their families with the cost of living crisis. [903402]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** Tackling inflation is this Government's No. 1 priority. We have a plan that will help to more than halve inflation this year and lay the foundations for long-term growth to improve living standards for everyone, including veterans.

**Gerald Jones:** Many in the armed forces community are being forced to turn to charities such as the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes for cost of living support. The Royal British Legion has awarded £1.9 million-worth of grants in the three months to January alone. Rather than leaving charities to plug the gap, will the Minister outline how he will ensure that veterans and their families right across the UK are not forced into hardship by increased living costs?

**Johnny Mercer:** There is no question of forcing people to go to charities to bail the Government out. Veterans have access to a range of support sources to help with the cost of living: the energy price guarantee, the cost of living payments, the relevant council tax rebates and veteran welfare services. I pay tribute to the RBL for all the work that it has done.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): I really do not think that the Minister recognises just how much some veterans are struggling to make ends meet. Of the £1.9 million-worth of grants awarded to veterans by the Royal British Legion, 88% were for basic energy bills, with 90% of applicants being of working age. How does the Minister expect the veterans community to trust him to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran when his Government have forced many of them to rely on charities and to choose between heating and eating?

**Johnny Mercer:** I am not going to take any lessons about what it is like to be a veteran in this country, particularly for our most vulnerable veterans. A suite of measures are available to help them. Under this Government, there have been light years of change in what it means to be a veteran. I was a veteran under the Labour Government and we are miles away from that place, but I am always willing to do more. I have concerns about these issues, but we are doing everything we can to improve the cost of living for those who need it.

#### Industrial Action: Public Services

6. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the operation of public services during industrial action. [903403]

13. **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the operation of public services during industrial action. [903413]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):** All Departments are responsible for their own business continuity plans and have well-established contingency arrangements. The Cabinet Office's Cobra unit has supported Departments to develop those arrangements to minimise the impact on public services. Yesterday, for example, more than 600 military personnel undertook action to support a smooth flow at the border. I pay tribute to the work that they and others did.

**Elliot Colburn:** As if the ultra low emission zone were not bad enough, Carshalton and Wallington residents have had to deal with strikes affecting the transport network, despite the Mayor's promise of zero strikes. There is a very important point to be made about safety as a result of the ongoing impact on the transport network. Bus stops and railway stations in London face dangerous overcrowding when strikes are on. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the safety of the remainder of the transport network will be a key factor when minimum service levels are set?

**Oliver Dowden:** As a Member of Parliament whose constituency borders London, I share my hon. Friend's deep frustration with the conduct of the Mayor and with the ULEZ, which is a tax on hard-working commuters and citizens in London. My hon. Friend rightly raises a point about minimum service levels, which are at the root of the Government's legislation—the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, which passed through this House in the face of opposition from the Labour party—to protect standards of service and safety on our transport network.

**Edward Timpson:** Ambulance response times, particularly in rural areas such as Eddisbury, are one of those issues on which I seem to have been campaigning since I first came to Parliament. Like others, I am perplexed by the contrarian and regressive turn that has been taken in the policy area by unions representing ambulance workers, which are refusing to agree to minimum service and safety levels during industrial action. Does my right hon. Friend agree that they should embrace those common-sense measures? Perhaps the public would then be more sympathetic in the subsequent collective bargaining.

**Oliver Dowden:** As ever, I agree with my hon. and learned Friend. The public expect a minimum safety level in core public services such as ambulance provision, as exists in comparable European countries. This is a sensible, straightforward measure to ensure patient safety at a time of most desperate need, which is why the Government are bringing it forward—again, in the teeth of opposition from the Labour party.

#### National Resilience

7. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What progress his Department has made in strengthening national resilience. [903405]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):** Resilience is a key priority across Government. My Department has already published the resilience framework,

refreshed the national security risk assessment and established a risk sub-committee of the National Security Council, which I chair. We will soon publish a new national risk register, and this afternoon I will chair the UK resilience forum, which strengthens our links with partners across the country in collectively tackling the risks we face.

**Peter Aldous:** I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am involved in family farms.

As the breadbasket of Britain and home to the all-energy coast, East Anglia has a key role to play in strengthening national resilience on food and energy security. Can my right hon. Friend outline the co-ordinating work his Department is doing with other Departments to ensure the east of England realises its full potential in both feeding the nation and keeping the lights on?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight East Anglia's increasing role in providing energy security through its massive offshore wind developments, which are helping to provide secure renewable energy. In addition, the Government food strategy, which was published last year, sets out plans to boost domestic production in sectors with the biggest opportunities, which will of course include East Anglia.

#### Prospective Cabinet Members: Financial Affairs

8. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Whether his Department receives advice on prospective Cabinet members' financial affairs before they are appointed. [903406]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):** Successive Governments have preserved the ability for officials to provide advice to Ministers in confidence. It would therefore not be appropriate for me to comment specifically on any advice in the ministerial appointments process. Ministers are required to declare all relevant interests and matters of concern.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is aware that I am not satisfied with his answer. It has been reported that the Prime Minister was given an informal warning about the tax affairs of the former Conservative party chair, and yet he still decided to appoint him to his Cabinet. If true, it means the Prime Minister's promise of integrity is completely meaningless. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm whether the Prime Minister was given an informal warning?

**Oliver Dowden:** Lib Dem Members, and indeed other Opposition Members, continually say that the Government need to appoint an independent adviser. We appointed an independent adviser, who looked into all the facts of this case and produced an excellent report, and the Prime Minister took action. That is the way government should be conducted, and was conducted in these circumstances.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Bob Blackman—not here.

#### Public Procurement: UK-made Steel

10. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote the use of UK-made steel in public procurement. [903408]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** The Government are ensuring a competitive future for the UK steel industry, and the reported value of UK-produced steel procured by the Government was up last year by £160 million, from £108 million to £268 million.

**Jessica Morden:** In last week's Westminster Hall debate, the steel Minister, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), said

"there is huge scope for more procurement to take place in the UK."—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2023; Vol. 726, c. 331WH.]

Will the Cabinet Office commit to publishing up-to-date data on the Government's record in using UK steel, because it has not been good enough so far, and to adopting ambitious targets across Departments on the use of domestic steel in public projects?

**Alex Burghart:** I am pleased to tell the hon. Lady right now that 67% of the steel required for High Speed 2 is UK-produced, 94% of the steel used to maintain our rail track is produced in the UK and 90% of the steel used to build schools is produced in the UK. I understand there will be an urgent question after Question Time, which will give her the opportunity to ask a Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about this.

#### Veterans: Mental Health Support

11. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve mental health support for veterans. [903410]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** The Government are committed to providing high-quality evidence-based mental health support for veterans. There will be an additional £2.7 million of funding for Op Courage over the next few years, on top of the £17.8 million annual investment to provide a specialist mental health support and treatment pathway for veterans and their families.

**James Morris:** A recent University of Manchester study showed that veterans under 25 were more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population. I welcome what the Minister says, but it would be good if he worked with the Department of Health and Social Care, which is looking at a suicide strategy, to ensure that we are doing all we can to help veterans under 25 with their mental health. Does he agree?

**Johnny Mercer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for all his work on mental health over many years. The Manchester study revealed that, overall, people who have served are less likely to take their own lives, but there is a cohort within that for whom the risk is clearly higher. Defence Transition Services is doing everything it can to prepare that cohort for civilian life. We are clear that every suicide is a tragedy for the individual, their family and the military as an institution, and we are working all hours and doing everything we can to prevent every single one.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Two things have impacted on the mental health of veterans in the Rhondda. One is the complete collapse of the private rented sector, with many single men getting no protection under the law and finding it very difficult to find a guarantor so

that they can get anywhere to live at all. The second thing is brain injuries. I hope that the Minister has seen the recent research showing that the percentage of people sleeping rough who are veterans—and, of those, the percentage who have brain injuries—is phenomenally high. What can we do to ensure that those elements are sorted so that people who have done everything they can for our nation get the support that they need?

**Johnny Mercer:** I will first tackle the homelessness point. Veteran homelessness has been an issue in this country for far too long. In December, I launched Op Fortitude, which is a dedicated drive to end veteran homelessness in this country. With £8.5 million and 910 supported housing placements, it will be rolled out across the nation. We are determined to end the problem this year.

I recognise the link with traumatic brain injury. A lot of work is going into understanding how that affects this generation of veterans, who have come out of Afghanistan and Iraq, in particular. That work is ongoing, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to update him on it.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, we are proud to be home to a number of charities that help veterans with their mental health, including the Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre and its Operation R&R, which is based at its retreat in Newchapel and Mow Cop; and the Veteran Support Network, led by Lee West, which is based in Middleport. Will the Veterans Minister be kind enough to come and visit those fantastic charities and see the work that they are doing, and will he look at what pots are available—whether revenue or capital—to allow them to expand their work across north Staffordshire?

**Johnny Mercer:** Of course, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his persistent work and campaigning on this issue over many years. This country has some phenomenal charities that work night and day to look after our veterans. Op Courage, which was established in 2019, has formalised that pathway for the first time, and any charity and service can bid in to run different parts of it. That is why it has been an incredibly successful programme. I am more than happy to visit his constituency at a time when we can make it work.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): One way in which we can support veterans' mental health is to ensure that they transition into meaningful employment that allows them to use the highly transferable skills that they bring from the service. Has the Minister had time to look at what is happening in the US, where they are counting the number of veterans in big companies, and does he think that we could or should do that here?

**Johnny Mercer:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there has been brilliant work in that space. Last week, I visited Barclays, which is the first company in this country to count how many veterans it employs. It is important that companies go beyond rubber-stamping paperwork about what it is like to be a veteran in those companies. They need to mark how many veterans work for them and the ease and equity of access to

employment. Some great work is being done in the States, and I am always looking to improve the offer over here.

## UK Constitution

12. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the constitution. [903411]

**Alex Burghart:** The British constitution is a summation of our conventions, practices and laws. The Government constantly assess their function and fitness for purpose. We currently consider the British constitution to remain strong.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** The thing about political constitutions is that they need to be underpinned by good relationships based on trust and respect. I do not think it would be an overstatement to say that some of those relationships have been a little strained of late. Will the Minister be proactive and support my private Member's Bill next month, which will ensure the representation of devolved nations on public bodies? That would be a small step toward improving things.

**Alex Burghart:** I am pleased to say that from where I sit I have seen some very good relations recently. We have been working in lockstep on the Procurement Bill with colleagues from Northern Ireland and Wales to devise a new procurement regime. I am obviously happy to consider her Bill.

## Veterans: Government Services

14. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure Government services meet the needs of veterans. [903414]

18. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure Government services meet the needs of veterans. [903418]

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** We are working to better understand the needs of veterans and their families through research and data collection with organisations such as the Office for National Statistics. We also regularly engage with the charities sector and with veterans directly, for example through the veterans' survey, which closes today.

**Ian Levy:** Our veterans are civilians in waiting to return to civilian life. Given the recent census and new data on veteran communities, are there any plans to improve healthcare services for ageing veterans with muscular and skeletal problems incurred through military service?

**Johnny Mercer:** Veterans healthcare is a responsibility across the nation, with 1,789 GP surgeries and 132 hospital trusts now veteran accredited. It is a low level of commitment, but it makes the world of difference to veterans who are trying to access musculoskeletal services. I am determined that by the next general election, every GP surgery in the country will be veteran accredited and every hospital trust too. I will work hard to ensure we achieve that ambition.

**Antony Higginbotham:** In Burnley and Padiham we have long supported our armed forces and veterans, including through brilliant local organisations such as Healthier Heroes and the Burnley and Padiham branch of the Royal British Legion, which support veterans in the community. We also have local events such as Padiham on Parade, which takes place every June as part of Armed Forces Week. Can I invite my right hon. Friend the Minister to Burnley to sit with these organisations and see what more we can do to join up Government support with local organisations so that we ensure this is the best country to be a veteran in?

**Johnny Mercer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy for a cause that I know is dear to his heart. The Office for Veterans' Affairs is all about blending third sector and statutory provision. Veterans do not care where their care comes from as long as it is professional and evidence based and they have that community. It is our responsibility, through the Office for Veterans' Affairs, to ensure they have that care, but it will often be delivered by different groups across the country. As my hon. Friend highlights, there are some wonderful groups up in Burnley doing that, and I would be more than delighted to visit him and talk about how we can support them better.

**Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind):** Can the Minister provide an update on the work undertaken by the Defence and Security Accelerator on behalf of the Office for Veterans' Affairs on veteran health innovation? What progress has been made to support mental health in the community?

**Johnny Mercer:** This year we established Op Courage and Op Fortitude, and we are looking at designing a clear, physical healthcare pathway for veterans. We are building pillars of support across the United Kingdom. We have put £5 million into a health innovation fund. A lot of individuals came back from Afghanistan and Iraq with injuries that would have been unsurvivable 10 or 15 years ago, with a level of complexity that we had not dealt with before. We are putting money into understanding the science behind that to ensure they have prosthetics for the rest of their lives, not just the next two or three years. There is a commitment from the nation under the armed forces covenant to special care for those who are seriously injured. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member and talk her through some of the other work we are doing.

### Public Sector Contracts: Fraud

16. **Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to tackle fraud in public sector contracts. [903416]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin):** Last year we established the Public Sector Fraud Authority as a centre of excellence to work with Departments and public bodies to understand and reduce the impact of fraud. It does so by providing expertise and best-in-class tools to prevent and detect fraud, including in contracts. The Procurement Bill will also fight fraud through extending the grounds for exclusion and by establishing a debarment list.

**Mr Davis:** The covid pandemic exposed several conflict of interest problems in public sector procurement. The Government's Procurement Bill is an excellent opportunity to address those, but it does not pick up all the issues raised by the Government's own independent inquiries. What will the Minister do to improve on that?

**Jeremy Quin:** I beg to differ slightly with my right hon. Friend because, as the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office said, we are absolutely determined to ensure that the Procurement Bill is a step forward in transparency and how we handle conflicts of interest. I believe that it will help to give more reassurance on exactly that topic, but I am more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend if he has further ideas.

### Government Departments: Best Practice

19. **Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** What steps he is taking to record best practice across Government Departments. [903420]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin):** Recording and building on best practice is vital to improving how government operates. That is a challenge in a complex digital world where information and data are created at unprecedented rates, but one that we need to get right. I assure my hon. Friend that the civil service is required to maintain records that can be used to spread best practice.

**Andrew Selous:** If we do not learn the lessons of history, we can end up repeating the mistakes of the past. Given that Ministers and senior officials in Departments are regularly changing posts, will the Government ensure that each Department has a corporate memory so that new Ministers and officials can see what worked and what did not, and what lessons were learned, to help us to have the most efficient government that we can have in this country?

**Jeremy Quin:** My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. Under the civil service code, it is absolutely the case that proper records must be maintained so that people can learn from the past and pass that on, and I would always expect there to be professional handovers between teams. On his wider point, I am keen for civil servants to remain in post longer so that they can be judged on outcomes and have the time to follow through on projects, which is particularly important for senior responsible owners. There is also a role for departmental boards to be a repository of institutional knowledge and to ensure that that is communicated to new Ministers and officials as they come through.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903423] **Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Oliver Dowden):** The Cabinet Office is co-ordinating action to strengthen our nation's resilience, including our energy security, cyber defences and industrial action contingencies. His Majesty the King's coronation in May will be another significant milestone in the history of our nation. A coronation claims office has been created within the



Cabinet Office to consider claims to perform historic or ceremonial roles in that ceremony. So far, more than 200 such claims have been received, and we will work with experts from the royal household to determine which will play a part in that historic day.

**Mary Glendon:** Shockingly, a survey found that one in 12 Public and Commercial Services Union members are having to use food banks. Yesterday, more than 100,000 civil servants took part in industrial action, principally over pay. What steps will the Government take to make a significantly improved offer so that they can reach a negotiated settlement for underpaid civil servants?

**Oliver Dowden:** My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office continues to engage with the unions in constructive discussions about precisely those points, with a particular view to the forthcoming financial year. I also pay tribute to the overwhelming majority of civil servants who did not strike yesterday—only 12% participated—to ensure that essential public services continued uninterrupted.

T2. [903424] **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): One clear lesson from our covid response has been to understand the severe and disproportionate consequences of closing our schools and the impact that that has had on our children's education and development. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of that so far, and does he agree that we should look at making schools part of our essential national infrastructure, so that we ensure that that does not happen again in future?

**Oliver Dowden:** I am deeply saddened, as my hon. and learned Friend is, by any interruption to our children's education, particularly when they have suffered so much during covid. I pay tribute to the headteachers and others who ensured that about 90% of schools were open in one capacity or another so that our children continued to have an education—indeed, 70% of teachers did not participate in the strike. I hope that we continue to keep schools open on a voluntary basis, but if we cannot, we reserve the right, under the legislation passing through Parliament, to deem education an essential service that requires minimum service levels.

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Last week the independent adviser revealed that the former Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), submitted his declaration of interests only in the last two weeks, some three months after his appointment and while he was in the eye of the storm. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell the House how many other Ministers are yet to submit their declarations and what steps he or the Prime Minister has taken to pursue them, and can he guarantee there are not yet more ministerial conflicts of interest waiting to emerge that he knows about either formally or informally?

**Oliver Dowden:** I can assure the right hon. Lady that we are upholding high standards of transparency. The ministerial code requires such declarations to be made, and they are policed by the independent adviser, which the Labour party urged us to appoint and we appointed that person. Where there are failures, action is taken immediately, as we saw from the Prime Minister this weekend.

**Angela Rayner:** While we are on the subject of transparency, *The Guardian* has today revealed that the National Audit Office is due to meet the Cabinet Office this week to obtain details of public money spent on the former Prime Minister's legal fees. The permanent secretary has already admitted a budget of £220,000 could have been exceeded, and the contract, which has already been extended once, could be extended again. Will the Minister publish the details of this arrangement and tell us who approved it and why—or, even better, can the Minister just put a stop to this insulting waste of public money all together?

**Oliver Dowden:** The right hon. Lady will know that this was dealt with by the permanent secretary at the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and the contract was published on Contracts Finder. It has always been the case that Ministers receive support in respect of their conduct in office after they have left office. That was extended to Ministers in the Conservative party and the Labour party. I will add that it is a good job that we did not extend it to former Leaders of the Opposition given the millions of pounds being spent by the Labour party defending itself against allegations of antisemitism.

T5. [903428] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): In 2020 we have evidence that the Cabinet Office monitored the journalist Peter Hitchens' social media posts in relation to the pandemic. In an internal email the Cabinet Office accused him of pursuing an anti-lockdown agenda. He then appears to have been shadow-banned on social media. Will the Minister confirm that his Department did nothing to interfere with Hitchens' communications, either through discussion with social media platforms or by any other mechanism? If he cannot confirm that today, will he write to me immediately in the future to do so?

**Mr Speaker:** Who wants that one?

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin):** It is a pleasure to take it, Mr Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He referred to the rapid response unit; what it was doing during the course of the pandemic was entirely sensible—trawling the whole of what is available publicly on social media to make certain we as the Government could identify areas of concern particularly regarding disinformation so that correct information could be placed into the public domain to reassure the public. I think that was an entirely reasonable and appropriate thing to do. I do not know about the specifics that my right hon. Friend asks about; I would rather not answer at the Dispatch Box, but my right hon. Friend has asked me to write to him and I certainly will.

T3. [903425] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster believe there should be a minimum qualifying period for a Prime Minister's resignation honours list?

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are conventions that govern lists submitted by former Prime Ministers; they are not for direct decision by current Ministers.

T6. [903429] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I have mentioned many times in this place the need for better connectivity in my constituency, namely for the unreliable bus services and trains into London. I have also recently spoken about ambulance wait times even on non-strike days. As yesterday there was the biggest national walk-out in over a decade, can the Minister provide an update on what he is doing to ensure my constituents can continue to use these public services and go about their daily lives?

**Oliver Dowden:** As a fellow Hertfordshire Member of Parliament, I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the disruption to travel, particularly for commuters into London. That is precisely why our manifesto committed to bringing forward minimum service legislation. We are passing that legislation through the House in the teeth of opposition from Labour, and the reason for doing so is to ensure that our hard-working constituents can get on with their lives and livelihoods.

T4. [903427] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This week, the Government passed draconian anti-strike legislation while we saw the largest public strikes for over a decade. Does the Minister agree that instead of vilifying public sector workers, it is time the Government got around the table with the unions and negotiated a resolution?

**Oliver Dowden:** Ministers get around the table with unions all the time—the Education Secretary did precisely that earlier this week—but Ministers also owe a duty to hard working people in all four corners of our nation to ensure that minimum standards of public services are upheld for their safety, and we will continue to pursue legislation to that effect.

T7. [903430] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): As the Government's 12 levelling-up missions transcend the responsibilities of any one Government Department, what co-ordinating and monitoring work is my right hon. Friend's Department carrying out to ensure the successful delivery of those policies?

**Jeremy Quin:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that that needs co-ordination. I am delighted to say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has regular meetings to make certain that that co-ordination happens across Government. The levelling-up missions themselves are jointly monitored by my right hon. Friend and by the No. 10 policy unit to ensure that they are effective and we get bang for buck.

T9. [903432] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The aim of my Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Bill, which is supported by the Government and will have its Report stage and Third Reading tomorrow, is to create respectful workplaces where everyone can feel valued and supported. What example are the Government setting when 24 civil servants are involved in formal complaints against the Deputy Prime Minister? Does the Minister think it is appropriate that the Deputy Prime Minister is still in office? If not, is it not one rule for them and another for everyone else?

**Oliver Dowden:** The Government take those allegations very seriously, which is precisely why we appointed a leading King's Counsel with employment law experience to investigate it. I thought the Liberal Democrats believed in due process—we have a due process and we should allow that to take place.

T8. [903431] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): In north Yorkshire we have a very high forces presence, so we have a correspondingly significant number of veterans. Today is the close of the Office for Veterans' Affairs and Office for National Statistics survey. I am concerned that some leaving our services find the transition to civil employment not very smooth. Will the results of the survey be used to identify either policy or practice where that transition can be improved?

**The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):** Of course. The whole point of those surveys was that, when we set up the Office for Veterans' Affairs and I came into this job, we were starting from a very poor position on data. We managed to get the question into the census to understand how many veterans we have in this country, and the ONS study that my hon. Friend mentioned increases the granularity of that data, to really understand what the challenges are for people transitioning. I am confident that the services provided now are much better than they were, but we are always looking to learn and I will look closely at the results of the survey.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Public procurement rules are the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. With the Procurement Bill, the Government are seeking to extend the scope of Government contracts to small and medium-sized enterprises, but I have always firmly believed that we also need to extend the number of advanced and higher-level apprenticeships as part of public procurement, so what more are the Government doing to get those high-level apprenticeships linked to contracts?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart):** As a former Minister for apprenticeships, I share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm. If he wishes to find out more about the Procurement Bill, he can join me and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) in Committee Room 10 on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the foreseeable future. He will hear us talk about social benefit and the social value embedded within it, and I hope apprentices will be part of that.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent is proud to still be the largest recipient of the levelling-up funding announced to date, and the second-largest recipient of the Places for Growth programme, through which we now have 500 Home Office jobs coming to our great city, with 100 jobs recruited, another 160 being advertised and the office due to open in March at Two Smithfield, a regeneration site led by Councillor Abi Brown and her fantastic Conservative councillors on Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Councillor Brown and the Home Office on securing those important jobs for our local area and place on record my thanks to the Cabinet Office for all its hard work in making this achievement come true?

**Jeremy Quin:** I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned long and hard on this issue, and I congratulate him and his area on achieving that huge goal. It is part of a process: since September last year 8,000 jobs have been relocated away from London, with all the associated benefits of people being close to the communities that they serve.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** There is, literally, one rule for all normal MPs and another for Ministers in relation to transparency. All ordinary MPs must declare all their financial interests within 28 days, whereas, as has already been revealed, Ministers do it considerably later, if at all. Why do we have to wait until May to know what Ministers' financial interests are? Only a few weeks ago, when we had a vote on this matter, the Leader of the House promised that she would ensure that all Ministers were held to the same timetable as other MPs. When is that going to happen?

**Oliver Dowden:** Ministers are required, under the ministerial code, to provide full declarations, so I dispute the hon. Gentleman's claim in that regard. However, he raises an important point which I have discussed with the Leader of the House. We are taking steps to move to more rapid declarations of ministerial interests so that they align more closely with the declarations of Members of Parliament, and we are working through those processes with our private offices.<sup>1</sup>

**Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con):** Many Members will know of the work of Bryn Parry, who set up Help for Heroes. Will the Veterans Minister join me in wishing him well—I know he is not well at the moment—and paying tribute to him for the work that he has done?

**Johnny Mercer:** I know your appetite for short answers, Mr Speaker. As my hon. Friend says, Bryn Parry is not well at the moment. He founded Help for Heroes with his wife Emma back in the early days of the Afghanistan campaign, and his contribution to care for the veterans of this nation and what he has achieved over many, many years is unrivalled. He has changed hundreds of lives for the better, and he has a dear place in my heart and in the heart of the nation. I pay huge tribute to him and his work, and we are all thinking of him and his family at this difficult time.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** In the three years since the United Kingdom left the European Union, almost all Brexit-related legislation has included sweeping Henry VIII powers, or other regulatory powers, for Ministers. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster give us an example of how democratic scrutiny and control have been taken back to this House rather than by Executive power grab?

**Mr Speaker:** Who wants to answer the question?

**Patrick Grady:** Think about it!

**Jeremy Quin:** There are a number of ways in which we are taking back control in this place following Brexit. The most obvious example is what is taking place in Committee Rooms in the House even as we speak, as my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary has said. The Procurement Bill is a major step forward: it increases flexibility, and will help smaller companies for many years to come.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** I apologise for not being here earlier, Mr Speaker.

Under my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, the Ministry of Defence has a duty to ensure that all veterans leaving the armed forces are provided with a settled home, and are advised to approach their local authority. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the MOD keeps to its legal duty?

**Johnny Mercer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work on homelessness. There should be no homeless veterans in this country. Provision is generally available but, under Op Fortitude, we have procured £8.5 million-worth of services to deal with instances in which it is not. This will be a clear, dedicated pathway for those who are at risk of homelessness, providing wraparound support in supported housing. We are going to end veterans homelessness this year, and I look forward to briefing my hon. Friend on how we are going to do it.

**Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind):** The Institute for Government has suggested that publishing more policy advice from officials, publicly, would improve transparency, ministerial engagement and analysis. What assessment have Ministers made of that recommendation, and will it be implemented?

**Jeremy Quin:** Every Minister relies on good and honest advice from our officials, and we are blessed with just that. It is up to Ministers to determine how that policy is then prosecuted, and to stand up to represent and defend it, and I believe that we need to preserve the privacy between the advice received and the decisions made by the Government. We as Ministers are responsible. I am grateful for the advice I receive, and I do not expect civil servants to defend it. I have to take the decision and I have to defend the advice, and I would rather stick to that position when it comes to how we are accountable to this place.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** One in 10 people in the ex-services community face financial difficulties, as the Minister knows. According to research from the Royal British Legion, that is about 430,000 people. In the current crisis, the situation is only getting worse, and I am aware of that as well from my constituency. What steps will be taken to ensure that those former members of the armed forces are not left behind?

**Johnny Mercer:** The issues facing the veterans' community are no different from those faced by all people across the United Kingdom today with the cost of living challenge. There is help and support through the energy price cap scheme. Grants are available across the country, including specialised grants from groups such as the RBL, which has been working hard in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I pay tribute to them and we will continue to do all we can to support the most vulnerable through this very difficult time.

**Mr Speaker:** There are no further questions, so I will suspend the House until 10.30 am.

10.25 am

*Sitting suspended.*

1. [Official Report, 20 February 2023, Vol. 728, c. 2MC.]

## British Steel: Negotiations

10.31 am

**Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on negotiations between the Government and British Steel.

**The Minister for Industry and Investment Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: First, let me begin by saying I understand that this must be a very concerning time for British Steel employees, following the discussions that took place between the company and union representatives yesterday. Of course, these are commercial decisions taken privately by the firm, and conversations with the unions are private.

We all recognise that Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has created challenging global trading conditions for steel, but it is very disappointing that British Steel has chosen to take this step for its employees while negotiations with the Government are ongoing. The Business Secretary and I have always been clear that the success of the UK steel industry is a priority. We have worked intensively with British Steel on support to help safeguard and unlock shareholder investment and will continue to do so. Steel is important for our economy, supporting local jobs and economic growth. We are committed to securing a sustainable and competitive future for the steel sector. I must put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) for all the insight and advice she provides to me as the Minister.

We have already taken action to protect the steel industry from unfair trade and reduce the burden of energy costs, including £800 million in relief for electricity costs since 2013. That is on top of a range of other support funds worth £1.5 billion to support efforts to cut emissions and become more energy efficient across the sector. It is firmly in the interests of the sector that we continue our engagement. We want British steel production to continue in the United Kingdom, to protect our steel sovereignty as a nation and build a stable, decarbonised and competitive industry. It is in the interests of employees, their communities and all areas of the UK that benefit from the UK steel supply chain, and I encourage the company to continue discussions with us to reach a solution.

I can confirm that the Government have put forward a generous package of support, which we believe, combined with shareholder action, would put British Steel on a sustainable and decarbonised footing. My officials are helping British Steel to understand that package in more depth, and I am hopeful that together we will find a solution that protects jobs while setting British Steel up for success. Obviously, decisions that the company takes are its commercial decisions, but I will continue to work with colleagues across Government to ensure that a strong package of support is available, including Jobcentre Plus and the rapid response service, if needed. Members across the House should be in no doubt of the Government's determination to continue support for the UK steel industry, and I urge British Steel to continue discussions to help us secure its future in the UK.

**Holly Mumby-Croft**: As my hon. Friend has set out, in the midst of these negotiations with Government, involving hundreds of millions of pounds of further

support on top of what she has listed, Jingye sat down yesterday with the unions and talked about laying off 800 British Steel workers. I do not want to break down my communications with British Steel, because I will fight for these jobs and continue to talk to it. Accordingly, I will temper my language today, but I want to be clear that I cannot and will not defend this decision, which is unacceptable in every possible way for my constituents. This is not a way to behave. It sends entirely the wrong message and breaches the spirit of negotiations, which I believe are the result of a level of Government focus on steel and its wider issues, including energy and carbon costs, that are genuinely encouraging for the industry.

Hundreds of families in Scunthorpe are worried sick, wondering if and when they will lose their jobs. I want to add that I am very capable of challenging the Government if I do not think they are going far enough on steel, but that is not what is happening here, and I hold the company entirely responsible for how it decided to act yesterday.

I ask the Minister to do three things, please. First, will she challenge the company on whether it is actually credible to run its operations with 800 fewer people? I have been told that it would not be possible to safely run the blast furnaces if that many team members were lost. Secondly, will she express in the strongest terms that this is not a way to do business and ask the company to immediately reconsider these potential redundancies? It is in its gift to do that, and if it publicly halted these redundancies, that would send a welcome and strong message to the community of which it is a part.

Thirdly, will the Minister reiterate this Government's support for the thousands of world-class steelmakers in my patch, who are decent, hard-working, skilled members of our community? Will she tell them again today that we value their skills, we understand the importance of steel, we understand that we need it for every single thing we do in this country—from defence to growth—and that we are determined to do whatever it takes to make sure we do not become the only country in the G20 that cannot make its own steel?

**Ms Ghani**: Our lady of steel basically sums up the whole argument in her two minutes, and I do not disagree with much of what she has said. The decision to hold this meeting is a commercial one, but I agree with my hon. Friend that it is a peculiar way to do business, while we are in the middle of negotiations that will involve substantial amounts of Government support, which I will go on to describe.

I put on record, agreeing with my hon. Friend, that we make the finest steel in the world, and the steelworkers in the UK are the most skilled in the world. British Steel manufacturing is vital, and it cuts across everything we do, as well as issues around supply chain resilience brought on by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and issues around Chinese steel dumping. Steel is vital for our national security, just as it is for every sector involved in manufacturing and production. The Government are absolutely committed to the steel industry, and I will go on to describe that.

I make it clear that any decision that Jingye makes is a commercial decision, but it is our duty to make sure that if support is needed, we make it available, so our thoughts are first and foremost with employees and their families. We will work across Whitehall, whether

that is standing up the Department for Work and Pensions rapid response service to support employees, working with the MoneyHelper scheme or working with the Department for Education's National Careers Service.

I will spend a moment to explain the level of support that British Steel has already had. We have offered £120 million in grant funding through the exceptional regional growth fund to ensure that it can continue to work in the area. We have offered UK export finance to help it with new export contracts. In June, we extended UK Steel's safeguards to protect domestic production. It has benefited from Government electricity price compensation for energy-intensive industries and the energy relief scheme for business. As I have mentioned, £800 million has been provided across the sector since 2013. It can also apply for help with energy efficiency, decarbonisation, low-carbon infrastructure, and research and development, where more than £1 billion is available in competitive funding for industry. The support is strategic and long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe raised three points. She asked me to challenge the company on the number of employees it needs to continue functioning in a safe and stable way. Of course, we will drive that message home, and we will make it clear in the strongest terms that this is not the way to do business. She knows that I was on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for a few years, and we wrote a report on steel. Perhaps my language then was a little freer than I can be at the Dispatch Box. It is peculiar for this conversation to take place while we are in the middle of good negotiations, since the negotiations involve substantial taxpayer money. Obviously, these are sensitive negotiations, but I do not think that it is inappropriate for me to say that the Government want some assurances and guarantees linked to jobs. The message I want to send today is that we will continue to be available to ensure that discussions and negotiations continue.

I listed the huge support that the Government have already put in place for steel. If I may, I would like to share some of the other support available for the region in and around Scunthorpe. More than £20 million was given to Scunthorpe through the towns fund, and more than £10 million through the future high streets fund. More than £25 million in seed capital was given towards the Humber freeport, and more than £5 million to north Lincolnshire from the UK shared prosperity fund. I must put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe for being such a fantastic campaigner and for securing that funding for her constituency.

These are ongoing, sensitive negotiations. I hope everybody across the House, regardless of what they think of the Government's record, will send the shared message that negotiations and discussions should continue. It is appropriate that within those discussions we should expect some assurances on job security.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) for securing this urgent question on an issue that affects not just the workers in her constituency but the future of a foundation industry across the UK.

In November last year, the iconic Redcar blast furnace—once the second largest in Europe—was demolished. Decades of work, tradition and pride needlessly went up in smoke. Here we are, yet again: another crisis under the Conservatives' watch, with Liberty Steel announcing a number of weeks ago the potential loss of hundreds of jobs and yet more pain this week from British Steel. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have granted the urgent question because I thought it was important. I certainly will not have the hon. Member for Scunthorpe heckling by putting her hands around her mouth to shout.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Liberty Steel bosses have described the UK steel sector as being “on life support”. No other developed country faces losing its domestic steel sector. If that were to happen here, it would be a badge of shame for this Government. It is entirely avoidable. Will the Minister outline the steps the Government are taking to secure the future of the Liberty and British Steel sites? She talked about the economic impact, but it is about more than that. It is about the fact that those sites have been at the heart of their communities for generations.

Earlier this month, there were reports that the Secretary of State wrote to the Chancellor requesting a bail-out for British Steel. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case and whether she and the Secretary of State are continuing to push for that? The last thing that the steel sector and the British taxpayer need is another blank cheque bail-out for a buyer, rather than a proper investor. We do not need more sticking plasters; we need a long-term plan.

The market wants green steel, so will the Government back Labour's plan for green steel, invest in new technology over the coming decade, crowd in private investment and address the root of the problems, rather than play an ever more expensive game of whack-a-mole? Labour will always back our steel industry. It has a bright green future—something it will never get under the crisis management Conservatives.

**Ms Ghani:** I had hoped that the Opposition Front Bench spokesperson would support our ongoing desire for negotiations, and that she would ask why the redundancy conversations are taking place while negotiations are ongoing.

On Liberty Steel, on 20 July 2021 the then Business Secretary set out in his evidence to the BEIS Committee that we did not have adequate assurances to be confident that money offered to Liberty Steel would remain solely available to UK operations. It is important to note that that approach was commended in the Committee's November 2021 report. Of course, I was on the Committee then, but it is important to note that the Committee is made up of Members from both sides of the House, so that was obviously an agreed position of colleagues across the House.

The hon. Member talked about the level of support that we are providing to the sector to ensure that it can reduce its emissions and take on board new technology to go as green as it can. We have more than £1.5 billion of long-term, strategic and focused support in place to help it to go green, cut emissions and become more energy-efficient. There is more than £1 billion for the carbon capture and storage infrastructure fund, more

[Ms Ghani]

than £240 million for the net zero hydrogen fund, more than £55 million for the industrial fuel switching fund, more than £20 million for industrial decarbonisation research, £289 million for the industrial energy transformation fund and up to £66 million as part of the industrial strategy challenge fund. That is substantial funding to help the sector to be strategic and have structures in place to help it to reduce emissions, invest in new technology and decarbonise.

The hon. Member spoke about Labour's plan, or the budget it has in place to help steel become green. I am not sure how that has been costed or tested. As I said in my statement, what is important is that we are putting forward a generous package of support. I hope that she agrees that, because it is taxpayers' money, we should also have certain assurances, whether on job security, or that new technology to decarbonise is adopted. That is a sensible, strategic way to go forward.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The company has clearly acted in a most inappropriate and high-handed manner, and that affects not just the 800 workers directly employed at British Steel: my neighbouring constituency has many thousands of jobs dependent on the supply chain. Could the Minister assure us that the Government will give maximum support and recognise the importance of steel to the region as a whole?

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend has always been a great advocate for all the jobs in his constituency, including those linked to the steel supply chain. That is why the sector is so important: the number of jobs that trickle through it is huge, and it is a foundation industry that supports every other manufacturing sector. We are negotiating as hard as we can to ensure that we get over the present hurdle and that we can go on and talk about other things, such as further procurement, which would be great news for the supply chain as well. Of course, if any decision is taken by the firm, it will be a commercial decision, and if any support is required for workers, across Whitehall, we will do everything we can to ensure that that support is available.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): I have listened carefully to the Minister's words, and she has regularly detailed the amount of public money that has gone in to support the steel industry in the United Kingdom, and said that these are commercial decisions and private discussions. I wonder though, with the renewed role for steel in the green energy transition, why the Government—I will say this, even if the Labour party will not—do not consider nationalising steel in the United Kingdom? If so much public money is going into the industry anyway and they recognise—the Minister has assured the House that they do—that steel is not just any other industry but a strategic asset for any developed economy, why does she not nationalise it?

**Ms Ghani:** Nationalisation is not going to solve any of the problems that we are talking about right now. The problems that the steel sector in the UK faces are the problems that it faces globally. It is unfortunate that the hon. Member thinks that nationalisation could be the answer to this or to everything. It would not

make steel more competitive, it would close down the ability to raise money from capital markets, and the whole of the risk and burden would fall on the taxpayer, with no guarantee of a long-term, sustainable strategy. We are proposing to ensure that we have a long-term strategy which is providing support now. We provided support during covid. We are providing substantial support during the energy crisis, and there is a fund of more than £1 billion—£1.5 billion in total—to help with tackling emissions and energy costs. We have a long-term strategy in place.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I think the shadow Minister must have forgotten—I like her a lot, but I think she must have forgotten—who the Government were in 2009, when the mothballing of Teesside and the loss of 1,700 jobs commenced. I would hope that the Opposition do not use my constituents who are affected by this as political pawns in some game to try to bash the Government, because that would be pretty low. I know that the shadow Minister will not do that, and I hope others will not.

Everything British Steel has asked us to do as local MPs in the past few years we have done. We have gone out and fought for it to ensure our steel safeguards are protected and to ensure that, when the site ownership changed, hundreds of millions of pounds of UK taxpayers' money was offered to support the new buyers and to pay the salaries of our constituents during that period, and, of course, we have done everything they have asked us to do on energy costs. So I am as angry as my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) at the way in which our workers are being treated by Jingye. This is no way to conduct a negotiation with Government and it is no way to engage with its workforce or with local Members of Parliament, at a time when the Government have put hundreds of millions of pounds on the table to help to support the sector. So I can only join my hon. Friend in demanding that Jingye and British Steel show a bit more respect to our constituents and negotiate in good faith.

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend, once again, nails the position that we are in. I know that the steel sector has such fantastic champions across the House. Since I have been in post, which is not very long, I have attended several meetings, briefings and debates in Westminster Hall, so I know it has fantastic champions, and it is a shame that those champions are feeling let down today. What is extraordinary is that there is a huge amount of growth coming down the line for steel. Demand for UK steel is expected to rise by 20%. Significant commercial opportunities are coming down the line. Once again, because British Steel has such fantastic champions and we have such superb MPs across the House, including my hon. Friend, they have been able to win some substantial deals for the sector. He mentioned steel safeguard measures. In 2022, we extended all 15 steel safeguard measures and agreed an extensive solution to the US section 232 tariffs, significantly increasing US market access for UK firms. The steel sector could not have better steel champions and, like them, I feel a bit let down today.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The point that was made relentlessly by hon. Members in last week's steel debate, and we really appreciate what hard news

this is for steel workers today, is that high production costs mean that UK steel is unable to be competitive in the international market. The Government support is not as generous as other countries', and some of the list that the Minister read out is older money and it is across industry, not just for steel. So does the Minister understand that a long-term plan is needed to give our industry confidence?

**Ms Ghani:** Because we have invested so much in renewables, we know that there will be better energy costs coming down the line, but we have had £800 million for the steel sector since 2013. We know that policy is being reviewed, and we are going to make sure that support is just as substantial going forward. The UK offers a great place to have a steel sector, and we know that there are opportunities for growth. We know there is going to be a 20% increase in UK contracts, we are looking at procurement and we have a fantastic skilled workforce. There is support to help decarbonise and take away some of the costs of emissions, too. Support has been available—up to £800 million—and support will continue to be available.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** In the BEIS Committee report the Minister referred to, we recognised that the ability to produce steel is fundamental to the existence of UK manufacturing, and it was good to hear the Minister's commitments. We know that, in part, the future will be about making more use of recycling of previously used steel in electric arc furnaces, but could she say a bit more about the discussions that have taken place with the broader industry to secure its future here in the UK?

**Ms Ghani:** My hon. Friend was my neighbour when I was on the BEIS Committee: we sat next to each other every Tuesday morning for two years, so I saw more of him than I did of my husband. I take care of manufacturing and advanced manufacturing too, so conversations are taking place across the sector. My attention since being in post has fundamentally been on steel, on ensuring that we can get these negotiations over the line, and on how we can take the sector forward and ensure it is as competitive as it can be, in particular by looking at procurement and ensuring that the £1.5 billion fund is actually used by the steel sector, that it comes forward and tries to get hold of as much of that money as possible.

**Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab):** This crisis is facing British Steel today, but the rest of the UK steel industry may not be far behind. The Minister will know that I and other Opposition Members have raised on many occasions the cost of energy, which was a problem before Ukraine and covid—it has been going on for years and years, and this Government have done absolutely nothing about it. We need a long-term solution to the cost of energy for steel, not just these little pots of money that she keeps talking about.

**Ms Ghani:** We have had many meetings, and normally they are very respectful, but I must object to “little pots of money”. There has been £800 million of energy cost relief since 2013, with more money to come down the line, and £1.5 billion to help decarbonise. These are not little pots of money. Energy costs for the steel sector are an issue worldwide. We have a strategy and a fund in place, and this debate is about ongoing negotiations and the action that has been taken by this particular firm.

**Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend agree that “little pots of money” seems a somewhat odd description, considering the £800 million since 2013 and lots of other support being available? Does she agree that holding the residents of Scunthorpe to ransom is a funny way of doing business? Does she also agree that my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) has worked relentlessly and fought tirelessly to help her residents and is doing so again today?

**Ms Ghani:** “Ransom” is not my word, but it is an interesting way to explain what is going on. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe is the leading champion of steel across the industry. I was at a Westminster Hall debate last week, and I pointed out that I cannot turn around any corridor without her cornering me on steel. That is why the sector is so well represented in the UK and why we have put together support that has been valued at over £1.5 billion of grants to help it decarbonise, with £800 million to cover energy costs.

Negotiations are ongoing. My officials will be speaking to British Steel and Jingye today. It was interesting to hear what meetings took place yesterday. When we are talking about hundreds of millions of pounds of support for a firm, while it is in negotiations with Government, for it to have this sort of conversation is not the way that we tend to do business in the UK.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Steel is vital to help us move to net zero by, for example, extending our railways or building net zero homes, but the industry is also a major contributor to carbon emissions, and we know that the industry will only survive long term if it becomes sustainable. The Government recently gave the green light to the Cumbria coalmine, supposedly to support the steel industry. How does that sit with the Government's claim that they are supporting the steel industry to go green?

**Ms Ghani:** I fear that the hon. Member would rather have coal imported and not worry about the cost or the emissions impact of that. The Secretary of State's decision on the Cumbrian coalmine was made following a comprehensive planning inquiry that heard from over 40 different witnesses and considered matters such as demand for coking coal, climate change and the impact on the local economy. What is really important is that we have a resilient UK steel sector, and I will never apologise for that.

**Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con):** To safeguard our national strategic interest, it is imperative that this country maintains a capacity for steel production. The Minister has outlined the considerable package of support that the Government have already provided, not least the £800 million for energy costs over the last few years. Can she reassure the House that this Government will do everything they can to support this key industry?

**Ms Ghani:** Absolutely. That is why we are working so closely with the companies and the unions. I have met with the unions, most recently last week. Hopefully I am not divulging too much information, but they also claimed that they struggled to have good levels of communication with Jingye and British Steel, so it is not lost on all of us. We are very committed to the sector.

[Ms Ghani]

We have also been buying more British steel. In 2021-22, the Government procured £268 million of UK-produced steel for major projects, which was an increase of £160 million on the figure from the previous year—this is based on departmental reports. I have been the HS2 Minister, and I have always been concerned about why we could not procure more UK steel in our rail and road projects, and in all others, including those for shipping—I have also been maritime Minister. So there is even a greater future ahead. As I mentioned, the UK's steel demand is going to rise by 20%; this is a good space to be in. We are just in a peculiar situation while we are having ongoing negotiations, and the decision was taken to have this meeting with the unions yesterday.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I know that the Minister is sympathetic, but Ministers across Government need to realise that this is a crucial time for steel companies, as they are making decisions about where to invest for the future worldwide. What discussions has she had with colleagues across Government about giving guarantees that far more than £300 million will be there for developing the steel technologies of the future, that there will be a proper Government procurement strategy for British steel and that there will be a fair deal on energy prices for the future?

**Ms Ghani:** I appreciate that this is a very tricky moment for the sector, as it is worldwide. We have spoken about this previously, and it is incredibly important for us to get it right. We have been focused on the present real-time negotiations. Let me put it on record that we are, as always, available to continue those discussions and we are hoping that they will continue regardless of the announcement of the discussions that took place yesterday. I cannot stress enough the long-term and strategic benefit of having a £1.5 billion fund in place to help us decarbonise—that is providing a huge amount of support.

We have spoken previously about procurement, and when I moved away from BEIS Committee after, I realised how life comes at you fast when you are a Minister and you cannot commit to the recommendations you made in your report. However, we are working hard on procurement, too. We want to make sure that there is more British steel in our defence projects. Let me put it on record that the Ministry of Defence purchased £4.3 million of UK-produced steel through its contracts in 2020-21, which is an increase of 42%, from £3 million in 2019-20. There is a huge market here, which is why we are so committed to ensuring not only that we negotiate well, because this is about British taxpayers' money, but that we have the right resources and infrastructure in place for a long-term future for British steel.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The announcement and news will be frustrating for my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), who has worked so hard, and for neighbouring constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who has worked with the supply chain. We are all conscious of the strategic importance of steel, the need to modernise the industry and the impact of energy costs on the profitability of the business. As the Minister says, there is a positive future demand

for steel. So will she confirm from the Dispatch Box that there is direct ministerial contact with British Steel's owners, Jingye, and perhaps also with the China Chamber of Commerce in the UK, so that the importance of this partnership is stressed and the need for a successful outcome to the negotiations is made very clear?

**Ms Ghani:** Not only are my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes and for Scunthorpe huge champions for steel, but they have good relationships with Ministers, unions and workers locally. I could not be better supported, which is why I am committed to ensuring that I deliver the best package for the steel sector that I can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talked about ministerial engagement with Jingye; I do not have all the dates in front of me, but there is engagement from the Secretary of State downwards, and of course I have meetings as well. Officials will be holding meetings with British Steel and others, too, so meetings do take place regularly. I will do my best to put together some more dates and write to him so that he knows the exact number of meetings taking place and at what level.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The green freeport announcement for the Cromarty firth is very welcome. Our dream is to build floating offshore wind structures in the Cromarty firth, at the Nigg yard, where I once used to work. We want to build them out of British steel, not steel from any other country. Our hopes, wishes and aspirations are for that to happen, so may I wish the Government all the best in sorting this situation out? I do not want to see my constituents' hopes dashed. We need that steel, including for the future of my constituency.

**Ms Ghani:** The hon. Member has hit on two of my favourite topics: freeports and the Maritime 2050 strategy, which I launched when I was the maritime Minister. He has all my support, and I am grateful for his support with ensuring that we get the best possible negotiations over the line as soon as we can. It is unfortunate that the discussions took place yesterday.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we find a way to ensure that steel is produced sustainably, right here in the UK, so that we can deliver new renewable industries such as floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, particularly as shipping steel in creates additional supply chain emissions?

**Ms Ghani:** Absolutely. I think the argument is sometimes lost when people say that we can bring steel in. Why would we want to do that when we have a sector right here? People do not often calculate the cost or the impact on the environment. We have put together substantial funding to help the industry take new technology on board, reduce emissions and decarbonise. I must say that when I have had meetings with those in the sector, they have enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to reduce carbon emissions and meet net zero targets. That is why we want to work hand in hand with them.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On TV this morning, a journalist carefully outlined the case with reference to discussions between the Government and British Steel's



Chinese owners. I echo what the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said about the supply of British steel; its supply to Northern Ireland is so important for the construction sector. What is forcing companies to look elsewhere is the increase in price, not a desire for a better product—the best product is British steel. Will the Minister commit to working with the industry to fund more efficient technology and mechanisms, and subsequently to aid the production of cheaper materials to maintain affordable buildings and enhance the British steel sector?

**Ms Ghani:** Absolutely; once again, the hon. Member asks a very sensible question. That is exactly what we are here to do. We need a cleaner, greener steel sector, so we need to do everything we can to support it in helping us to meet our net zero targets.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Our steel industry has suffered as a result of unfair international competition for many years, because Governments all over the world have been subsidising their own steel industries. My hon. Friend referred to our steel industry's bright future and the potential 20% increase. Does she agree that it is an absolute business nonsense to lay off highly skilled staff at a time when the order book is likely to fill up?

**Ms Ghani:** That is why it was so peculiar to be made aware of the conversations that took place yesterday. Opportunities are coming down the line and we know that there will be huge demand for more UK steel. Grants are available to help with cutting the cost of adopting new tech and decarbing. The Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), is next to me on the Front Bench, and we are doing everything we can to ensure that we can export. It is a peculiar period to be having discussions with the unions, while we are in the middle of negotiations and we know that the sector will only improve.

## Business of the House

11.7 am

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** The business for the week commencing 6 February will include:

**MONDAY 6 FEBRUARY**—Debate on motions to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023, the draft Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, followed by a debate on a motion to approve the charter for budget responsibility: autumn 2022 update.

**TUESDAY 7 FEBRUARY**—Remaining stages of the Seafarers' Wages Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 8 FEBRUARY**—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

**THURSDAY 9 FEBRUARY**—A debate on the independent review of net zero, followed by a general debate on parliamentary services for Members. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 9 February and will return on Monday 20 February.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

This week, the International Monetary Fund announced that the UK is the only advanced economy forecast to shrink this year. Even sanctions-hit Russia is performing better than us. Why, then, was the Chancellor not in his place on Tuesday to answer Labour's urgent question? He needs to address the concerns raised by MPs on behalf of people who do not know how they are going to pay for a holiday this year, or how they will ever get round to servicing the boiler or making the home improvements they have been putting off. Some are simply worried about how they will pay the bills.

Britain has huge potential and people with great talent but, under the Tories, we are all being held back. Labour will get the economy growing with our green prosperity plan and our active partnership with businesses, which I know from our packed-out international trade reception earlier this week are turning to Labour in their droves. Has the Leader of the House considered a debate on boosting export-led growth? Under Labour we would have a growing economy and better public services.

Labour's motion on Tuesday called for the abolition of the unfair tax break that the super-rich use to avoid paying their fair share: non-dom tax status. The next Labour Government would instead use the money to train a new generation of NHS and social care workers, and to provide breakfast clubs for every primary-aged child in England. I understand there are around 100 non-doms in the constituency of the Leader of the House, so why is she choosing to give her super-rich constituents an unfair tax break over providing for Portsmouth's children and reducing her local NHS waiting lists?

[Thangam Debbonaire]

Speaking of the economy, the Business Secretary has, according to media reports, taken great offence at my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones)—I cannot understand why—for putting perfectly legitimate questions to him on the economy at a session of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee last month. Think about that: questions on the economy to the Business Secretary. That is hardly a curveball. Apparently, the scrutiny annoyed him so much that he is not co-operating with the Committee on national security. We need parliamentary scrutiny by the Committee on the blocking of foreign takeovers of British companies on national security grounds, which can happen only once the Government have published a memorandum of understanding, for which the Committee has been waiting for more than a year.

I cannot believe I have to say this, but national security is not a game. This playground politics should be beneath senior members of the Government. Does the Leader of the House agree that Cabinet Ministers who will not do their job properly because robust questioning has hurt their feelings are simply not up to it? Will she urge the Business Secretary to act in the national interest, and for national security, by co-operating with my hon. Friend and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee so that we can have proper parliamentary scrutiny of this important process?

Finally, it has been five years since the damning report on the Hillsborough disaster, in which 96 people lost their lives. In all that time, the Government have not provided a response and Ministers have not committed to changing the law to protect future victims of public disasters. Families have spent decades fighting for the truth, yet they are still waiting for justice, despite the tireless campaigning of the bereaved, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and so many others. Labour has long called for the introduction of a Hillsborough law to give real protection to victims of future public disasters and their families. We need urgent action, not further painful delay.

Just this Tuesday, the Home Secretary could not even provide a timetable for a response. A Home Office Minister later said that we can expect it in the spring. Could the Leader of the House please be more specific? The Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood, is due back in the House tomorrow. As a lasting legacy for the Hillsborough families, will the Leader of the House support it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I start by echoing the many sympathies and sentiments that hon. Members have expressed at the sad death of firefighter Barry Martin. I am sure all Members in the Chamber today will want to echo those sentiments.

On a more cheerful note, I wish all the home nations good luck in the Six Nations, which kicks off this weekend.

The Hillsborough inquiry and its findings were well done, and what we have done was the right thing to do. I know this is a huge concern to many Members, and I will never forget our debates and the incredible emotional stories that many Members told about that tragic day. I understand that ongoing police inquiries are the reason for the delay. Certainly, given what the hon. Lady has said—I am sure that this is also what other Members

would want me to do—I shall write to the Home Office and ask it to contact her and other Members who have expressed an interest to update them on progress.

I thank hon. Members for supporting the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill this week. I am delighted to say that we have introduced the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill this week, and I hope that all Members will support it. I also welcome the announcements on the environmental improvement plan, as well as the health and social care improvement plan and today's important announcement on children's social care.

The hon. Lady asks me about growth. I would be happy to compare the Labour party's record, and the state in which it leaves the UK when it leaves office, with what we have done on business growth. She will know that in previous years, we have had one of the fastest growth rates, in part because we came out of lockdown earlier than others. That is largely what she is seeing.

The hon. Lady talks about the cost of living. One of the things that the Prime Minister has delivered on is £26 billion-worth of cost of living support. Exports are growing, and if she wants that to speed up and continue, perhaps she will support the legislation we are introducing to modernise our economy—the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill—and be a bit more encouraging and positive about the from-scratch trade deals and memorandums of understanding that the Department for International Trade is doing. I expect the Opposition to welcome our accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, which will open up a £9 trillion market to our constituents.

The hon. Lady should look into Labour's record. She will not know my own constituency as well as I do, but when it comes to getting people into employment, doubling their personal tax allowance thresholds, the new schools that we have built, the vast improvements to the local hospital—it had one of the worst MRSA records in the country—or the maladministration of pension credit and tax credit, every index, including the recent Bloomberg index on levelling up, says that my constituency is doing very well. That is, in very large part, down to the hard work of my fantastic constituents.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of national security. I would like to make a comparison between our records on defence and national security, and perhaps compare our current national security architecture with Labour's, but Labour had no such architecture. The National Security Council was set up under a Conservative Government.

I am responding to business questions on the Prime Minister's 100th day in office. During that time, as well as providing the cost of living package that I mentioned earlier, he has stabilised the economy and invested billions in schools, the NHS and social care. We have also passed much legislation—[*Interruption.*] As the hon. Lady is calling out, I will be generous. Although I am sorry that we do not have the Opposition's support on minimum service standards, modernising our regulatory framework or reducing stamp duty, I thank them for what they have supported; there is quite a lot of it.

Of the Financial Services and Markets Bill, the Labour spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), said:

“The Opposition support this important piece of legislation”.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 468.]

The shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said of the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill:

“The Bill, which the Labour party strongly supports, has got much better”.—[*Official Report*, 7 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 55.]

Of the National Security Bill, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) said:

“I rise to confirm that the Labour party supports the Third Reading of this Bill.”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 792.]

Ditto on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, the Online Safety Bill, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, the Seafarers’ Wages Bill and the Procurement Bill. If we are doing such a bad job, why does Labour end up supporting our Bills? I do not know.

On the Leader of the Opposition’s 100th day, one of his own MPs remarked that he did not have a clue what the Leader of the Opposition stood for. I suggest to the hon. Lady opposite that 1,034 days since her leader took the helm, that charge still stands.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): What we did not hear is that when Labour was last in Government, it halved the number of first-time house buyers, but while the Tories have been in Government it has doubled again.

I regret that the Government have not even got a strategy for pensions uprating, let alone decided to change the appalling decision that half our overseas pensioners will not get increases. Legal sophistry is not good enough; we ought to have a plan or strategy to change that. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will talk to her colleagues and ask them to talk to me and to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) about that.

May I also say that the Government really must have a debate on planning? In a one-mile stretch of road in my constituency, outside the local councils’ plans there are applications to build on Highdown Vineyard, Lansdowne Nursery, Rustington golf course, the land north of Goring station at Roundstone, and now between Ferring and East Preston. If developers can make those proposals outside both local councils’ plans and may then appeal to the Government’s inspectors, that is wrong. We ought to debate that and get it changed.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising those points. Questions to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be on the day the House returns, but I will also write on his behalf to the Department for Work and Pensions and make sure it has heard his remarks today. I know it is a long and ongoing campaign and that many Members of the House would agree with the sentiments he has expressed.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the House for its thoughts and best wishes for the family, friends and colleagues of Barry Martin, who lost his life bravely fighting a fire in my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith.

The recent impartiality review of the BBC suggests that its reporters receive training in economics—not a bad idea. Should the Leader of the House not introduce some training in economic literacy for Ministers? It might prevent over-budget blunders such as the Ajax

armoured vehicle programme, which is six years overdue, with costs of £3.2 billion so far and not a single deployable vehicle delivered; or HS2, where it is suggested that even what remains of the line could cost twice the latest official price tag of around £71 billion.

The Leader of the House speaks of stabilising the economy. Who can ever forget the Budget catastrophe of ’22, which cost us all more than £70 billion, or the double-counting of shared prosperity funds? It might even stop the rather misleading and lazy criticisms peddled every year by opposition parties about reserves in the Scottish Government’s capped budget. Is it any surprise that the UK is now the worst-performing economy in the G7? I will tell you who can get their sums right: oil and gas companies, whose obscene profits balloon while some of our most vulnerable citizens suffer. Let us have a debate on whether the call for maths to be compulsory for young people in England until they are 18 should be applied retrospectively to Ministers as well.

Lastly, this week sees Brexit’s third birthday. Its arrival was welcomed with joy and acclamation from the Government Benches, but now it seems it is naebody’s child. Yesterday we heard the Prime Minister deny that it had any impact on the cost of living crisis, but that is not what the London School of Economics says. Its research shows that Brexit caused a 6% increase in food prices over just two years, and the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that Brexit will cost every person in the UK on average £1,200. Where are the debates taking a clear-eyed look at its impacts?

Scotland, opposed to Brexit from the outset, is being told by both the Tories and Labour that there is no way back and that we should just sink with the rest of the Brexitanic. There is a way back, Mr Deputy Speaker, but only with the powers of independence will we find a way back to our friends and family in the EU. I hope they leave the light on for us.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I clocked earlier that the SNP’s theme of the week was Brexit. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) made the same point yesterday when he invoked the metaphor of an SNP lifeboat saving the good people of Scotland from Brexit. Leaving aside the fact that, based on the SNP’s attempts to procure ferries, any lifeboat that it procured would be likely to cost three times the contract price and never materialise, I would say that Scotland does not need such a lifeboat. Rather, Scotland needs a Scottish Government whose main modus operandi is not talking down their own nation; it needs a Government who take responsibility. The hon. Lady invites me to talk about economics and wishes that Ministers had better economics lessons, but the Scottish Government have not even managed to spend their planned budget. Instead, they have an underspend of £2 billion.

I do my homework and I am always interested to learn, so I went on to the Scottish Government’s website to see what they say about the economy. Clearly, growth levels have not been what they were in previous years, so I wanted to look up what they thought the reason for that was. According to the website, it was:

“Due to the requirement for many industries to cease trading during the lockdown for COVID-19”—

nothing about Brexit or us rotters in the UK Government. It was down to covid, as the hon. Lady knows well.

[Penny Mordaunt]

The hon. Lady also knows that the UK shared prosperity fund has maintained funding to Scotland post Brexit. She knows about the Edinburgh reforms, the Financial Services and Markets Bill, and the reforms to Solvency II, which will mean so much to financial services firms in her constituency. She knows that figures reported in autumn last year show that exports in Scotland are up by £3 billion since 2018, in current prices. She knows how the green freeports will help to drive growth, and she knows that we will shortly open up an enormous, multitrillion-pound market for producers in Scotland through our accession to the CPTPP.

The whole UK has been through the mill, but we are coming through it and the future is bright. There are massive opportunities, and I invite the hon. Lady to talk them up and to talk her nation up. If the SNP was coaching the Scottish Six Nations team, it would have told them to stay in their dressing room and tied their laces together. I encourage her to be a little more positive about the future, as her constituents should be.

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Since November 2021, I have been assisting my constituent, Mr Paul Barford, regarding his concerns about the quality of care that his late father, Joseph Barford, received from the NHS and about the way in which the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman dealt with his complaint. Indeed, I, too, experienced an unacceptably slow response from the PHSO. The ombudsman plays an important role in dealing with complaints about Government Departments, but there is too little accountability to Parliament. In the light of the concerns raised by Mr Barford, I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could find the necessary time for a general debate on the standards of the PHSO and, more generally, the accountability of ombudsmen and regulators to Parliament.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about that case and the difficulty that my hon. Friend and his constituent, Mr Paul Barford, have had in raising concerns about his father Joseph's care. My hon. Friend will know that the ombudsman is accountable to Parliament through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which holds an annual scrutiny session to evaluate its performance. If he agrees, I shall write to that Committee and to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to let them know about the case and to see what can be done to improve scrutiny.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): First, I have an apology from the Backbench Business Committee. We had proposed to hold a debate this afternoon on 25 years of Welsh devolution, but following consultation with the lead member concerned and general agreement from everyone we spoke to, we thought it appropriate to postpone that debate given the very sad loss of First Minister Mark Drakeford's beloved wife Clare earlier this week. We send our sincerest condolences to Mark and his family.

I have been contacted by many constituents on the following issue. Given the cost of living crisis and in particular the cost of fuel and vehicle maintenance and insurance, may we have a statement from the Chancellor on whether the Treasury intends to review and revise the approved mileage allowance payments of 45p? Many

employees assist their employers by using their own vehicles for work purposes, and employers can of course at their own discretion pay above the AMAP rate but those payments may then be subject to tax and national insurance implications. These mileage payments go to many categories of workers including domiciliary care workers and peripatetic health staff. This is an important part of looking after people; people receive these payments for driving their own car. May we have a review and a statement? That would be greatly welcomed by hard-pressed workers who must use their own vehicles for work.

Lastly, given the Leader of the House's Portsmouth constituency, will she congratulate Newcastle United on defeating Southampton on Tuesday night and therefore being on the way to Wembley to play Manchester United at the end of February in the League—or Carabao—cup final?

**Penny Mordaunt:** First, I echo the hon. Gentleman's sentiments about Mark Drakeford and the sad loss he has suffered. I very much understand the decision to move that debate.

I will certainly make sure the Treasury has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns today, but I point out that the next Treasury questions are on 7 February and I suggest that he raises the matter there.

The hon. Gentleman knows the staff in my office well and he will not be surprised to learn that the football match he referred to was very much in our minds earlier this week and there was much cheering emanating from our office.

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): London Councils recently published a report about school places in London highlighting that constituencies such as mine, whose London Borough of Hillingdon has seen a 15% reduction in the number of primary school children, face a serious challenge of overcapacity. At the same time the report highlights a serious shortage of places for children with special educational needs and disabilities across the capital. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate to discuss solutions, which might include greater openness among mainstream schools to taking children with special educational needs and disabilities and opportunities for local authorities to open their own SEND schools where multi-academy trusts have been able to do so in their locality?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter. As the next Education questions are not until 27 February, I will write on his behalf and make sure the Department has heard his concerns. He is absolutely right that it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that every child can reach their full potential. He will know that increasing support for children and young people who need extra support and have special education needs is a priority for the Department and I will certainly make sure it contacts my hon. Friend to see what more can be done for his constituents.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): It gives me no pleasure at all to say that if the coroner service in Manchester was a school or a hospital trust it would be in special measures: the coroner service is statistically bottom of the list in England. The reason appears to be that the coroner's mental capacity has been challenged and he is subject to accusations of

sexual harassment. I make no judgment about the validity of those claims, only about the time it is taking to resolve them. Those issues have been outstanding for two years and bereaved families in Manchester need a better service. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time on how issues such as mental capacity and matters of internal discipline can be dealt with more efficiently and quickly?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes. He is quite right that it is about not just the functioning of bureaucracy but families facing unresolved issues and the additional trauma of not being able to move on from a tragedy that has occurred. Given that the next questions for the Ministry of Justice is a little way off, I will write on his behalf to ensure that the Secretary of State hears those concerns and ask him to contact the hon. Gentleman.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Last week I met the Football Foundation and Pannal Ash Junior football club in my constituency. Pannal Ash Juniors is a fantastic local club, which started with just six boys and now has more than 500 boys and girls playing football, and has been built up over many years by former Conservative councillor, now club president, Cliff Trotter. I want to see all children, regardless of age or ability, being able to take part in sporting activities and climb the football pyramid. Can we have a debate about increasing access to and participation in grassroots sport, for all the benefits sport brings and to help to find the next generation of England's Three Lions and Lionesses?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point and putting on record the tremendous success of that football club and how much we owe to Cliff and other individuals who have enabled it to happen. We recently had a debate on community sport, but the issue is raised pretty much every week, so I am sure that if my hon. Friend applied for a debate, it would be well attended.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The position of the Church of England bishops on same-sex marriage is causing very real "pain and trauma" to many gay Christians. I hope the bishops will back reform in the end, "allowing parishes and clergy to conduct weddings for same sex couples".

I know the Leader of the House agrees, because I am quoting her words from her letter to her local bishop, for which I commend her. I suggest two ways we could progress. First, every one of us who goes to a gay marriage this year could take a bishop along so that they get to know and share in the love—you are bound to be going to one, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am sure the Leader of the House is going to several this year. Secondly, the Church of England and the General Synod were established by statute, agreed by the House of Commons. Will she allow time—as I suspect this would be the view of the whole House—for legislation to push the Church of England into allowing same-sex marriages to be conducted by parishes and clergy who want to do so, if Synod does not act?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I know many people will ask why we are concerned about such matters in this place and say that surely it is not a matter for us, but a

matter for the Church; I would point them to the large number of letters we all receive, not just from parishioners, but from members of the clergy. I understand why this is a focus for many Members across the House. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), responded to an urgent question on this matter, and I refer hon. Members to that. As politicians, we perhaps more than most appreciate the difficulty of the judgments that the Church needs to make in this respect, but I know there have been meetings this week both in Parliament and with the legal profession about the implications of this decision. I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I know this is an issue that many Members of this House will wish to pursue.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Today is the deadline for outer London local authorities to sign up to dictator Khan's unreasonable demands to erect cameras and other signage in their boroughs for the ultra low emission zone. Given that that decision will affect more or less the whole south-east of England, with councils all over the region concerned about their residents driving into London, will my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate in Government time, so that we can express our view and send a very strong message to dictator Khan that he should not be implementing this policy—*[Interruption.]*

**Penny Mordaunt:** The title that the hon. Gentleman gave the Mayor of London is causing some disquiet across the Chamber. The Mayor of London is not a dictator. The Mayor of London can be voted out of office, and I would encourage people to do that, because I think that some of the policies he has implemented are causing immense difficulties, not just to residents but to businesses in London and outside, and not just in surrounding boroughs but in constituencies such as mine where tradesmen need to come into London. We have to enable people to make such transitions, and I think that—particularly at this point, when they have little liquidity in their businesses and households—a more sensible and considered approach might be appropriate.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. May I just remind Members of Mr Speaker's strictures on temperate language—Mr Blackman?

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The decision to allow Bristol airport's expansion flies in the face of local democracy and action on net zero. The expansion will produce an extra 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions per year, double what is currently emitted by the rest of Bristol's transport. The Government's planning rules have allowed this to happen, putting airport expansion ahead of net zero, although the Climate Change Committee recommended no net expansion of airport capacity. May we have a debate in Government time on how expanding airports such as Bristol accords with the UK's net zero targets?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady has raised a matter that is clearly very important to her constituents. In all decisions such as this, we have to balance economic growth, and the ability to make the transition to a higher-wage economy and level up the country, with the legally binding net zero targets to which we are committed.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I think that this matter has been largely dealt with at a local level, but I shall ensure that the relevant Department is aware of the hon. Lady's concerns.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Following the disgraceful antisemitic abuse directed at the football fan Katie Price earlier this month, may we have a debate on the so-called Y-word, so that the House can send the clear message that this is a vile racist slur which has no place in football or in wider society?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. I was also pleased to see swift action this week with regard to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), who apologised—rightly, and all credit to her for doing so—for the totally unjustified and appalling remarks that she had made about Israel.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for confirming that on Wednesday the House will debate the local government and police grants. As she will know, local authorities are in the advanced stages of preparing their budgets for next year, but the public health grants for 2023-24 have still not been announced. Local authorities in England with health and wellbeing responsibilities desperately need to know what their funding allocations for public health will be next year as they set their budgets. Can the Leader of the House explain the delay, and tell us when we can expect that announcement?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I am very happy to write to the Department and get them not just to contact the hon. Gentleman, but to make the timetable for that clear. It is important that we give people the information they need to plan, and I am sure that the information will be forthcoming very soon.

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is the case that the ultra low emission zone scandal is getting worse and worse by the day. Not only were the majority of Londoners ignored in the consultation and not only is there a lack of evidence on air quality, but now, according to a freedom of information request and media reports, it appears that the Mayor of London may have lied to the London Assembly. Can we have a debate, in Government time, about the integrity of public consultations—[*Interruption.*] We can hear Opposition Members groaning, and it is notable that not a single London Labour Member is in the Chamber. May we have a debate about the integrity of public consultations, about holding the Mayor of London to account and about the powers of the London Assembly?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I understand that there are very serious concerns over not just the decision that was made, but how it was arrived at. I thank my hon. Friend for getting those concerns on the record today. The real damage that this is doing to many small businesses across the capital and elsewhere, the knock-on effects on household income and the ability of those companies to get on the front foot are incredibly serious. It is understandable that people want to scrutinise how these decisions were arrived at. I thank him for getting that on the record today.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): Just before turning to my question, the Leader of the House quoted me at the Dispatch Box at the start of her contribution, outlining our support for the National Security Bill. I politely point out that she did leave out the bit where I had to come to this House to make a point of order, as I was concerned that the Bill Committee for that really important legislation had to be adjourned twice, largely because there were three different Government Ministers during the Committee, two of whom resigned because they fell out with the leadership of the Conservative party. It is a good job that we on these Benches supported that legislation; if it had been left to this Government, thanks to their ineptitude, it would probably still be in the Committee corridor.

Turning to my question, the Leader of the House will be aware that Shell announced record profits of £32 billion, which is the highest profits to date in its 115-year history. She will understand that that is utterly galling for so many of our constituents who are really struggling to pay their energy bills. Will she make time for a debate to consider the firm action that we all now need to see from this Government to make sure that those energy companies are working for their customers and not just exclusively for their shareholders?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I reiterate what I said in my opening remarks: I am incredibly grateful for the support that the hon. Lady and her colleagues have given to the lion's share of legislation that we have introduced. I hope that that trend will continue as we bring forward critical legislation, such as that to stop small boats, and I encourage the Opposition to continue in that way.

With regard to energy companies, the hon. Lady will know that the Government have taken action not just to support households through the cost of living crisis—£26 billion-worth of support brought in by the Prime Minister and his Secretary of State—but to ensure that energy companies are acting in good faith in passing on cost of living measures to bill payers and also that people will not be pushed on to prepayment meters. The Department and Ofgem have taken action on that front.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Bringing the vision of floating offshore wind to reality in the Celtic sea has been the work of the Celtic sea all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, and so many businesses in the Celtic Sea Developer Alliance. Will my right hon. Friend advise how we can ensure that the Government deliver a strike price in the current auction round that enables this to happen as there are growing concerns that officials behind the scenes would prefer a failed auction round rather than start at an achievable strike price. A failed auction round would lead to investment in this vital new technology going overseas. May we have a debate on this in Government time, or can my right hon. Friend suggest more rapid alternatives to ensure success in this auction round so that floating offshore wind becomes a reality and we hit net zero by 2050?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those concerns. Given that the next departmental questions are not until late February, I will write on her behalf to the Department and ensure that her very understandable concerns have been heard.

**Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, Labour Councillor Jack Hemingway proposed a successful motion to Wakefield Council calling for urgent action on sewage discharges in our rivers and lakes. He spoke about the River Calder in my constituency, where, on a three-mile stretch from Horbury Bridge to the M1, there have been over 400 sewage and waste water discharges, pouring out the equivalent of 100 whole days a year. Even Wakefield's Conservative group supported the motion. May we please have a statement from the Environment Secretary on what she will do to crack down on water companies and stop sewage being discharged into our waterways for good?

**Penny Mordaunt:** This issue affects the constituents of many Members across the House. I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's request for an update, but what the Government are doing to ensure that storm overflows and discharges are ended for good is very clear. He will know that there is no piece of legislation that can switch off overflows. The only thing that will stop them is investment in infrastructure. That is why there is now a statutory duty on companies to bring forward an infrastructure plan and they are doing that. The only reason he can quote those statistics accurately is because instead of 6% of storm overflows being monitored, as was the case when we came into office, 100% now are. We want to improve the monitoring of those systems. The Government have gripped this issue and change is happening. In short order, we will end storm overflows for good by investing in the infrastructure needed to bring that an end.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I congratulate Stoke-on-Trent-based charity Helping Angels on opening up Café Indi at The Pavilion in Burslem's grade II listed Victorian park. The café, supported by the local ward councillor, Lesley Adams, provides inclusive work placements and volunteering opportunities to adults and young people with autism and Down's syndrome, for example, to gain experience in hospitality, build their confidence, enhance their life skills and help them transition into paid employment. Will my right hon. Friend come to visit both Helping Angels and Café Indi in the weeks and months ahead, and will she make time in this place for us to debate how we can help more people with learning needs and disabilities into the workforce so they can have a better and fuller life?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point and join him in congratulating Helping Angels on all the work it is doing to ensure that those individuals can reach their full potential, and have the dignity of a pay packet and all the good things that come with having a job and a good workplace. I am always open to invitations from hon. Members, but I might extend one to Helping Angels. From my conversations with Mr Speaker, I know that he is very keen, particularly in catering, that we offer more opportunities to exactly these sorts of fantastic individuals to potentially come and work here in the Palace of Westminster. The Minister with responsibility for disabled people is organising and facilitating some visits, and I am sure we can make sure that Helping Angels gets an invitation, too.

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): My constituent Eugene was granted permission to resettle in Bellshill under the Ukrainian family scheme.

Thankfully, he is now living safely in my constituency. However, his wife remains in Ukraine alone, under cruel Russian occupation. After five months of waiting and still no update on why her application has not been approved, will the Leader of the House commit to assisting me in resolving this case? Can she find some time to debate, on the Floor of the House, why the sheer inadequacies of the Home Office are causing loved ones, like my constituent's and those of hon. Members' constituents across the House, to be separated in a needless and cruel manner?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about that case. If the hon. Gentleman will pass on to my office the details and his correspondence to date with the Home Office, we will help him to look into it today. It is very important that, if there is no valid reason for someone to be in that situation, it is sped up and families can stay together. The work to ensure that we support Ukrainian people and children unable to stay in country and be safe, under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and other schemes, has been a huge success and a very positive and innovative step forward. That is why it is very disappointing when we hear of such cases, which are certainly not the norm, but we will do everything we can to get the situation resolved for the hon. Gentleman very swiftly.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The Leader of the House rightly referred to this week's announcement of the urgent and emergency care recovery plan, and I note that in Gloucester the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust's category 2 response times have halved since the Christmas period, the average time lost per day to handovers is down by two thirds, and its internal rating has moved from red to black for the first time in two years. Alongside Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust coming out of business continuity measures, I hope we will see further improvements, and I am grateful to those who are working so hard to improve public services, which include nationally, by the way, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the Passport Office, on which my office has recently received thanks from constituents for recent service. Will my right hon. Friend agree to find time to update the House on improving public services, as well as analysis of the impact of strikes on their performance?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving us all the opportunity to say thank you to all those individuals who work in those services, whether that is the NHS, passports, the DVLA or other areas of Government. They have had a hell of a job in catching up after covid. For passports, for example, just at the end of last year more than 95% of standard applications were processed in the 10-week period. With the DVLA, there are no delays now for vehicles and standard driving licence applications. With the NHS, huge progress has clearly been made on elective recovery, GP appointments and cancer referrals. Cancer referrals are currently the highest on record. That is down to the hard work of those public servants, and we should thank them. The Government want to focus our energy on what is still left to be done, but it is very good that we have been able to say thank you today.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I know that the Leader of the House will fully understand and share the concerns expressed by Members right across the House

[Dan Jarvis]

about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, not least the terrible treatment of women and girls. I know that she will also understand the importance of continuing to engage with a country that collectively we have invested so much in. Will there be an opportunity, at some point in the not-too-distant future, to debate future UK Government policy with regard to Afghanistan, not least given the concerns that exist about the continuation of official development assistance to that country?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this huge concern. We have a duty towards the people in that country, many of whom stepped up and were part of the reforms. Many women took on positions of leadership in their communities, and we fully understand their loss and their sense of abandonment. I am grateful for the opportunity to say from the Dispatch Box that they are always in our thoughts. I think we need to take a very pragmatic approach and ensure that we can keep hope alive for as many people in that country as possible. It should be the topic for a debate, and I will certainly make sure that the Foreign Secretary has heard what the hon. Gentleman says. Separately, I am also looking at what I can do as Leader of the House to give all Members more opportunity to directly support individuals, in particular those who stood up—including women, and particularly those in leadership roles—who now find themselves in an appalling situation.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): The Government's decision to reduce air passenger duty and reform public service obligations will boost regional aviation and make it easier to restore commercial passenger flights from Blackpool airport. All we need now is for the Labour-run council that operates the airport to believe in its potential, and we can finally get Blackpool flying once again. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in this House on regional airports and aviation and how they can deliver levelling up and help to achieve economic growth?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising an incredibly important point. I echo his encouragement to his council for the regional aviation hub. That connectivity is important to the whole levelling-up agenda. I know that my hon. Friend has been campaigning vigorously on this matter. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Transport has heard, again, his championing of his constituents and the airport.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This month Nigeria will hold elections. More than 3 million Nigerians have been displaced by violence and climate change, forcing them to live in internal displacement camps. Religious minorities are often excluded from those camps due to stigmatisation or fear of future attacks, leaving them unable to cast a vote in the election. Whenever I ask the Leader of the House for help, she always responds positively. Does she know of any representations from His Majesty's Government to ensure that Nigeria's religious minorities are not disenfranchised?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his diligence in shining a spotlight on what is going on in Nigeria. Enormous numbers of people are displaced, for a variety of reasons. He will know that wherever

there is support—particularly international aid—there is oversight of how that aid is distributed, ensuring an equal duty of care. There are ways of monitoring that. I will ask the Foreign Office to write to the hon. Gentleman to let him know how that is being carried out in the areas that he raises.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): A constituent wrote to me about his elderly friend's experience in A&E at Luton and Dunstable University Hospital recently. The 88-year-old man needed urgent care. He waited in a wheelchair in a corridor for 26 hours before being admitted. We all know that, sadly, that is no longer unusual after 13 years of Conservative Government, but it is unacceptable. When will my constituents get a response from a Government Minister that actually reflects and respects the awful reality facing NHS staff and patients today? When will the Government take responsibility for failing patients and breaking the NHS?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's case. I do not know whether she has raised it directly with the Department of Health and Social Care, but I encourage her to do so if she has not already. If she has and would like some assistance in getting a response, my office would be happy to help. We know that the NHS has been under huge pressure because of covid. We also know that the Department of Health's plans are enabling those backlogs to be cleared. We would expect waiting times, certainly on elective treatment, to come down in the next couple of months.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): There are reports today that the Government have been misleading pensioners into thinking that their universal credit national insurance credits are automatically applied to their NI records. In fact, the system is either broken or has never worked, because they are being applied manually. That is leading to a series of errors, leaving pensioners without the payments that they are entitled to. It is not a legacy issue but one that is happening now. When will the Government make time for this issue to be discussed in this House, to be transparent about what is happening and to set out the steps being taken to ensure that our constituents are not left with shortfalls in their retirement that they might not even be aware of?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns. Departmental questions are not until early March, so I will ask her to issue a reply and to consider what can be done to inform more Members of this House.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): Today is Time to Talk Day, when we are all encouraged to take some time in our day to have a conversation about mental health. I encourage all Members to do so. Many people are unable to access mental health services or the support they need. Recent figures from the Royal College of Psychiatrists show that 78% of mental health patients end up seeking help from emergency services. Can we have a debate in Government time on what the Government are doing to improve access to community mental health services, to ease pressure on our ambulance services and A&E departments?



**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that incredibly important and timely issue. I encourage all hon. Members to promote the Time to Talk campaign. She will know that we have had recent announcements on additional mental health support. It is incredibly important that interventions are there early, because that can often mean the difference between someone being able to recover and manage the issues they are facing or heading into a decline, with ever more serious interventions needed further down the track. I encourage everyone to take part in the campaign, and I will ensure that the call for a debate has been heard by the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I take my responsibilities on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee seriously in scrutinising the Cabinet Office. I was pleased to have had a question listed this morning on value for money and procurement, but I was disappointed that the Cabinet Office withdrew it and changed the answering Department. It was entirely within its rights to do so, but it has answered similar questions before. Will the Leader of the House, as the Commons' voice in the Cabinet, ensure that her colleagues respect this place, understand that hon. Members, particularly members of Select Committees, should be able to table questions to be debated in this place, and stop the habit of denying answers?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear that. If the hon. Lady will give me all the information, I will follow it up with the Department on her behalf.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): As interest rates are set to rise again to 4%, almost a million households are at risk of defaulting on mortgage payments over the next two years. Borrowers will be hit hard, and the cost of living and purchasing power will be further squeezed. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out what her Government can do to support those currently struggling with climbing mortgage interest rates? Otherwise, predictions of a significant rise in repossessions may well happen, at great social cost.

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady will know that stabilising the economy, bringing down inflation—halving inflation—and providing certainty and stability on people's mortgage rates is a priority for the Prime Minister. I will ensure that the Treasury has heard what she said, but that is a priority for the Government, and the Prime Minister has set out how he will be judged on it.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Bus services are vital in keeping the many communities across my constituency connected and yet, with the bus recovery grant due to finish on 31 March, we again face a cliff edge for the continuation of many of our services, with an up to 20% reduction being predicted. It is vital that we maintain our bus services, so can we urgently have a debate in Government time on maintaining our local bus services?

**Penny Mordaunt:** This is an important issue for many hon. Members across the House. We recognise the importance of local bus services, which is why we have provided £60 million to help bus operators cap single fare journeys to £2 a journey at the start of the year to help with household budgets. Bus services received about £3 billion in the last financial year to support improvements, and I will ensure that the Department for Transport heard the hon. Lady's particular local concerns.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House is due to nominate Members who can stand in for her at meetings of the new restoration and renewal board. Will those Members be delegates who share and represent her views on, say, the use of electronic voting, the House moving to meet in different places around the country and other aspects that might be described as modernisation, or will they be substitutes who will be free to express their own opinions about how things should move forward? If so, how will that help to ensure consistency in the new board's deliberations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will maintain an interest in this as a member of the House of Commons Commission. I think that this is a serious job. Those Members will be able to make their own judgments, but, clearly, that body has more than my delegates on it. The shadow Leader of the House also has a delegate, and there are external experts to help form a collective judgment.

Most importantly, in the coming weeks we will be asking all Members of the House their views about the priorities. We will be ensuring that we have a solid schedule of works, which currently has not really been visible to Members of this House, and that we can be pragmatic about how we approach the R and R project, both to reduce the cost to the taxpayer and to minimise the disruption to the business that we conduct in the House.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My constituent Sophia Martin from Cambuslang, who plays for Glasgow City FC, is believed to be the youngest female player to sign a three-year professional contract, having just turned 16. Sophia has already impressed with her performance, hard work and commitment, and I wish her well. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sophia on her achievement, and can we have a debate in Government time on the contribution of young women in professional sport?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I very happily give the best congratulations a Portsmouth supporter can possibly give to the hon. Lady's constituent by saying, "Play up, Sophia Martin!" She has achieved a great deal, and we should all be very proud of those achievements. I wish her well, and I thank the hon. Lady for telling us that fantastic news.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Leader of the House for her business statement and for responding to questions for over an hour.

## Reform of Children's Social Care

12.11 pm

**The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about how we plan to reform children's social care.

My first visit in this role was to a children's home in Hampshire. The young people I met were full of excitement and enthusiasm for the opportunities ahead. One wanted to be a hairdresser or perhaps a beautician—she was still deciding—and another was set to follow his dreams and join the Navy. They all wanted to have the same opportunities as their friends, and our job is to make sure that all children should have those opportunities. It is why levelling up was the guiding principle of our 2019 manifesto.

On this visit, I could not have seen a more vivid example of how our dedicated professionals can change young lives. I am sure all colleagues will join me in paying tribute to the phenomenal work of our social workers and family support workers, directors of children's services, foster and kinship carers, children's home staff and so many others across the country. It is thanks to them, as well as to children's talent, resilience and determination to succeed, that many who have had a tough start in life go on to thrive.

While the care review, the child safeguarding practice review panel on the tragic deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, and the Competition and Markets Authority pointed to some good and innovative practice in children's social care, they were also unequivocal in showing us that we are not delivering consistently enough for children and young people. These reviews provide us with a vision of how to do things differently, and how to help families overcome challenges at the earliest stage, keep children safe and ensure that those in care have loving and stable homes. I accept wholeheartedly their messages, and give special thanks to those who led and contributed—Josh MacAlister and his team, Annie Hudson and the rest of the panel, and the Competition and Markets Authority. Many thousands of people with lived and personal experience of the system also contributed and told their stories to these reviews, and I extend my heartfelt thanks to them for helping us to reach this point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) came to this House eight months ago and committed to action from day one to respond to the care review, and I commend him for all his work while he was the Minister for Children and Families. Since then, we have established a national implementation board, with members to advise, support and challenge us on the delivery of reform. We have set up a new child protection ministerial group to champion safeguarding at the highest levels. We have launched a data and digital solutions fund to unlock the potential of technology, and we have started work to increase foster care placements. This work, coupled with the direction of the reviews and successful initiatives such as the supporting families programme and the innovation programme, has provided us with the confidence to go further to achieve our ambitions for children.

I know both Houses and all parties support bold and ambitious reform. This Government are determined to deliver that, and I am pleased to announce that today

we will publish our consultation and implementation strategy, "Stable Homes, Built on Love", which sets out how we will achieve broad, system-wide transformation.

We want children to grow up in loving, safe and stable families where they can flourish. The Prime Minister recently spoke about the role of families in answering the profound questions we face as a country. Where would any of us be without our family? That is true for me and I am sure it is true for everybody. My parents, my brother, my sister and my wider family had a huge role in shaping who I am, and they continue to do so.

When children are not safe with their families, the child protection system should take swift and decisive action to protect children. Where children cannot stay with their parents, we should look first at wider family networks and support them to care for the child. Where a child needs to enter care, the care system should provide the same foundation of love, stability and safety. Over the next two years, we plan to address some urgent issues and lay the foundations for wider-reaching reform across the whole system. Our strategy is backed by £200 million of additional investment, so we can start reforms immediately and build the evidence for future roll-out. We know this is something that partners support, including local government. This investment builds on the £3.2 billion provided at the autumn statement for children and adult's social care.

After that, we will look to scale up our new approaches and bring forward the necessary underpinning legislation, subject to parliamentary time. We will listen to those with experience of the system as we deliver. This starts today, as we consult on our strategy and the children's social care national framework. Our strategy will focus on six pillars of action to transform the system. We will provide the right support at the right time, so that children thrive within their families and families stay together through our family help offer. We will strengthen our child protection response by getting agencies to work together in a fully integrated way, led by social workers with greater skills and knowledge. We will unlock the potential of kinship care so that, wherever possible, children who cannot stay with their parents are cared for by people who know and love them already. We will reform the care system to make sure we have the right homes for children in the right places. We must be ambitious for children in care and care leavers, and provide them with the right support to help them thrive and achieve their potential into adulthood. We will provide a valued, supported and highly-skilled social worker for every child who needs one, and make sure the whole system continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

I will set out some of our key activity over the next two years to deliver this shift. On family help, we will deliver pathfinders with local areas to test a model of family help, and integrated and expert child protection to make sure that we support family networks and help them get the early help they need. On child protection, we will consult on new child protection standards and improve leadership across local authorities, the police, health and education through updates to the statutory guidance, "Working Together". On unlocking the benefits of alternatives to care, we will publish a national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023, and invest £9 million to train and support kinship carers before the end of this Parliament.

For children in care and care leavers, we will deliver a fostering programme to recruit and retain more foster carers, and path-find regional care co-operatives to plan, commission and deliver care places. We will fund practical help for care leavers by increasing the available leaving care allowance from £2,000 to £3,000, and strengthening our offers so children can stay with their foster carers or close to their children's homes when they leave care. In recognition of the great work that foster carers do and the increasing costs of living, we are raising the national minimum allowance and foster carers will benefit from a 12.43% increase to that allowance. We will consult on strengthening and widening our corporate parenting responsibilities so that more public bodies provide the right support to care leavers.

On the workforce, we will bring forward a new early career framework to give social workers the right start, and support employers with a virtual hub sharing best practice. We will expand the number of child and family social worker apprentices by up to 500, and we will reduce our reliance on agency workers by consulting on national rules related to their use. For this system, we will assemble an expert forum to advise on how we make the most of the latest technology and publish a data strategy by the end of this year. We will introduce a children's social care national framework to set out our system outcomes and expectations for practice, and align this with the work of Ofsted.

This strategy sets out a pathway towards fundamental, whole-system reform of children's social care. We are rising to Josh MacAlister's challenge to be ambitious, bold and broad for the sake of vulnerable children and families. I thank all those who guided us here, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), who contributed so much along the journey.

Too many children and families have been let down, and we are determined to make the changes needed. We must remember the stories and the lives of Arthur and Star and the children who came before them. We must settle for nothing less than wide-reaching, long-lasting change. Today we set the direction of travel and make a pledge on a future system that will help to provide all vulnerable children with the start in life they deserve.

As the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), noted in November in the House, our ambition is to lay the foundations for a system built on love and family. I believe that this strategy and the actions we are taking now will deliver that. Family will be central to the way we deliver our ambitions. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the shadow Minister.

12.20 pm

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. The independent review of children's social care rightly called for a "radical reset" of a system it described as

"skewed to crisis intervention, with outcomes for children that continue to be unacceptably poor and costs that continue to rise."

The review was necessary because we have had more than a decade of the erosion of services for children and young people in which poverty and inequality have been increasing; preventive services have been stripped away, while the need for crisis interventions has rocketed; and Sure Start centres have closed, while private providers of children's homes and foster placements have raked in huge profits and teenagers have been placed in unregulated care settings, where 29 have tragically died in the last five years.

I pay tribute to social workers, foster carers, kinship carers, youth workers, directors of children's services and all who work with the most vulnerable children and their families and advocate for them, especially those who use their own, often painful, experiences of the care system to give voice to the needs of others. Across the country, they will be left asking of today's plan, "Is this really it?" While some additional funding is welcome, this is not the radical reset that the review demanded and that we need. There is no vision for the direction of children's social care. There is no ambition for our most vulnerable children. There is no cross-cutting commitment from the top of Government to deliver better for every child and every care-experienced person in every part of our country. This Government have spent months legislating to restrict the fundamental rights to protest and to strike, but they have chosen not to make time to legislate to strengthen protections for children.

The disadvantage and discrimination suffered by care-experienced people is a deep injustice, yet there is no plan of the scale and ambition needed to address the structural issues that fail them so appallingly. Kinship carers have been badly let down by a system that has never properly been designed to support them. While more support for kinship carers is welcome, this plan falls far short of what they need.

There is a workforce crisis in children's social care, but there is no commitment to a broader workforce plan. Last year, the 20 biggest private providers of children's homes and private foster placements made £300 million in profits. The Government's own data shows that six in 10 councils are spending more than three quarters of their funding for residential placements with private providers—providers such as the Hesley Group, where a placement costs £250,000, but instead of high-quality care and support, children were subjected to horrific abuse. I welcome the consultation on national rules for the use of agency social workers, but where is the plan to end the grotesque profiteering in children's social care and ensure that funding is always spent on the best-quality care and support?

Thirteen years of Conservative Government have been a disaster for our most vulnerable children and their families. Hundreds of thousands of children have grown up in a care system that has failed them. They will not get their childhood back. Does the Secretary of State think that today's announcements will support improvements in the 43% of children's services departments currently rated inadequate or requiring improvement? What will the impact be on kinship carers currently gripped by the cost of living crisis? How will the measures announced today deliver meaningful support to 16 and 17-year-olds currently placed in unregulated settings? What meetings has she had with other Government Departments whose policies play a role in the disadvantage and discrimination suffered by care-experienced people?

[Helen Hayes]

When will profiteering by providers of children's homes and foster placements end? How will these piecemeal measures ensure that we see a transformative change in the way we support our most vulnerable children and that the aim of long-lasting, loving relationships for every child is the driving force at the heart of children's services everywhere? Finally, does the Secretary of State really believe that this is enough?

**Gillian Keegan:** I think I made it clear that this is the start of the journey, to lay the foundations for wider whole-system reform. Many people have had good intentions in this area. Many initiatives have been started after a review. Many things have been tried, and many things have not worked. We need this to be evidence-led. These are very complex cases and situations, and we need evidence to see what really works, not just good intentions, which everybody has in this area. This is the start of that, through the implementation plan. We must put families at the heart of that and change the whole purpose of the system, which is not really focused on trying to get people the help they need, as opposed to just intervening and telling them what they ought to be doing. We need to help people in the first instance to stay with families.

The hon. Lady mentioned the work that had been done on local authority intervention and improvement. Every local authority has specific needs and circumstances, but we have done a lot of work in this area, including a programme to improve the performance of local authorities, which are key to delivering these services on the ground. Since 2017, the programme has provided immediate support to local authorities. The number of inadequate local authorities has gone from 30 down to 14, and the number of local authorities that are good or outstanding in this area has gone from 54 to 85.

For the first time, there is an investment in kinship carers, specifically in training and help to support them, and of course local authorities currently provide a wide range of support to kinship carers. The hon. Lady mentioned excessive profiteering by some children's homes. We will be introducing a new financial oversight regime, because we are determined to make sure we cut that out. It is unacceptable.

**Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con):** I welcome some aspects of this, particularly the extension of the ECF to the children's social care workforce and the trebling of bursaries for apprenticeships, which I know will be welcomed by the John Lewis Partnership; it has been making great efforts in this space and said to me only the other day that the bursary was welcome but did not go nearly far enough. I also welcome the support for kinship carers, but I urge the Secretary of State to go further on this and to use the kinship care strategy to ensure that they have greater legal status.

My Select Committee will want to look into the detail of the financial arrangements announced today, so will the Secretary of State or a Minister attend the Committee in fairly short order to go into more detail on that? In particular, our Select Committee has called previously for greater scrutiny of the finances of some children's care homes, and after the scandal we have seen at the Hesley Group homes, it is not before time.

**Gillian Keegan:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for the important work that he and his Committee will be doing in this area. I am sure we will be happy to work with them. I am full of admiration for kinship carers, who step up to provide a safe, stable and loving home for children who can no longer live full-time with their parents. The care review made a series of bold and ambitious recommendations aimed at increasing the number of children who can remain within their family network. We have made a commitment to implement and explore each one of those recommendations, including, as I said, with £9 million to offer support for training in the spending review period and more than £45 million to begin implementing the family network support packages, through the Families First for Children pathfinder. So there will be more work done in this area.

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** Like my hon. Friend, as I call him, the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, I would welcome seeing the Secretary of State appear before us at her earliest convenience, so that we can talk through the implications of this announcement. As much as I respect and like her, I cannot help thinking that the shackles of the Treasury have been around her while she has made this announcement this morning. Josh MacAlister called for the implementation of his review recommendations, which were costed at about £2.6 billion—I think that was a conservative estimate, given the scale of need that lies before us. The Secretary of State rightly said at the end of her statement:

“Too many children and families have been let down in the past”.

I cannot help thinking that while these pilots play out and while only 75 authorities out of 151 have family hubs, we will be letting down families and children for years into the future until we can fully implement the recommendations of the MacAlister review. Far too many youngsters end up in our care system and far too many of them subsequently end up in the criminal justice system. We have to stop that pipeline, and urgency and resource are much needed; “too little, too late” could be one way of interpreting Josh MacAlister's view that we need work “faster and more urgently”.

**Gillian Keegan:** Obviously the size of the investment that Josh MacAlister set out was bolder, but it was a five-year plan. What we are doing is laying the foundations, with two years' spending, to make sure that we can build the evidence through a test and learn approach. We want to ensure that the interventions are rolled out, and are systematic and system-wide reform. There have been lots of initiatives, but we need to do this right. As the hon. Gentleman says, many people rely on us when we—the Government, the state—are their parent, and we need to make sure that we do a better job. We accept that, but we need to make sure we do this right. Many people have tried, but there have been many, many times when it has not worked, so we need to do it effectively. This is a two-year programme, and we will be coming forward with more after that.

**Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):** I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome this policy as far as it goes, particularly the fact that the Secretary of State is not going to rely on excessive legislation, which caused so many problems

rather than offering solutions before 2010. She did not say anything about adoption and sibling groups. She is aware that adoption rates have fallen back to near what they were when we brought in the adoption reforms of 2010. What is she going to do to turbocharge adoption levels again?

Secondly, the Children's Commissioner has revealed that 37% of sibling groups are still split when they go into the care system—into homes or into adoption. A little pot of money and a little creative thinking, for example on providing funding for expanding bedroom space in the homes of foster carers or prospective adopters, could go a long way to preventing an important aspect of stability for sibling groups from falling down. Will the Minister say something on either of those important points?

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in this area and he puts his finger on one of the core problems when siblings are involved. It is about trying to ensure that the places fit those with complex needs and wider family groups. That is one thing we will focus on in growing the number of fostering and adoption places.

In July 2020, we published a new adoption strategy, "Achieving excellence everywhere", to improve adopter recruitment, matching and support services. In March 2022, we announced that the Government were investing £160 million over the next three years to deliver the strategy. The regional adoption agency leaders are developing a new framework of national standards, which will mean that services are delivered to the same high quality across the country. So there is more work to do.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I, too, refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

How utterly underwhelming this statement is. We have the usual piecemeal, short-change measures for just a few chosen areas, in the naive assumption that more carers will suddenly become available. Far, far worse than that is the total disregard for those in care aged 16 and above. They are children in care of the state. They are being placed by this Government in unregulated, unsafe hostels, bed and breakfasts, shared homes, caravan parks, tents and campsites on their own. More than 20 of these children have died. Can the Secretary of State explain why these children do not matter to her and this Government?

**Gillian Keegan:** I regret the hon. Lady's tone, because everybody cares about children's lives; everybody in this House cares to do their best for the most vulnerable children in our society. We are bringing forward new national standards to make sure that we have the right type of care homes and the right places that will keep our children safe. We are also investing £30 million in family finding pathfinders. She would do well to follow the progress of that and work with us to make sure that, as all of us want, we do the very best for the most vulnerable children in our society.

**Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): I join other Members in welcoming the range of commitments made in today's statement in response to the care review, not

least the £200 million of funding, which I suspect was hard fought for, that will go towards improving family help, family finding, mentoring and other key areas.

May I urge my right hon. Friend, in taking this important work forward, to be conscious of two things? The first is that in 2014 we had another £200 million innovation programme, where a number of important projects, such as Mockingbird, No Wrong Door and Families First, were proved to give positive outcomes for many children, and they are being rolled out across the country. We must not end up reinventing the wheel in the next few months and years in trying to understand what we perhaps already know.

Secondly, the key to this will be leadership, not just in Whitehall but locally. This is an opportunity to try to improve some of the quality of leadership in local councils, at not only director level but team leader level. Some of that funding can go a long way in ensuring that the culture that needs to be prominent in every local authority is being led by the very best.

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. and learned Friend makes a very good point, and I know he has a lot of experience in this area. He is absolutely right to say that the evidenced trials that were done in the innovation programme, the Mockingbird programme, have delivered fantastic results. We will be rolling that out further, and there is investment behind the retention and recruitment of foster carers of £25 million—that will include Mockingbird.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The children who end up in our social care system are, of course, some of the most vulnerable children in our society. It is incumbent on all of us to put the utmost protection and care in place for them. The Secretary of State says that she is

"rising to Josh MacAlister's challenge".

He recommended a fundamental reset, but her announcements are a piecemeal approach that barely commit one tenth of the money that he was suggesting is needed. So I am afraid that although there are good intentions behind these announcements, they barely scratch the surface. Politics is about choices, and I am deeply saddened, and I suspect that in her heart of hearts the Education Secretary is also saddened, that the Treasury has bound her in this way.

Kinship carers will welcome the new investment in training and the promise of a national strategy, but will the Secretary of State explain how exploring the case for a financial allowance is any different from the usual Government line of keeping policies "under review", when a third of kinship carers cannot even afford to clothe their children and they are struggling to put food on the table? How is a national strategy and some training going to help those kinship carers?

**Gillian Keegan:** I assure the hon. Lady that we will report back within a year on the pathways that we are exploring; that is a priority. I welcome her words about how we all care about doing this. It is not that people have not tried before, but I am proud of our work because this is the first time that we have had a whole-system reform of our children's social care service. That was in our manifesto, and we are intent on doing it properly. It is very complex, it requires lots of people to work together, and we have to ensure we do it right. This is a

[Gillian Keegan]

two-year programme; Josh MacAlister set out a five-year programme. We are at the start, laying the foundations for the further work that we will bring forward.

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Children's Minister—the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho)—for all their work. There is a lot in it that will help to protect children, keep families together where possible and support social workers. I specifically welcome the increase in the apprenticeship bursary for care leavers. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need more universities and employers to take on care leavers? Although they may have had a very difficult start in life, they have huge potential, but it often goes unfulfilled.

**Gillian Keegan:** Absolutely. It is vital that we support care leavers as they journey into adulthood. We are increasing bursaries for care leavers from £2,000 to £3,000 and increasing the apprenticeship bursary that my hon. Friend mentions from £1,000 to £3,000. That comes on top of the existing bursaries for further education and university. It is also very important that we support access to work. We have a care leavers board, and we will be working to ensure that many more businesses take their duties to care leavers as seriously as the excellent businesses that have been mentioned, such as John Lewis.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol City Council, with the help of funding from the Department for Education, is setting up two new care homes: one for children with complex mental health needs, and another for adolescent boys with challenging behaviour who are involved in the criminal justice system and are at risk of exploitation. That will ensure that they do not end up being placed outside the city. It is obviously a very good move, but the number of young people in care in Bristol is predicted to rise by 5% next year alone, so we know that needs will increase. What are the Government doing to support local authorities to expand in-house provision even further and to tackle profiteering by private providers so that we can ensure that children are safe in our hands?

**Gillian Keegan:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Bristol City Council is obviously doing a good job of using the funding. We have £259 million in funding to build more children's care homes and make sure that they meet area-specific needs—more complex needs, in some cases—and that they are closer to home. We are also encouraging local authorities: we will be working on a pathfinder for regional co-operative boards, because we recognise that it is sometimes easier to get a number of local authorities to work together on more specialised provision.

**Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and all those who work in the children's social care sector for their incredibly important work. My right hon. Friend knows that many of the failings in children's social care, including in my area, are a result of a lack of political leadership. Will her reforms go further and hold local political leaders to account?

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. Friend always champions the cause of improvements in his local area and to his local council. We will work with poorly performing councils through our regions group. We have done a lot of that work, which since 2017 has more than halved the number of inadequate children's services from 30 to 14. Where services are poor, we will continue to act until we get them up to the standards required.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The proposals include a significantly increased focus on early intervention and prevention so that young people can stay in their family home for as long as possible. That may well be a noble endeavour, but it raises questions about the pressure that it will put on frontline social workers to leave potentially vulnerable children in their home for longer. What additional training will there be for frontline social workers to ensure that robust and appropriate decision making is in place around intervention thresholds, so that any child who is too vulnerable in their family home will be placed into safety?

**Gillian Keegan:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. We need to focus on families and ensure that we give them every opportunity to stay together, so we will have family hubs, the Supporting Families programme and a real focus on early help, but he is absolutely right that the decisions that social workers have to make are immense. We want to give them more support, so we will bring forward an early career framework. We will also work in a multi-agency way so that police, education professionals and many others are always there to help with the difficult decisions and make sure that the data is shared more effectively.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's statement. She made a point about the importance of prevention and early intervention; does she agree that what those things demand is good-quality joint working between children's social services and local health services, particularly on mental health provision? We have family hubs and we have relationships with child and adolescent mental health services, but we need to do a lot more to get joint working to work locally.

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is one of the real focuses of family hubs. I have seen a number of family hubs that do a great job of offering support to anybody up to the age of 19 and to any families eligible. They have all the services there, from midwifery services to mental health services, addiction services and domestic abuse services, and that is absolutely the focus. [Interruption.] An Opposition Member says, "Like Sure Start." The main difference between Sure Start and the family hubs is that Sure Start went up to the age of only five, whereas family hubs go up to the age of 19 or, for those with special educational needs, 25. They are also a universal service: anybody is eligible. Anybody can need help at any time when they are bringing up a family, from the start of their journey to the teenage years and beyond. The family hubs will do a much broader job and make sure that our interventions work.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): I am interrogating the new document, which is hefty. The MacAlister review was explicit that children's social care was spiralling

“out of control”—it was that stark. The report makes a clear case for wholesale reform, costed at £2.6 billion, as the Secretary of State knows, so today's £200 million falls a long way short of what it says is required.

Children cannot wait. The Secretary of State spoke about a kinship care strategy, but those proposals could have been in her document today. She says that it is a priority, but it will be almost a year before we see any meaningful proposals in that space. Will she rush them through so that we can get allowances and other measures in place for families as soon as possible? Will she commit central Government to directly funding all the new measures announced today so that the costs do not fall on cash-strapped councils? Why have the Government not accepted the recommendation to make “care leaver” a protected characteristic?

**Gillian Keegan:** Just so that everybody is clear, the actual amount that we spend on children's social care is £10.8 billion—a lot of funding goes into children's social care. As I said, Josh MacAlister has welcomed today's announcement and the foundations that we are putting in place, but this is a two-year pathfinder to lay the foundations; his recommendations cover a five-year period. We intend to bring the recommendations forward quickly, and kinship carers are very much a priority.

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the focusing of the Government's efforts on what will make the biggest difference to the largest number of children. The Government's intention is to go with the grain of the work done in the sector, which has led to the vast majority of English local authorities getting an above-the-line judgment from Ofsted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most important things we can do is use the evidence, particularly from Government-funded What Works centres, so we know that money is being spent on things that will definitely make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable children? With Sure Start, for example, a great deal of money was unfortunately squandered on things that did not make a transformational difference in children's lives.

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. There have been many attempts to do this, but the evidence gathered from Sure Start showed the programme was not always well directed and its interventions did not work very well. The What Works programme is important because it is not just about spending money or about buildings. It is about being led by the evidence of what works, and that is what we will be putting together.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): There is no reason why the Secretary of State would know, but I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care. More importantly, I am a kinship carer for my four-year-old grandson, Lyle. My wife and I are his special guardians, so kinship care is a subject very close to our hearts. I thank Josh MacAlister for engaging with the all-party parliamentary group as part of his review.

The strategy recognises that there are variations between local authorities in their financial support for kinship carers, and that it is unfair and inadequate. Too many families who have stepped up to raise children who

would otherwise be in the care system are missing out on vital support. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that practice for assessing the needs of carers is both fair and consistent, irrespective of the local authority in which a kinship family live? As she brings forward proposals on kinship care, will she work with me, with colleagues on both sides of the House and with the all-party parliamentary group so that we get this right?

**Gillian Keegan:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and for the role he plays in his family, which I am sure is greatly appreciated by everyone.

We have written to councils today to ask them to review their kinship care arrangements, and to make sure they know we will be looking to ensure that we have the right support for kinship carers. They have the most invaluable role, and we want to grow and support that role. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on that.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Joanne Strickland and Maxine Wainwright are kinship carers in Ashfield. They put their lives on hold to provide stable and loving homes for their child relatives, but they have come across many barriers to getting the benefits to which they are entitled. Will this social care strategy help to stop this jobsworth mentality and red-tape nonsense, to help families get the financial support they deserve much quicker?

**Gillian Keegan:** We are grateful to people like my hon. Friend's constituents for all the work they do. Indeed, we want to make it possible for more people to take on this vital role. In our strategy, we have committed to exploring the implementation of a financial allowance for kinship carers during the next Parliament but, working with local authorities, we will make sure it is much easier to be a kinship carer and that kinship carers are better supported.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. As she said, it is important to remember that kinship care is built on love. Funding for kinship carers has reduced by a fifth in recent years, and there has also been covid-19. Will she make investment available to keep families together? Such investment will always pay dividends because healthier, happier children become functioning, happy adults.

**Gillian Keegan:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and it is why our focus is on early intervention through the supporting families programme and family hubs. We will continue to roll them out, and we will continue to make sure that we test what works. We will make sure we do everything we can to keep families together.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Being a children's social worker is a challenging job. Identifying signs of abuse or the needs of a family are very difficult, so building a relationship over a long period of time is vital, but vulnerable children often live in chaotic households. They often move home, frequently between boroughs. It is vital that data is passed from one borough to another, but the relationship and knowledge that have been built up cannot be passed on. How will my right hon. Friend make sure these chaotic families and vulnerable children get the support they need?

**Gillian Keegan:** My hon. Friend makes a good point, and it is what makes this area difficult. Certain aspects of complex cases can be concealed, so it takes the skill and experience of our fantastic social workers. We also need to do a much better job of sharing information between agencies. Different agencies will often have different pieces of the puzzle—data that may be concerning—but the picture becomes much clearer when the whole thing is put together. That is why we are making sure that multidisciplinary teams continue to develop so that they work even better together and share more data.

## Omagh Bombing

12.55 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the Omagh bombing.

The Omagh bombing of 15 August 1998 was an horrific terrorist atrocity committed by the Real IRA that caused untold damage to the families of the 29 people and two unborn children who were tragically killed, and to the 220 people who were injured. It remains the largest loss of life in a single incident in Northern Ireland, and it took place mere months after the signing of the landmark Belfast/Good Friday agreement, just as Northern Ireland had overwhelmingly expressed its desire for a future of peace and stability based on democracy and the principle of consent, and a future without the violence that had dominated the previous three decades and that, once again, caused untold pain and suffering to families on that day in August 1998. That atrocity, as well as other acts of terrorism before and since, had absolutely no justification.

The Omagh bombing has been subject to a number of investigations, both immediately after the event and in subsequent years. This includes the original inquest and the investigations by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and by the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, as well as a review by Sir Peter Gibson, the then Intelligence Services Commissioner, at the request of Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

In 2013 my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) decided not to establish a public inquiry into the Omagh bombing. Her decision was made in the light of the situation as it was at that time. Michael Gallagher, who lost his son Aidan in the bombing, pursued a judicial review of the decision not to establish a public inquiry into whether there had been a failure to investigate whether the Omagh bomb could have been prevented. Following a short summary judgment in July 2021, the Northern Ireland High Court found in October 2021 that plausible arguments could be made that the state had failed to comply with its obligation under article 2 of the European convention on human rights to take reasonable steps to prevent the bombing.

The Northern Ireland High Court identified four grounds that gave rise to the plausible argument of preventability: the handling and sharing of intelligence; the use of cell phone analysis; whether there was advance knowledge, or reasonable means of knowledge, of the bomb; and whether disruption operations could or should have been mounted, which may have helped to prevent the tragedy. The court did not prescribe the form of investigation that should take place. It left that to be decided by the state authorities.

Since coming into post, I have taken time to carefully consider the full judgment. I have met Mr Gallagher and representatives of the support group he chairs, the Omagh Support and Self Help Group, which works to promote and advocate for the needs of victims of terrorism. I visited the site of the bomb with them—it was a very sobering experience—and crossed the road to the memorial garden that commemorates all those who lost their life. I have also met representatives of Families Moving On,



another support group that is doing incredibly valuable work in helping victims and survivors to recover, grow and sustain a sense of wellbeing. I have listened to the representations of these families and taken their varying perspectives into account.

I have considered important factors such as the independence of any future investigation, the cost to the public purse and how best to allay wider public concern. I have weighed these against the clear findings set out by the court, which we must meet for any investigation to be effective and compliant with our international obligations, and which are at the core of my decision.

I intend to establish an independent statutory inquiry into the Omagh bombing. I have informed Mr Gallagher and members of the Omagh Support and Self Help Group, as well as representatives of Families Moving On, of that decision. The inquiry will focus specifically on the four grounds that the court held as giving rise to plausible arguments that the bombing could have been prevented. The inquiry will also need to take account of the findings of previous investigations in order to avoid duplication.

I know that this is a significant decision, and I am keen to explain to the House why I believe it is also the most appropriate course of action. First, the inquiry will allow us to meet our article 2 procedural obligations under the European convention on human rights, as it will have powers of compulsion and will be capable of compelling the production of documents and witnesses and of subjecting their accounts to scrutiny. The 2008 Gibson review of the Omagh bombing did not have such statutory powers, meaning that Sir Peter Gibson had no means of compelling witness testimony. It is important that any investigation has at its disposal sufficient tools to access all necessary evidence and materials. It is for that reason that I discounted the option of a non-statutory inquiry.

I also discounted referring the Omagh case to the yet-to-be-established independent commission of reconciliation and information recovery, which will be established by the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is being considered in the other place. That new body will have all the powers required to access all evidence and compel witnesses. However, it has been designed to consider cases that occurred before the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was signed on 10 April 1998. That is a well-established approach to distinguish between cases that happened before and after the agreement. I do not think that we should change that approach now, and the legislation setting up the commission has yet to pass into law.

Secondly, an independent statutory inquiry is an appropriate forum for examining the vast volume of national security-sensitive information that the court has deemed to be at the core of the question about whether the bombing could have been prevented. A disclosure protocol will be agreed between the inquiry and all relevant partners to take account of the national security-sensitive material involved in this case.

Thirdly, the inquiry will involve the next of kin and will be open to public scrutiny where possible. That will, of course, need to be balanced against national security considerations. It is important to note that it will not be possible to examine some of the material in public. A final report will be published and will respond to

each of the issues identified by the High Court. Justice Horner expressed in his judgment a desire for a simultaneous article 2-compliant investigation to occur in Ireland. He recognised that it was not in the Court's power to order a cross-border investigation. Nor is it in my power, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to do so, but I remain in close contact with the Irish Government on the issue.

I wish to assure the House that this decision has been taken following careful consideration of the facts, of the findings of the Supreme Court judgment, and of the United Kingdom's obligations under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. I hope that the decision to establish an independent statutory inquiry gives some comfort to the families who have long campaigned for that outcome. I recognise, however, that not all the families affected by the bombing desire such further investigation. Some have worked hard to process their trauma and move on with their lives, and do not wish to re-examine the past. I hope that the targeted nature of the inquiry, allowing it to answer the four points I have mentioned, will provide the middle ground whereby answers are sought for those who want them without reopening avenues that have already been investigated to satisfaction.

On the next steps, I will now proceed to identify a chair for the inquiry and finalise the terms of reference following consultation with that chair. My intention is that the terms of reference will be heavily based on the grounds set out by the Court. Further details will be announced in due course, but it is my full intention to establish the inquiry as promptly as possible and for the investigation to proceed at pace.

It must be remembered that those responsible for the deaths and destruction on that awful day in 1998 are the immoral terrorists. As Justice Horner highlighted:

"It is important not to forget that the responsibility for this terrible atrocity, the worst in the last 60 years of Northern Ireland's history, lies with those malevolent and evil dissident republicans who, with complete disregard for human life, planned, planted and detonated a huge bomb among shoppers in Omagh's town centre on a Saturday afternoon in August."

I fully concur with those words. I commend this statement to the House.

1.5 pm

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the in-person briefing that he afforded me and the team earlier this week.

I begin by paying tribute to all those who lost loved ones or were injured in the Omagh bombing. Last year, I visited Omagh and went to the memorial park—a beautiful tribute to the victims. The local community in that quiet market town has shown remarkable resilience and dignity in the face of an unspeakable act of terror.

The republican dissidents who planted the bomb were trying to derail the peace process, just months after a majority had voted for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. They did not succeed, which is a credit to everyone in Northern Ireland. Michael Gallagher's son, Aiden, was one of 29 people and two unborn children who were murdered that day. Michael has been a tireless campaigner for answers. I am struck by his powerful words when he says that he and other relatives of those killed want answers so that they can finally reclaim their lives.

[Peter Kyle]

We welcome the Secretary of State's decision and the approach that he has taken in putting victims first in his deliberations. I know that he met the families before Christmas and promised that he would return personally to tell them whether he would order an inquiry. He has been a man of his word. Justice Horner was not prescriptive in his ruling about what the Secretary of State should do. Indeed, other Northern Ireland Secretaries have responded differently to similar rulings.

It is important to say that if the inquiry finds that there were shortcomings in how intelligence was used, that will not change the fact that republican terrorists are ultimately responsible for the lives that were lost and changed that day. Any article 2-compliant inquiry should provide the opportunity to learn the lessons that will prevent similar tragedies in future. The Republic of Ireland now has a moral obligation to start its own investigation. However, the fact that the Secretary of State is calling for the inquiry clashes with the Government's overall approach to legacy issues. We oppose the Government's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill because it provides more benefits to perpetrators than it does to victims of terror.

The Secretary of State has put Omagh families at the heart of today's decision. I am worried that other victims of atrocities during the troubles will be watching and wondering why their loved ones are not being treated in the same way. I speak regularly with the families of the Birmingham pub bombing victims, for example, and I am worried about how this news will affect them. Victims are already noticing contradictions in the Government's approach to legacy issues. The Government rightly included the Omagh bombing in the troubles for the purposes of the victims' pension scheme in 2020, but today the Secretary of State is saying that the Omagh bombing is outside of the troubles as defined by the legacy Bill.

Although the legacy Bill is opposed by all parties and communities in Northern Ireland, I think the Secretary of State's decision today will be supported by them all. A seesaw approach to policy is not healthy in any circumstances—least of all when dealing with the sensitivities of Northern Ireland's past. The Government have presented their logic as to why atrocities that were committed in late 1998 qualify for a public inquiry and those committed before that do not, but that logic is understood only in Whitehall.

Many families still struggle with the loss of loved ones, and their grief is compounded by the absence of information or justice. They simply cannot see the logic in treating the crimes that shattered their lives as undeserving of the treatment announced today simply because of a date that appears to them suited to the needs of Ministers but not respectful of their needs as victims.

I believe the Secretary of State to be a decent man. If he proceeds with the legacy approach that he has inherited, he needs to be certain that it will provide to all victims the same comfort and answers that he is offering the families in Omagh today.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and support for my decision. On what he said about the main point of difference, I actually do believe that we are being consistent. For hundreds, if

not thousands, of families over the 25 years since the troubles ceased and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement came into effect, there has been no justice or information about what happened to their loved ones during that period. Investigations might have come and gone, but to no result for those families.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am trying to improve the legacy Bill as much as possible by talking to everybody who has an interest in the legislation. I have met victims groups over the last four months, as has the Minister from the House of Lords—Lord Caine—to ensure that we get the legacy Bill exactly right so that it can give those families, if possible, at least some information about what happened to their loved ones. That is all Michael Gallagher really wanted when he started his campaign. He wanted to know as much information about what happened that day as possible, and I hope the inquiry I have announced today will give him that.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Omagh bomb was one of the most appalling atrocities of the long campaign of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Even all these years later it is painful to hear the facts recounted at the Dispatch Box in the Chamber. I accept the decision that the Secretary of State has made. It is different from the one that I made, but I accept that circumstances have changed.

It is important in the inquiry going ahead that we address some of the defects in the public inquiry process. We want to avoid the delays that have beset some public inquiries. We want to ensure that the extensive investigations that have already taken place into the Omagh attack are carefully considered by this new inquiry. As the Secretary of State has said, it is vital that sensitive security information can be examined by the inquiry but not disclosed publicly in a way that would put lives at risk or jeopardise the fight against terrorism. I want to offer my support, condolences and sympathies to the Omagh families, and I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on the important points that I have made.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her questions and views; they are very valuable indeed. She knows better than anyone the complexities that sit behind the sorts of decisions that a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has to make. I find myself in a completely different position from the one that she found herself in all those years ago. The Government had lost a court case, and I had to consider what I was going to do based on its findings. She is entirely right. It is important that there is not duplication or undue delay, and that this targeted public inquiry delivers for all who have concerns, especially the families. I completely understand what she says about addressing defects of previous inquiries, and I would very much like to think we can get it right on this occasion.

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance notice and sight of his statement. The bomb that exploded on Market Street in Omagh on 15 August 1998 left hundreds of people injured and saw 29 people have their lives taken away from them in the most brutal, callous and indiscriminate manner imaginable. Several children lost their lives, including in the unspeakable tragedy that afflicted the Monaghan family, when 18-month-old Maura lost her life—the youngest of

three generations who lost their lives that day—along with her mother Avril, who was pregnant with twins. It remains the worst single atrocity in the history of the troubles.

The pain of those who survived and continue to live in the dark shadows of the events that day can only be intensified by the knowledge that the security services held information that may have been able to prevent what happened, especially since, in the words of Mr Justice Horner, there is “no doubt” that the authorities could have done more to disrupt the activities of those involved.

Today’s announcement by the Secretary of State is long overdue, in my view, but no less welcome. We thoroughly welcome the fact it has been made, and we commend the Secretary of State for taking this step toward enabling the families who were affected on that day to access a route by which the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth can hopefully at last be established.

Like the shadow Secretary of State, I cannot help but notice a difference. I believe that everybody should have access to justice, truth and reconciliation on equal terms, but there is a contrast between the approach that allows for an inquiry of this nature to go ahead and the way that the shutters will be brought down by the legacy Bill. I know that he will, but I ask the Secretary of State to reflect deeply on the difference that sets up for all those who continue to grieve losses from the troubles. I urge him to reflect deeply on the fact that there can surely never be any time bar on access to truth and justice.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words and support today. I would like to think I covered briefly in the statement what he mentions on the legacy Bill. When the Bill comes back to this House after being amended in the other House, I believe we will be able to answer the questions that he and the shadow Secretary of State have raised. I understand the point he makes, but as I have just said, I have literally met hundreds of people who for years and years—decades—have had no answers at all using the current system.

Omagh is most definitely the worst atrocity and has been at the forefront of people’s minds. It is one of the legal cases that has been rumbling through the system for years. However, thousands of people in Northern Ireland have not had access even to an investigation in some cases. I would like to think that when the legacy Bill comes back to this place, I will be able to demonstrate to those people that they have a chance of getting information about what happened to their loved ones, just like we are doing for the victims of Omagh today.

**Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con):** I commend my right hon. Friend for the way in which he has presented this statement. He has reflected the sensitivity of these issues and the deep concern of the families involved. I well remember some of the complexities from my time in the Northern Ireland Office. The legal judgment he quoted quite rightly described the people who planned and carried out this appalling atrocity as “malevolent and evil”. It is important to put on record that they failed. They failed in their objective to disrupt the peace process, and they failed in their vision for a violent, divisive future for Northern Ireland.

It is vital that we continue to work with all parties across all communities to ensure that the peace process moves forward and that we can successfully deliver on the legacy of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which this atrocity was designed to disrupt and avoid. With that in mind, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee heard just yesterday from victims groups about the ongoing challenge of tackling paramilitarism. I know that my right hon. Friend has been engaging extensively with those groups. May I encourage him to continue to engage with those victims groups, and particularly to address some of their concerns about the information disparity on each side of the border? It was a vital part of the Stormont House agreement to have information from both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. May I urge him to engage with the Irish Government, as he said he will on the back of this inquiry, on ensuring that information flows from south to north to the victims groups in Northern Ireland?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words about what happened as a result of Omagh—it was not the success that the terrorists had wanted. They failed to derail the peace process and, on 10 April, we will reach the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That agreement came at some price in political capital for many of the people who entered into it, but it has brought peace and stability to Northern Ireland for the last 25 years. As he rightly said, I am well aware of the ongoing Select Committee investigation into paramilitarism. I have engaged partially with it so far, but I believe that I will even have the privilege of attending and giving evidence to it in the near future. On Ireland, I would like to think that I have a constructive and friendly relationship with my counterparts there. At the last British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, we talked about a number of cases where information flows on both sides were mentioned, so we talk about these issues and I hope that we will engage fully on them as we move forward as well.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I remember exactly where I was the day that the Omagh bomb atrocity took place in August 1998 and I remember the news being announced, so we appreciate all the efforts today. My party has previously supported the Omagh families’ call for an article 2-compliant investigation, and I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement. Although we know that evil republican terrorists detonated the bomb, we hope that the inquiry will help the families to establish more of the truth in their quest for justice. The bomb that murdered 29 people and the unborn twins that day was detonated in Northern Ireland, but it was planned, assembled and transported from the Republic of Ireland. In noting the comments of Justice Horner about a simultaneous investigation in the Republic of Ireland, does the Secretary of State agree that unless there is such an investigation, it is unlikely that the full truth about what happened that day will be brought to light?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that his party leader, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), wanted to be present. The nature of giving statements, and the fact that I wanted to personally contact the families first, meant that that was logistically impossible,

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

but I know that he and his party have supported the families' call for the inquiry, and that the Gallagher family and his campaign appreciate that.

What the hon. Gentleman says about Ireland is true in many ways but, as I said, there is no way that the British Government can compel the Government of Ireland to do anything, in the same way that they cannot compel us. We are, however, talking to each other about a range of issues, much more constructively than we have done for a decent while. Discussions about issues such as this can be tough for both sides, but they are being done respectfully, and I know that both sides want to do the best they can by all the people we represent.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): I welcome the statement and commend the Secretary of State for his leadership on this matter. The entire community in Omagh and further afield stands in solidarity with the families. It must be stressed on every occasion that the ultimate responsibility for the murders in Omagh lies squarely with the terrorists—there should be no ambiguity about that. I ask him to respond to Michael Gallagher, who said in response to the statement in the last few minutes:

“This is an inquiry that we've been calling for really since 2001... We believe that there was serious security and intelligence failings and I personally believe that Omagh was a preventable atrocity, had the right action been taken in the lead-up to Omagh.”

On the terms of reference that the Secretary of State set out, as comprehensive as they were, can he confirm that if the chair feels that he needs to go beyond that, he will have the flexibility?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I have not heard Mr Gallagher's words, because obviously I have been in the Chamber and paying attention to hon. Members rather than regarding my phone or checking the news, but I completely understand his point and I am sure that that information, if it exists, will come to light in the inquiry. I hope that

he will be able to prove to himself, and the community in Omagh will be able to prove to themselves and the wider community, exactly what happened one way or another. The terms of reference have not actually been set yet. When I have appointed the chair of the inquiry, we will have that conversation, but I will certainly take into account what the hon. Gentleman has said.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and welcome and commend his decision to establish an inquiry into the Omagh bombing? I also pay tribute to the victims and their families, particularly Michael Gallagher. I will never forget visiting the town towards the end of 1998 to see the devastation for myself—it was beyond heartbreaking. The Secretary of State is a decent man and a man of his word, and he completely understands the complexities of the issue—all hon. Members understand how difficult it is—but I echo the points of my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) about how the inquiry will relate to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. I am mindful of the comments that the Secretary of State has already made, but I ask him to keep an open mind in that regard and to continue what he is already doing, which is working with others to ensure that the Bill gets to the best possible place.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. As we have seen in previous exchanges at oral questions and in other places, he cares passionately about these matters for all the right reasons and has more than a passing interest in them. I enjoyed meeting him recently to talk about issues in the Bill and I hope that we can continue those discussions, because it is fully my intention to improve it so that I can stand here, when it returns to the Commons, and answer all the points that have been made, knowing, hand on heart, that I am doing the right thing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

## Backbench Business

### LGBT History Month

1.26 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered LGBT history month.

It gives me great pleasure to open this debate. The beginning of this year's LGBT history month gives the House a timely opportunity to consider the progress that we have made as a country in guaranteeing respect and freedom from discrimination for our diverse communities. It also gives us a chance to look at the progress, and sometimes the lack of progress, in the rest of the world. The all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT rights, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who is in his place, is especially concerned with that global aspect.

Here in the UK, we have come a long way from the dark days when homosexuality was criminalised and LGBT people were forced by the prejudice in society to live their lives underground, constantly in fear of being discovered, mocked, blackmailed and punished. It gives me great pride to stand in what has been described as the gayest Parliament in the world—perhaps that is the law of unintended consequences. If I had been told on my first day in this place more than 30 years ago that we would have achieved this much progress during my membership of the House, I would scarcely have believed it, although I would have been very happy.

I am particularly proud of the role that the last Labour Government played in ridding the statute book of discriminatory anti-LGBT legislation. We did that not only in the area of outdated sexual offences, but in the workplace and in equal access to the provision of goods and services across our society. The battle to repeal the odious and harmful section 28 was particularly hard fought, but its removal was an essential requisite if we were to begin to rebuild the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ pupils in our schools, which had been destroyed by that piece of prejudice masquerading as legislation.

This morning, it gave me great pleasure to do an interview about those doughty abseiling lesbians who dropped themselves into the House of Lords 35 years ago today. They waited until the Lords had voted to include section 28 in the Bill; they did allow the debate to go on before they made their protest. They smuggled in a washing line from Clapham market under one of their donkey jackets. People like that who fight for LGBT rights when they are under the most attack are our heroines in the liberation movement.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her personal role in many of those struggles over so many years. We all stand on the shoulders of that today, but does she share my deep concern that, despite all that fantastic progress, there is a reversion in a number of areas? There is currently a petition before this House suggesting we should go back to the dark days of section 28, we see daily attacks on the trans and non-binary community, and in last year's figures we saw the sharpest rise in hate crime against people on the basis of their gender identity and sexuality.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I thank my hon. Friend. I am not sure about him standing on my shoulders; I am not sure I could quite cope with that, but I understand absolutely the points he made and, unlike my response to them, they are very serious. They are a serious cause for concern and should concern everybody in this House.

Returning to the transformative work of the last Labour Government in this era, I recall that we needed to invoke the Parliament Act, no less, to equalise the age of consent in the face of massively ferocious opposition and ongoing vetoes from the House of Lords. This was the heavy lifting and it was done because it was the right thing to do. These progressive gains have made our society a better and more supportive place for everyone, and they finally allowed LGBT+ people to be respected and included and to enjoy equal rights before the law.

I see the effect of these gains especially in the increased visibility of LGBT+ people and their willingness to live their authentic lives in the open at last.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the real gains from being able to teach about LGBT people in schools is that young people—when I say “young” I probably mean those under 35 or under 40—in this country have a very low rate of problems with LGB and T people and they find many of the debates we are currently having on the roll-back completely bemusing, because for them it is just normal to have diversity in sexuality and gender?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** It is almost like my hon. Friend can read my mind—which is a slightly worrying prospect—because I am going to come on to make precisely that observation.

These gains have led to the increased visibility of LGBT people and confidence among our community for them to live their lives as they wish, in the open. I also see it in the recent census returns, which show an increased propensity of young people to define themselves as LGBT+ without the stigma that that label would have presented in the past. There are those who regard this as a bad thing and call it a “social contagion,” but I regard it as a welcome freeing of our society from oppressive norms which imprisoned people and narrowed their lives, depriving them of the chance to flourish and live their lives more truthfully.

None of this was easily accomplished. None of it happened automatically as if there was always going to be an inevitable progression from less enlightening times to a more enlightened present day. This progress was not inevitable. It had to be campaigned for; it had to be fought for; it had to be won. And it was won, often in the teeth of fierce opposition from the red-top tabloids and some in the Conservative party who put section 28 on the statute book and blighted the lives of generations of children—although I am glad to see that there has been progress there too, and I genuinely welcome Conservative Members to the ongoing fight to maintain and strengthen the gains we have made, because there is no doubt that there is a backlash, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) pointed out, and a threat that we may go backwards here and in the rest of the world.

In the UK, we are approaching the 20th anniversary of the repeal of section 28, the 10th anniversary of the equal marriage Act and, incidentally, the 25th anniversary

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

of my own coming out, but there are still things on our immediate to-do list. First, the Government must fulfil their pledge to legislate for a comprehensive ban on conversion therapy. That must include all LGBT+ people and not be rendered ineffective by either a religious or a consent loophole. For let us be in no doubt: conversion therapy is torture, it is inherently abusive and damaging, and five years after pledging action it is past time for this Government to act. I hope we can hear from the Minister in his response some indication of precisely how and when the Government will do that. I note the recent announcement of a draft Bill, which is welcome, but as yet there is no detail on when it might be enacted, or what it will actually consist of. As the delay lengthens, vulnerable LGBT+ people are left at risk of this unacceptable abuse.

Secondly, the Government should be tackling the rising tide of anti-LGBT+ hate crime. Currently in the UK, the atmosphere is becoming increasingly hostile, with a 42% increase in reported hate crime targeting sexual orientation and a 56% increase in the targeting of transgender people. Some of this is associated with the backlash I mentioned earlier, to which I will return. Some of it, I am sad to say, has been provoked deliberately by the disgraceful targeting and problematising of transgendered people by some members of the Government and their enablers in the press.

We are currently in the middle of a full-blown hysteria which targets transgender people using many of the tropes and smears which those of us who lived through the '80s remember only too well being used against gay men and lesbians. Trans people, especially trans women, are disgracefully being portrayed as automatically predatory, inherently dangerous to women and children and somehow responsible for all the violence against women which plagues our society. That is an offensive caricature which does not bear relation to the truth.

The Prime Minister spent his leadership election campaign pledging to save, and I quote him, "our women" from the supposed threat of trans people, and we currently have an Equalities Minister—not the Minister opposite, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), I hasten to add—who feels able to use the term trans women and predator in the same sentence, as if the two were somehow inherently the same. Although she appears to have lost the battle, it was reported that she wished to exclude trans people completely from the proposed ban on conversion therapy even though they are more likely than anyone else to be subjected to it.

For the record, I believe that the cause of equal rights best advances when the interests of all those who have suffered discrimination in the past advance together. There is no contradiction between LGBT+ rights and women's rights that is not adequately covered in the Equality Act 2010. Trans rights which grant them respect and dignity are not a threat to anyone, and I say that as a lifelong feminist and a lesbian.

It is obvious that we are now in the midst of a well-organised global backlash against LGBT+ rights. It is well-funded, ferocious and potentially deadly for LGBT+ people. Its adherents range across the globe, from President Putin to Steve Bannon, from Viktor Orbán to ex-President Trump. Its aim is to reverse progress and, sadly, our own country is by no means immune to these global issues. The Government's announcement

of a review of those countries whose gender recognition certificates they will recognise is ominous, with rumours circulating that the Government are seeking to delist as many as 18 countries whose gender recognition certificates we currently accept. That is so that they can justify their use of section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 to strike down the recently passed Scottish law on gender recognition. Surely the best way forward would be to have, not that confrontation, but a sensible discussion to find a way through. I urge the Government to reconsider their confrontational stance. I hope the rumours of delisting are not true and that the Minister can reassure us on that point, because such a move would take away existing rights.

Many countries are at risk of going backwards on LGBT+ rights. Russia legislated for a modern version of section 28 and then extended its so-called anti-LGBT+ propaganda laws across society. That follows the vicious persecution of LGBT+ people in Chechnya; legislation has been passed in Hungary, with so-called LGBT-free zones appearing across the country, and anti-LGBT law is also being passed in Ghana, accompanied by open persecution of LGBT+ people.

On that point, I wonder if the Minister might be able in his response to scotch persistent rumours that the Government are in the middle of trying to negotiate a Rwanda-style deal with Ghana. The implications of that for LGBT+ asylum seekers are too horrendous to contemplate, so I hope the Minister will be able to put all our minds at ease that that is not currently on the Government's agenda.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am very concerned to hear what the hon. Lady has just said; I had not heard that rumour, but many of us are already expressing grave concerns about Rwanda's record on LGBT rights. Does she agree that this House and the Government in particular would do well to focus more on the terrible abuses of LGBT rights abroad, particularly where people's lives are at risk in other countries?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I agree with the hon. and learned Lady about the work that the Government should be doing abroad. To be fair to the Government, they do use and are using diplomatic channels, particularly to try to further decriminalisation in those countries that still criminalise LGBT relationships. While I have to give the Minister 10 out of 10 for his tie at the Qatar world cup, I can give only five out of 10 for his Government as a whole for their work across the world, simply because there are such contradictions between doing good, progressive things in some areas and then contemplating really not very progressive things at all in others. I hope that he will be able to reassure us that sending asylum seekers to Ghana is not on his Government's to-do list.

No fewer than 300 anti-LGBT+ laws have been introduced by the Republicans in the USA, attempting to create a new era of repression that includes, significantly, the rolling back of women's abortion rights and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. As I have said, in the fight for equality, we advance together or not at all. If we start losing LGBT+ rights, women's rights will not be far behind.

After all those warnings, I wish to end on a positive note. There has been an increase in nations decriminalising LGBT+ relationships, and equal marriage legislation has progressed across the world, which means 33 countries

have such laws, covering 1.3 billion people. I am already taken, Madam Deputy Speaker, but 1.3 billion people is quite a big pool to fish in.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Are you telling her that?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** No, I certainly am not—I am making a general observation, as my hon. Friend knows.

There is progress in the world, but there is also regression. It is up to us all to put our collective shoulder to the wheel in this House and push our country and the world towards progress and liberation.

1.44 pm

**Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con):** I begin by congratulating my co-chair of the APPG on global LGBT rights, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), on her excellent opening speech. It is always a pleasure to work with her on the APPG, and I look forward to all the work we will continue to do together in this space. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this debate, particularly during LGBT History Month. I know time is precious, particularly with the recess in February, so I am grateful for the Committee's attention.

I also welcome the Minister; I am happy that it is this Minister who is responding to the debate, and I particularly want to pay tribute to him; I know he is sick of hearing it, but his bravery in wearing the "One Love" armband in Qatar sent a strong signal. I commend him and am grateful to him for that; it is important that we remember that act of bravery.

We are now 50 years on from the Stonewall riots in the United States, the first ever pride rally in London and the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the UK. We stand here in not only the mother of all Parliaments, but what was, until recently, labelled the gayest Parliament in the world. I think that is a term of endearment and very much a good thing; while I must heap praise on and congratulate our Commonwealth partner New Zealand on recently nicking that title from us, I am sure that we will get it back before too long.

We are here to talk about LGBT History Month, and of course LGBT history stretches much further back than just 50 years—believe it or not, we have been here much longer. For as long as there has been love between humans, there has been LGBT history. In fact, throughout history LGBT love has not just been limited to humans. Historians consider that the first chat-up line ever recorded took place between two ancient Egyptian gods. It is said that the deities Set and Horus argued for nearly a century about who should be the rightful ruler on Osiris's throne. Considering a different approach, Set turned to Horus and said, and I quote:

"How lovely are your buttocks! And how muscular your thighs..."

One thing led to another and, as they say, the rest is history—I promise that was not from the Grindr profile of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant).

In ancient Mesopotamia, the priests and priestesses of the goddess Ishtar were bisexual and transgender. One of the aspects of the goddess that was considered most awe-inspiring was her ability to turn men into women and women into men. Her father-god Enki is

said to have created a third gender, neither male nor female; what today we would refer to as a non-binary gender was first recognised more than 3,000 years ago and a third gender was created by divine will.

We have come a long way since dodgy chat-up lines from the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians—*[Interruption.]* The point bears repeating that we can find evidence of LGBT people and LGBT history across human history for thousands and thousands of years. Same-sex relationships and gender fluidity were considered very common in many parts of the world, and distinctions concerning sexual and gender identity and prohibitions on such relationships and identities only appeared in recent centuries.

The first recorded criminalisation of homosexuality in England appeared in the 13th century, when sodomy and sorcery were considered punishable by being buried alive. Henry VIII's Buggery Act 1533 reinforced that, and he exported it across the world. For hundreds of years, that led to the promotion of long-lasting discrimination against LGBT people, which in many places can be seen today.

I do not often praise Napoleon, but the French were way ahead of us: in the early 19th century, the Napoleonic code effectively decriminalised homosexuality for many countries. Despite the absence—*[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The hon. Member for Rhondda has got to stop giving a running commentary on this speech.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am always happy to be commented on by the hon. Member—but I digress.

Despite the absence of laws criminalising same-sex relations, many countries still impose restrictions on LGBT people in other ways. The legal position on homosexuality softened in the 19th century with the more progressive and modern move—some might say—from "punishable by death" to just life imprisonment. The lack of sufficient evidence to convict all those suspected of having engaged in homosexual activity led to the introduction of the "blackmailer's charter", which criminalised gross indecency between men. That was the legislation under which many people, including Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, were convicted, and it also affected transgender people.

The prohibition against cross-dressing started to take off during the 19th century, and to this day at least 15 jurisdictions across Africa, Asia and the middle east still impose criminal sanctions against people whose gender expression does not align with their sex assigned at birth. In the early 20th century, Australia introduced legislation specifically to criminalise sexual acts between men, which directly influenced legislation in many other countries including Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda.

"Gross indecency", as defined in law, was limited to men until the 1920s, when people discovered that lesbians existed. English lawmakers identified an anomaly in the law, and attempted to criminalise same-sex relationships between women. Fortunately those attempts failed, but the damage had already been done internationally, and many former British colonies went ahead and adopted the criminalisation of lesbianism. Today—this was a point made very ably by my friend the hon. Member for Wallasey—at least 43 countries continue to criminalise

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sexual activity between women. Some do so explicitly by criminalising intimacy, while others do so through other gender-neutral provisions.

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Gentleman is making some extremely important points. Does he agree that it is a tragedy that countries that stood up against colonialism and imperialism are seeking to entrench what were colonial and imperialist exports of this country through the criminalisation of those very people?

**Elliot Colburn:** The hon. Member makes an excellent point, and I absolutely agree with him.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) for the important work that they do in co-chairing the APPG, but does my hon. Friend agree that there is a role for all of us, as parliamentarians, in reaching out and working with people in other countries to help them change the regressive laws that he is describing?

**Elliot Colburn:** I agree entirely, and I commend my right hon. Friend for all the work he has done in paving the way for many of us in this place.

Let me now turn to some of the UK's more recent history in this regard. As I said earlier, the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in the UK finally occurred in 1967. By the turn of the century, LGBT people could serve in the armed forces and the age of consent had been equalised.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** We should note, however, that when same-sex relationships between men were legalised it was due not to some euphoria about gay rights, but to a conservative view held in many quarters that we should look after these sorry, poor, gay individuals who were likely to be blackmailed. While that was a step forward, the transformation in people's minds in relation to how to consider gay people took many more years. Are there not similarities with the way in which some people talk about trans people now? Perhaps we are on that journey as well.

**Elliot Colburn:** The hon. Gentleman is right. This was not a euphoric overnight decision in 1967 after which everything was OK; things took much longer. Of course, the circumstances were very different, but the hon. Gentleman has made an important point.

I was talking about some of our more recent successes. The passage of the Equality Act 2010 protected LGBT+ people from discrimination, harassment and victimisation in many areas of public life, and the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 and equivalent legislation across the UK—passed in 2014 in Scotland and 2019 in Northern Ireland—finally enabled LGBT+ people to marry.

We have come so far, and it is easy to reel off a long list from the history of discrimination, but it is important not to forget the implications of that history. If many of us—here in the Chamber and outside it—had been born just a few heartbeats earlier, our lives would have been completely different, and would have been hell. That was the reality for millions of LGBT+ people

throughout history—our history. We must never forget the struggle that they underwent, and the sacrifices that they made, to lead to the great advances that we enjoy today, but we should also remember that for too many people around the world, that struggle is still all too real. LGBT+ people are still criminalised and persecuted because of who they are and who they love in 67 countries across the world. Half of those are Commonwealth countries, where homophobic and transphobic laws and attitudes exported and implemented by the UK have still not been repealed.

There is hope, however: I want to emphasise that. Recent years have seen an increase in the decriminalisation of LGBT+ people. Just last year, same-sex activity was decriminalised in Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Singapore and Barbados, with many more countries likely to follow. Equal marriage legislation has progressed across the world, in countries including Cuba, Slovenia and Mexico last year. I look forward to visiting the Czech Parliament later this year: it is currently considering its own equal marriage legislation. Thirty-three countries now have equal marriage laws, which means that 1.35 billion people now have access to the joy that is marriage.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is being very generous to me. Does he note with disappointment Bermuda's repealing of same-sex marriage legislation, and this Government's failure to intervene to prevent it despite their ability to do so? They did intervene to prevent Bermuda from legalising cannabis, so they have no problem with intervening, but they did not intervene on the human rights issue of same-sex marriage, which was such a disappointment.

**Elliot Colburn:** I agree that that is a great disappointment. It also harks back to the point made by the hon. Member for Wallasey about not taking rights for granted, and the fact that the fight for LGBT+ rights does not always move in a linear, A to B direction. There is always a struggle. We have to remember that and always be conscious of it, and the hon. Gentleman has given one such example.

India and Pakistan recently passed legislation supporting the protection of trans people against discrimination in education and healthcare. Further progress can be seen, with Cyprus, India, Canada, New Zealand and indeed the United Kingdom now considering banning conversion practices, or currently legislating for them. I want to go into a bit more detail on conversion therapy, because we have been talking about it for a long time.

A ban was first announced back in 2018, as part of the LGBT action plan. I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, at the conclusion of our proceedings on the Online Safety Bill, that the Government intend to publish the Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny in the current parliamentary session, and that it will be trans-inclusive. However, I hope that the Minister will either be able to give us a bit more of a timeline today or commit himself to sharing that information with us soon, because we have been waiting for this for a long time. Pre-legislative scrutiny is a rare tool for Parliament to use. I understand why the Government wants to ensure that legislation is done well and done right—Parliament's job is, after all, to produce good, well-worded legislation—but I sincerely



hope the Government will not allow pre-legislative scrutiny to enable a watering down of the Bill, and I hope that we can have that commitment from the Minister.

I have one final thing to touch on—I realise that I am being very selfish with my time—which is the current discussion around the trans debate, gender recognition reform, the use of section 35 in Scotland, and the potential for delisting countries for acceptance of gender recognition certificates. The hon. Member for Wallasey put it very well indeed when she said that there seems to be hysteria around trans issues at the moment. Often, discussions on those issues have become so blown out of all proportion and so lacking in any fact that we have lost sight of what people are attempting to do.

Public opinion polls have shown that, overwhelmingly, the British people come at this issue from a position of compassion. We might not necessarily understand all the issues, we might not necessarily think that everything that some people propose is correct, but the British people are overwhelmingly compassionate in this space and really want Parliament to get a grip of what has become a very toxic public debate. This is a failure of this place to get to grips with difficult issues, to calm things down and to talk about issues on the basis of fact and move the conversation on.

We will not always agree—I know that. We have seen examples of that with the passage of the Gender Recognition Reform Bill in Scotland and the subsequent use of section 35. I do have concerns that there seems to have been a lack of discussion between Holyrood and Whitehall in the run-up to the passing of the Bill. I appreciate that it took a long time for all the amendments to be considered in the Scottish Parliament, but the Government have indicated that they are willing to accept a form of gender recognition reform Bill in Scotland if certain criteria are met. That is all well and good, but I do not think that it has been adequately explained exactly what that framework would look like—what the Bill would look like.

In my opinion, and in the opinion of many lawyers that we have received evidence from on the Women and Equalities Committee and beyond, the statement of reasons for the section 35 order are shaky. I worry about the Government going into legal proceedings—inevitable legal proceedings—against the Scottish Government not only because of the effect that will have on the Union and the constitution, but because it will bring trans people into a very public fight.

Again, I understand where the Government are coming from: they say that this is about procedure and not the policy itself. I hope that the Government and everybody in this House can understand the problem that many trans people have in believing that at the moment. It is because the talk about trans issues has become so toxic in Parliament, in the media and beyond. The idea that there is any sort of goodwill or benefit of the doubt that this is more to do with procedure and constitutional issues than trans people is hard to believe, whether or not it is true.

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Member is making some very important points. Does he agree that one thing that we can all do in this place, across the House, is speak to and listen to trans and non-binary people? Quite frankly, much of the debate that goes on is about people without our having listened to them and their lived experiences.

**Elliot Colburn:** I agree with the hon. Member. Indeed, in the Women and Equalities Committee we have had some very fruitful discussions with the trans community in this space. It is worth remembering that the UK does now have the first ever trans MP sitting in this House. We do need to be mindful of the way we approach this issue and of tempering our language.

There is one thing that I am struck by when it comes to gender reform—*[Interruption.]* I promise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am coming to the end of my remarks. In the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry, and in discussions that we have had beyond that, there is an overwhelming consensus among both those who are in favour of reform and those who are against that the current legal framework for gender identity in the UK is very confusing, is now out of date and requires updating. There is obviously a debate to be had among parliamentarians about what that update looks like, but the current legal framework is very confusing, particularly the interaction between the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010 and the exemptions within it. We have a duty to address that matter as parliamentarians, because the law currently is in a very difficult place.

I wish to leave with one final point: LGBT History Month is important for us not just to reflect on the past, but to send a message to the LGBT community more widely that they are heard and they are valid—their existence is valid. We are standing here in the name of LGBT History Month not just to explain and explore the past, but to show that we as a community do have a future.

2.4 pm

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to follow the honourable, cheeky wee monkey—the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn). I should point out for the record that I am not on Grindr, but I note that he basically admits that he is, because otherwise how would he be able to look at anybody else's Grindr account?

I will focus primarily on history, for a very important reason that I think will become clear. On 25 September 1810, six men who had been convicted of what was called an unnatural crime were put in a cart at the Old Bailey and taken to the Haymarket, where they were to be put in the pillory. Some 30,000 to 40,000 people turned up to line the streets to watch them being pilloried. When they got there, they were assailed with mud, dead cats, rotten eggs, potatoes and buckets filled with blood, offal and dung. On the way back, they were chained in the caravan in such a manner that they could not lie down in the cart and could only hide and shelter their heads from the storm by stooping. One of them was whipped repeatedly.

This is what happened on 25 February 1823—200 years ago:

“Yesterday morning, at an early hour, considerable numbers of spectators assembled before the Debtors' door at Newgate, to witness the execution of William North, convicted in September Sessions of an unnatural crime. The wretched culprit was 54 years of age, and had a wife living. On his trial, he appeared a fine, stout, robust man, and strongly denied his guilt. On his being brought before the Sheriffs yesterday morning, he appeared to have grown at least ten years older... His body had wasted to the mere anatomy of a man, his cheeks had sunk, his eyes had become hollow, and such was his weakness, that he could scarcely

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stand without support... At five minutes past eight yesterday morning he was pinioned by the executioner in the press room, in the presence of the sheriffs and officers of the gaol. As St. Sepulchre's church clock struck eight, the culprit, carrying the rope, attended by the executioner, and clergyman, moved in procession with the sheriffs...on to the scaffold. On arriving at the third station, the prison bell tolled, and Dr. Cotton"—

the priest—

“commenced at the same moment reading the funeral service, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ of which the wretched man seemed to be totally regardless. On his being assisted up the steps of the scaffold, reason returned; he became aware of the dreadful death to which he was about to be consigned; his looks of terror were frightful; his expression of horror, when the rope was being placed round his neck, made every spectator shudder. It was one of the most trying scenes to the clergymen they ever witnessed—never appeared a man so unprepared, so unresigned to his fate. The signal being given the drop fell and the criminal expired in less than a minute. He never struggled after he fell. The body hung an hour, and was then cut down for internment.”

We have had horrible laws in this country. Sometimes, when we tell children in school this, they find it completely incomprehensible. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to the 1533 Buggery Act of Henry VIII, which classified sodomy as an illegal act between man and woman, man and man, or man and beast.

Formal court indictments in this country for many centuries used the same formula:

“The detestable and abominable crime, among Christians not to be named, called buggery”.

Often the court records did not even use the full word “buggery”; they just put “bgry” or “sdmy”, because it was not to be named. When Sir Robert Peel introduced the Offences Against the Person Bill in the Commons in 1828, which included a clause aimed at making it easier to obtain sodomy convictions, he did not even say the phrase

“the crime, amongst Christians not to be named”.

He said it in Latin instead, such was the degree of shame.

We were still executing people for sodomy up until 1835—James Pratt and John Smith were the last two—and the death sentence was still pronounced on men, right up until 1861. Then it was penal servitude for life. When it was said in the House of Lords at one point that that meant being sent off to Tasmania or Botany Bay, somebody pointed out that it was perhaps a bit counterproductive to send lots of homosexual men to a single sex colony on the other side of the world.

Once we got rid of the death penalty, we added other laws on importuning under the Vagrancy Acts, which were introduced after the Napoleonic wars. Anybody caught was called a rogue or a vagabond. Repeat offenders were known as incorrigible rogues—which is how I often think of myself. The 1898 Act added another clause, which was importuning for immoral purposes, under which hundreds and hundreds of men were sentenced right up until 2003. Two men were sentenced to nine months of hard labour and 15 strokes—corporal punishment was a part of it too—in May 1912. The appeal court at that time pronounced

“if ever there was a case for corporal punishment it is for that particular class of offence of which these applicants have been guilty—soliciting men for immoral purposes”.

All they had done was hold hands.

And of course gross indecency was introduced by Henry Labouchère at the very last minute in an amendment in a late-night debate in 1885, under a catch-all clause that applied to events not only in public but in private. It was later interpreted as meaning as an attempt to commit any of those things as well, which meant, for instance, that during the second world war Sir Paul Latham, a Member of Parliament, tried to take his own life when letters of his were found that suggested he wanted to have an affair with another man.

In 1926, a 61-year-old vicar—I am 61 and I used to be a vicar—was sentenced to six months on eight cases of gross indecency, even though the judge recognised that the time might come when such cases would be treated medically. Of course, that is what happened next: it was a sin and then it became a medical condition. If there is one thing I feel more strongly about than any other in the trans debate we are having at the moment, it is that I do not think we should be treating it as a medical condition. I do not think that the allocation of a certificate should be done by a medical practitioner, because that makes people leap through a medical hoop and implies that what is intrinsic to them is somehow a physical disorder. We can, of course, count many instances of versions of so-called therapy that were inflicted on people—medical castration, actual castration and all sorts of different therapies—of whom Alan Turing is the perhaps most renowned instance.

Homosexuality remains a criminal offence in 34 out of 54 countries in the Commonwealth—a pretty bad record for British exports—in large measure because we exported our strict laws around our empire. Homosexual acts still carry the death penalty in Iran, Brunei, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar—several of us have been to Qatar and told them this; I think it came as a bit of a shock to those running the World cup when it turned out that more than half the British delegation was gay—Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan. Two men were hanged in a prison in the north-western city of Maragheh in Iran in February 2022 after spending six years on death row. Even in the United States of America, the land of the free, Pastor Dillon Orrs of Stedfast Baptist church in Texas believes that homosexuals “should be sentenced with death. They should be lined up against the wall and shot in the back of the head”.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that all the advances we have made today are not something we should take for granted. I have said before in this House that, in the 20th century, the most liberal place in the world for gay men was Berlin from 1928 to 1931. By 1936, gay men were being carted off to concentration camps, and we do not even know how many lost their lives under the Nazis. It is one of the reasons I have always felt a very strong alliance with Jewish people, who suffered that same appalling holocaust.

The new French penal code of 1791—in the 18th century, not the 19th—did not even mention sodomy, and nor did Napoleon's version in 1804, which rapidly spread around the globe. Yet we did not achieve that in this country for nearly two centuries. Most other nations never executed people for homosexuality at all, and those that did abolished the practice long before the 19th century—Germany's last case was in 1537, Spain's in 1647, Switzerland's in 1662, Italy's in 1668 and France's in 1750. Only the Netherlands kept going until the 19th century and their last execution was of Jillis Bruggeman

in 1803. Yet between 1806 and 1835, 440 men were sentenced to death for sodomy in England and 56 of them were hanged. Peru and Paraguay legalised homosexuality fully in 1924, Uruguay in 1934, Iceland in 1940, Switzerland in 1942, Greece in 1951, Thailand in 1956 and even Hungary in 1961. We only did it partially in 1967. It did not really come until the Labour Government in 1997 that we fully legalised homosexuality and introduced an equal age of consent.

The gays have phenomenal powers, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have been blamed for all sorts of things. In 1978, the drought in California was blamed on that state's liberal attitudes towards LGBT people. After 11 September 2001, Jerry Falwell said:

"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle...all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

Hurricane Sandy, which hit the east coast of America in 2012, was described by a US rabbi as a divine justice for the state of New York legalising gay marriage a year earlier.

At the same time, a press release from Pastor Steven Andrew of the USA Christian Church stated:

"God's love shows it is urgent to repent, because the Bible teaches homosexuals lose their souls and God destroys LGBT societies".

In the UK, in 2014, the UK Independence party councillor David Silvester said that floods had happened after David Cameron had acted "arrogantly against the Gospel" by legislating for same-sex marriage. And, of course, most recently Patriarch Kirill blamed gay pride marches for the war in Ukraine.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sorry this is slightly different from what others may talk about, but I want to talk about the Bible arguments about homosexuality because this is still a very live debate in many communities up and down the country and it worries me. Some people point to Leviticus:

"You must not lie with a man as with a woman; that is an abomination."

It is true that that is in Leviticus. But other things thought of as abominations are eating shellfish, touching the skin of a dead pig, which would make lots of sports quite difficult, combining fabrics—I'm looking at you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and sowing crops side by side. I do not know if any of us have done that. Many of those things we see very differently today, but there is a bigger point.

First of all, the Bible is a bundle of books that were written by different people at a variety of different times. There have been lots of rows about which books should be in and which books should not be in. Different versions of Christianity have rowed about that. A man told me once that the Bible was written by King James in 1605 and we should all get used to it. Ignorance is a blessing sometimes, I suppose, but the truth is that the Bible is a translation. Often, it is a translation of a translation, and it may be a translation of a translation of a translation. It has to be read very closely. If I were to ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, how many commandments there are, you would probably say 10. But if I asked you to delineate which the 10 are, you would find it difficult because different versions of Christianity lay them out in different ways. That is one

of the reasons why we have a different view about what craven images constitute and why Orthodox churches do not have three-dimensional imagery. For that matter, if I asked you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I know this is not a quiz for you—who were the 12 disciples, you would find it difficult because there are different versions of the names of the 12 and you would have thought that that was an important thing to get right.

My point here is that the Bible has to be read carefully. We cannot just pick little bits because they fit what we like. We have to read it in its context and then hold that up against the context of today. I do not think the story of Sodom is about homosexuality at all. It is about rape. It is probably also about how you should behave towards foreigners and strangers coming into your community—even if they were angels, so it is obviously a slightly different story.

We obviously do not today sanction selling daughters into slavery, which is a good thing, but Leviticus does. Likewise, we do not sanction slavery at all, yet most of the Bible thinks that slavery is a perfectly acceptable system. Jesus actually said that there are two commandments:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind",

And:

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Some might think, "Oh, neighbour just means my next-door neighbour," but of course that is not what it means, because Jesus tells whole parables, including that of the good Samaritan, about how your neighbour is all sorts of people you might not think of as your neighbour. Incidentally, the point about the good Samaritan is not that he is rich, but that he is a good neighbour to someone who is not actually his neighbour.

All of that is to say that I just hope every Christian person who cares about their faith will look again at this question of same-sex love, because if they read the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the form of solemnisation of matrimony, they will see that three reasons are given for matrimony, namely

"the procreation of children...a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication...the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity."

Is that not what every single marriage and relationship of love between two people is all about? You cannot do either of the other two things unless you have the third, too. I just hope that every Christian person in the land will think long and hard about where the Church goes in the near future.

We look around the world and we see so many people still living under the conditions of 200 years ago that I referred to at the beginning of my contribution. I hope that one of the things we can give back to the world, having been one of the nations that gave the toughest laws on homosexuality to many other countries, is to be the country that gives hope, liberation and a sense of joy.

If I may, I will just end with RuPaul, because it is always best to end with RuPaul. RuPaul says:

"If you can't love yourself, how you gonna love somebody else?"

and it is true. I think one of the things that has become possible for so many gay men, lesbians, trans and non-binary people over the past 30 or 40 years is that they have felt able to love themselves, even though they were brought

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

up to hate themselves. When I was a child, all the teaching at school was, “It’s moral delinquency, a perversion, a medical condition—it’s something to be erased.” “Out, damned spot” was the feeling. So many people tried to overcome it by marrying, because they wanted to inflict it on somebody else, or they crammed themselves into a straitjacket of their own life, which meant that they never managed to have any joy or give joy to other people.

I knew so many priests in the Church of England when I was training who had devoted their lives to the Church. If they went on holiday to Sitges or somewhere like that, they would probably have a fumble somewhere. They might have an occasional lover. They could never bring them into the vicarage or rectory. Then, when they got to 60, they would become terribly, terribly bitter, because they felt they were not able to share their life with somebody else. They were not able to be honest and open. They were not able to know the love and the fullness of life that the Christian faith is meant to be all about. Then, they became quite nasty people sometimes. I just hope that the future will be very different from what we were brought up with. Frankly, there are almost too many of us in this House these days—and yes, it is great.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Shame!

**Sir Chris Bryant:** There are not enough of you lot! [*Laughter.*] It is a great joy that things have changed dramatically, but there is still so much more to change.

2.24 pm

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): It is a real privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), and I thank the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate. I commend them both on their superb speeches.

As I stand in Parliament as an openly queer woman, I am standing on the shoulders of giants. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey, who was the UK’s second openly lesbian MP and the first openly lesbian Government Minister. I also want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who made history a few years ago as the first MP to come out in this Chamber as HIV-positive. I pay tribute to my city. Nottingham was home to Britain’s first licensed gay club, the first professor of gay and lesbian studies and the first LGBT trade union group.

The labour movement has a proud place in LGBT+ history. It was Labour in power that decriminalised homosexuality, equalised the age of consent, gave legal recognition to same-sex couples and brought in the Equality Act 2010. But our rights were not just given to us; they were won—won by people who were rejected by society, ridiculed, demonised by the media and criminalised by Governments. Our movement has faced resistance every step of the way, and as the current backlash threatens to roll back the progress we have made, we must not give an inch but keep fighting for more.

I was seven years old when section 28 was finally scrapped. It is thanks to years of struggle, including by people in this room, that my generation could go through education without it and not be taught that who we are and who we love is too shameful even to be mentioned. Now we have another generation of LGBT+ youth growing up in a dangerous climate of hostility. Trans children are every day hearing their very existence and human rights being subject to debate, and witnessing media figures speaking of them as potential predators and politicians using them as a political football. Some of the tropes against trans people today sound awfully familiar—like attacks used against gay people in the 1980s—and it is opening the door to wider homophobia, too. Let me say it clearly: our community will never be divided. There is no LGB without the T.

Throughout history we have suffered together, struggled together and as we win together, we will win for all of us. For a trans person growing up in the UK, it might feel like the whole world is against you. I assure you that there are MPs in here who are on your side. We see your struggle for rights and dignity. We are proud to march with you in the streets and to stand up for you in Parliament. We will not give up on this fight, and believe me when I say that we will win. Just like those who came before us defeated section 28, together we will beat this wave of transphobia and consign oppressive laws to the past.

The history of Pride is a history of resistance. Pride is not owned by corporations that want to profit from us and our community but then throw us under the bus when convenient. Pride is not the Home Office posting rainbows on Twitter and then deporting LGBT+ asylum seekers to Rwanda. From the days of the Stonewall riots, to the fight for queer lives during the AIDS crisis, to the campaign against section 28, to the ongoing struggle against conversion therapy, and from Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners to Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants, our movement has always been diverse and has often been led by those who are most marginalised. That is in recognition of the fact that there is no pride for some of us without liberation for all of us. We do not need allies who pick and choose. LGBT+ history is still being made, and everyone in this building has a choice whether they want to be on the right side of it or to be remembered as obstacles to progress who will ultimately be defeated.

2.28 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) on securing this debate? I also publicly thank her, as I have done before, for coming out when she did in 1997. It was a very powerful moment for lesbians of my generation to see a Member of Parliament come out so publicly and so strongly, and I will never forget it. It was also good to hear her mention the abseiling lesbians. I remember seeing that on the 6 o’clock news 35 years ago when I was studying for my finals, just a couple of years after I first came out. It was a great moment of lesbian visibility. I also thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) for his speech, which I found very moving—particularly the beginning. It is a great reminder to us that much of our focus as human rights activists should be on supporting

LGBT people in countries where they are still put to death—that still happens, as we have seen in the middle east—and where they do not have basic civil rights. I very much endorse his plea for the Christian churches to take a more tolerant approach towards same sex love.

LGBT History Month should be a time of celebration, but many lesbians do not feel like celebrating. I would like to explain why, using the words of my constituent Sally Wainwright—not the Sally Wainwright who writes “Happy Valley”—who, like me, is a lesbian. Sally is a left-wing activist and author. In recent years she has spent a considerable amount of time volunteering to support refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos. Last month, *The Times* published a column that Sally wrote about her fear that lesbians—women who love women—are being forced back into the closet. I want to read out some of what she said, because lesbians who feel like her do not have much of a voice in our current public discourse on LGBT issues. I want to give them a voice in this Parliament. Sally wrote:

“I choose to spend much of my free time in the company of lesbians and other women. This is essential for my personal happiness and wellbeing. I find women-only gatherings a world apart from mixed ones, gaining support as well as friendship.

The atmosphere, our shared experiences and understanding and much more, are unique — not only in the privacy of our own homes, but also in our social and cultural activities, even walking groups, that are open to all lesbian women.”

She continued:

“In 1988 the Thatcher government introduced Section 28, prohibiting local authorities from ‘promoting’ homosexuality. In response, a friend and I founded the Deckchairs Collective, which organised annual lesbian gatherings. The point was to assert our right to exist and to ensure lesbians were not afraid to be ‘out’ in the aftermath of that appalling homophobic legislation.

I was unprepared for the fear lesbians experienced. One woman rang to say she and her partner were teachers but hid their relationship from everyone for fear of the consequences of being discovered. She was too frightened to tell me even her first name or the town where they lived, but phoned just for the opportunity to speak to another lesbian.”

Sally went on to say:

“With the reversal of Section 28, changes in public attitudes, eventually the introduction of gay marriage, I thought lesbians would finally be able to live free from prejudice, and certainly without state interference. For a few years that was more or less true—homophobia persisted of course, but we were able to organise lesbian discos, bookshops, nights out, walking groups. Naively, I thought that we had achieved an unchallengeable right to live publicly as lesbians. How wrong I was.”

Sally goes on to describe the challenges that some lesbians now face while defending our right to meet as lesbians, without men who identify as women demanding access to our events. She said:

“For some years now, lesbian groups have been forced to organise and meet in secret, taking care how we advertise our activities or invite new members. Almost all our social spaces and meetings closed.”

I can vouch for that. You will not find lesbian bars anymore in the United Kingdom, which is a real shame.

She said:

“Women self-excluded from previously safe lesbian spaces and events which had, de facto, become mixed.”

Sally went on to describe how and why many lesbians feel unwelcome at Pride marches. She said that lesbians who feel like her have been betrayed by the political class. She sees politicians as happy to watch while lesbians

who feel like Sally are erased from our culture and young women who are gender non-conforming are encouraged only to think of themselves as trans, rather than to acknowledge that they might just be lesbian. She believes some politicians are pandering to homophobia.

The experience of Sally and her friends is shared across the United Kingdom. Here is what a group of lesbians from Wales have said about it:

“lesbians are facing enormous challenges defending our rights to meet as lesbians. We hear the stories regularly. Online groups being assailed by demands for access, even if only to a book group.”

They said that dating apps are filled with males seeking “friends, maybe more.” They went on to speak of:

“Young lesbians, including university students, unable to find safe spaces without men telling them to hate their love of women. Events facing at best constant efforts to join in and at worst full scale picketing and aggression.

Lesbians have always faced challenges from men unable to accept our independent sexuality, but in the last five years we have seen such attacks ramp up every month. The number of assaults and the vitriol aimed at us has grown beyond many women’s ability to manage. The organisers of such spaces sometimes give in to these demands. Maybe they are not too concerned about lesbian boundaries, or they sincerely welcome male-bodied people into their organisations. That’s not a problem, so long as everyone knows what to expect... But we hear too often from women saying that they don’t believe they have any legal choice, but to allow men into women’s spaces. Or they are scared of the doxing and abuse that frequently follow when women say ‘no’. We are seeing lesbians forced into gathering in secret, meeting behind closed doors or passwords, and using false names in social situations.”

Those are the words of lesbians from an organisation called LGB Alliance Cymru. They say that they refuse to go back in the closet and to return to hiding. They think those days are over. Like Sally, those Welsh lesbians believe that lesbians who want mixed spaces are welcome to have them but, equally, those who want to meet, socialise and interact only with other lesbians must be allowed to do so.

I recently met in this House a delegation of lesbians from Women’s Declaration International, who shared those concerns and had come to lobby parliamentarians. Despite voices to the contrary, those concerns are widespread across the lesbian community in the UK. I do not say that all lesbians think the same, but I simply wish to give a voice to those who express such concerns.

I do not have time today to set out the solution to those concerns, but as a lawyer, inevitably I see it involving the proper application of the right to single sex spaces in the Equality Act, the recognition that sexual orientation is a protected characteristic, and lesbians not being discriminated against, harassed or victimised on account of their sexuality and their same sex attraction. The solution would also involve the recognition of the rights of lesbians under the Human Rights Act and the European convention on human rights to safety, dignity and privacy, freedom of belief, freedom of expression and freedom of association.

Earlier this week, the Women and Equalities Committee heard some interesting evidence about the legal rights issues from the barrister Naomi Cunningham, who is an expert in equality law, and the constitutional law academic Michael Foran, himself a gay man. I commend it to those interested in learning more about the legalities around these issues.

[Joanna Cherry]

My point today is that in LGBT History Month we should be able to say that lesbians are women who love other women. That is our history and we should be free to say it, so I am saying it here in this Parliament that is supposed to represent the voices of everyone in the United Kingdom. No doubt, because I have made this speech, someone will call me a transphobe and a bigot. In previous weeks, I might have expected to be shouted down, but after recent events, MPs have learned that shouting down their colleagues when they are talking about LGBT and women's rights is not a good look.

Some lesbians have faced losing their livelihoods for saying what I am saying. They have faced threats of sexual violence and death threats for sticking up for their right to love other women. But they have stood up and fought, and they deserve a voice in this Parliament. I am thinking in particular of Kathleen Stock, Jo Phoenix, Julie Bindel, Shereen Benjamin, Allison Bailey, Rhona Hotchkiss, Bev Jackson and Kate Harris. Those two last women set up an organisation to represent the interests of lesbians who are same sex—not same gender— attracted. It is called LGB Alliance and it is currently facing what I consider to be a malicious lawsuit akin to a SLAPP to remove its charitable status. It is very important that organisations such as LGB Alliance should be allowed to organise on the basis of same sex attraction. That is their legal right under the Equality Act and human rights law. I believe that LGB Alliance will prevail and that lesbians will prevail. In this month of lesbian history and in future months, we will stand up for who we are and for our rights with pride.

2.39 pm

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I just want to say “Thank you so much” to the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Members who proposed the debate and all hon. Members on both sides of the House for their speeches on the important issue of LGBTQ+ History Month. It is so important for the visibility that it affords people across our community. For all those who are anxious about who they are, it can be affirming and even life changing to celebrate the history of people like them—people like us—and to see out and proud and politically active people making a difference in the world.

It is a privilege to stand alongside and follow trailblazers, including Members present such as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), who is a dear friend of mine. Is she right hon.—did I get it wrong?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** No.

**Olivia Blake:** That is an absolute travesty—we should sort that out.

My hon. Friend has led the way through such tricky times and through such prejudice. She has been a champion and was the visibility that we needed through my childhood and that of many others. That was really courageous. I was seven in 1997. I came out at 14 and went back in the closet. “Gay” was the biggest insult that could be said in the playground, and “lesbo” was used as well. It was not a safe space to come out, so I went back into the closet until my early 20s, when I went to university and had the freedom to be who I truly am.

As a bi woman, it is interesting to see and hear even Members of this House trying to erase my identity on radio programmes such as “Woman’s Hour”, accusing people who happen to be bisexual, who fall in love with someone of the same gender and who happen to have that happiness recognised in a marriage, of cosplaying. I am not cosplaying. I am bisexual. I have loved men, I have loved women and I think that should be celebrated.

This is a debate about love. It is also a debate about hate—they are two sides of the same coin when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. We will always have to resist, and it is that resistance that allows children, young people, older people and people going into care homes in their 70s to be out and proud. It is a constant battle and, as many have said, we must be vigilant.

We could all do with remembering that it is not just in other countries that people are losing their lives to prejudice, whether through lynching—unfortunately, that happens in some countries—or regressive laws. Society continues to peddle hate, to peddle fear and to tell people, “Hate yourself. Do not love yourself. You are not valid. You are not welcome in our society. You should change and hide yourself to be in our society.”

In 2021, Just Like Us, the LGBT+ young people’s charity, surveyed 2,934 pupils aged 11 to 18. More than 1,000—1,140—pupils identified as LGBT+. It found that 68% of LGBT+ young people had experienced suicidal thoughts, compared with 29% of young people who were not LGBT+. For lesbians, it was 74% and for transgender, 77%. They were most likely to experience suicidal thoughts and feelings. Nearly a third of LGBT young people have self-harmed, compared with only 9% of non-LGBT young people. Of the black LGBT young people surveyed, 89% had experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings, compared with 67% of the wider LGBT+ young people surveyed. Those statistics should absolutely shame us. I think that we can sometimes feel that we have reached equality and that we can be who we want to be, but those statistics paint another picture. That is why it is so important that we can talk about LGBT+ experiences in our schools and colleges.

When I did sex education at school, someone rolled out the VCR—that is showing my age. For kids watching at home, that was a tape that we put in a machine to play a video. We were separated from the boys in our class and put in a hall. Someone had started their period, so it was felt that we needed to know about what being a woman was and what being a woman meant. The video had this poor actress on an escalator. She got on, and the video said, “Being a woman: there are ups”—the woman went up the escalator—“and there are downs”, and she went down the escalator. That sticks with me and is the only thing that I remember about the video, because the rest of it was not relevant to me and my identity. It was very prescriptive. It was all about, “This is what happens to make a baby. There you go—job’s a good’un. Don’t do it before you’re ready”. Obviously there was no mention of condoms, because that would be ridiculous. That was of its time in the ’90s and the early ’00s. Section 28 was still in force and there were whisperings about which teachers might be gay, but they were not able to talk to us about it. They could not say, “Yes, I am, and I am proud of it.” That was really harmful.

People make assumptions about sexuality and what it means. People—even within our community—still see bisexual people as a threat to lesbian or gay areas.

We are told, “Pick a side.” We are considered hypersexualised, not real and living in a fantasy land. That is absolutely not the truth for every member of every category in LGBTQ.

Some people may say, “Why does that acronym keep on getting bigger and longer? Why is it growing?” I am glad that it is growing, and I hope that in 50 years’ time when openly gay, lesbian, bi, transgender, queer and non-binary people and whoever else stand up here, they can look back, quote our speeches from today and say, “How horrifying that in 2023 politicians were standing up and saying this.” I hope they challenge us and that we continue to develop our understanding, acceptance and tolerance of people.

We need to recognise that, behind every LGBTQ+ person, there is a family. I am pleased that that family is now mostly made up of relatives: the people who have brought that person up, loved them and supported them. However, there is still a family around every LGBTQ+ person, and they might not be people they are related to, because there are still young people who have to flee from prejudice in their own homes. At 16, 17 or 18, they still have to leave home and leave the people who are meant to love and protect them to get to a place of safety and escape persecution and conversion therapy. As has been said, that is torture.

I wonder how the many of us in this House who are parents, aunts, uncles or grandparents of trans children must feel having to tolerate the discussion of how there are failings in the way we love our family members, how we are creating a threat to society and how we are allowing our medically ill loved ones to act in a way they should not. I just think it is absolutely abhorrent. Actually, I say to anyone who is supporting a trans young person—or anyone who is trans themselves, or non-binary, lesbian or gay—“You’re welcome, and please continue to stand in solidarity with the person you love, whether that is through a relationship or as a relative or a friend.”

Love is so, so important—it feeds each of us, and it is as important as water and food to the human condition—and the dehumanising nature of the debates we have seen over recent years has led me to be very concerned about where we are at the moment. We have heard far too often even our children being painted as predators, perverts and somehow a danger to others for just being who they are. However, this debate reminds us that LGBTQ+ people are everywhere, and have been throughout our history, as was eloquently put across by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn).

The whole idea of being in the closet hinges on the mismatch between someone’s internal emotional life and how they appear to other people, and the mismatch can often be dramatic. Being in the closet is something I have experienced, and it is horrible—not being able to be your true self is really difficult. For some bisexual people, being in a heterosexual relationship is enough for people to say they are not really bisexual—that can be both ways, with people saying either, “They’re actually a lesbian” or “They’re actually straight”—or even that they are appropriating gay culture. It is a denial of their internal emotional life: a “prove it” culture that colludes with the worst kind of homophobia to say, “If you’re not going to be gay in the way we say you should be gay, get back in the closet.” At its worst, it stops many from ever coming out at all. This does not only happen to people in the B category of LGBTQ+. The tension between

the internal experience of what and who you are and the way the world expects you to be is rife across the whole spectrum of the Pride progress flag: “Be gay, but not like that; be lesbian, but not like that; be—especially—trans, but not like that”.

I know some people find the word “queer” difficult. It rakes up old or maybe even recent memories of being abused, just as “gay” and “lesbian” were used against us in the playground. I realise the pain and hurt that that word may make people feel, but there is something about it that flips the “but not like that” attitude. Queer culture exists, and we live messy lives, feel messy feelings and express ourselves in numerous and various ways—exciting ways—in great spaces that are the most welcoming I know. For those who use the word, queerness celebrates the way that people’s experiences of themselves do not ever quite fit with the labels and stereotypes. I celebrate that, because stereotypes can be toxic, as we have heard with the risk of suicide for younger LGBTQ+ people.

That is especially so when we look at public policy. Look at the way we treat LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. We changed the law about the evidence that they need to provide to claim asylum for being LGBTQ+ to the satisfaction of the people making judgments on their sexuality, but border officials may have no experience, lived experience, understanding or, for that matter, even training about what being LGBTQ+ is. People have often been hiding their entire life for fear of persecution just for who they are. It could even be that the way they express their sexuality—for example, the language they use to talk about it—is specific to their culture, and is not even recognised in the interview room. Their future wellbeing is held to ransom by the extent to which they conform to the received stereotypes of the interviewer.

The debate on trans rights is similar. Trans people are caught in the crossfire of being expected to conform to gender stereotypes by medical professionals and policy makers, but when they do, they are told that they are just replicating and internalising damaging gendered expectations and are therefore anti-feminist. Non-binary people do not even fit into that framework of understanding, and they are not even acknowledged as existing. Well, I see you: I see non-binary people and I recognise non-binary people. Their experience is absolutely valid and is beautiful. I am so proud that we are getting to a point where we can get outside these boxes.

This approach to the public discussion of LGBTQ+ people must end. Instead, we should respect and take seriously the actual lived experience of all LGBTQ+ people, not dismiss them as illegitimate, appropriative—that is not a word; well, it is now—or suspicious. That means taking the Government’s consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 seriously, and listening to the people who go through the process of getting a gender recognition certificate. Their testimony is harrowing. They talk about being dehumanised and humiliated for simply trying to get the world to acknowledge their existence and who they are. That process must be transformed, and it needs to be de-medicalised. We need to get rid of the medieval spousal permission rules, of course, but that cannot be all we do. We must end all aspects of the process that reinforce the outdated and old-fashioned expectations of how men and women should behave.

It also means brushing up on the law. The Equality Act 2010 is a beautiful piece of legislation that allows people to stand with pride, dignity, respect and honesty

[*Olivia Blake*]

and makes me proud to be a Labour MP. It has been a huge leap forward in fighting discrimination and tackling bigotry, allowing young people now to come out proudly to communities and be accepted for who they are.

The term “gender recognition certificate” appears once in that Act, in a point about getting married. GRCs are not related to how the Act defines a transgender person or what it says about trans people’s access to single-sex services. Today in the UK, we do not need a GRC to access a public toilet, changing room or any other single-sex service, just as we do not need our birth certificate to access them either. It is a red herring to say that we cannot have GRA reform because of the Equality Act. The only way the two are related is that both are about making life better for people who are marginalised and discriminated against. They are a way of recognising as a state that people exist, rather than pushing them back into a Narnia-like wardrobe that will have endless people in it if we continue down this road of trying to deny their existence.

We are not going anywhere as the LGBT+ community. We are proud, we are here and we are staying. For years, we have been told to get back in the closet because we are troublesome, we are perverts, we are a risk to children and we are somehow troublesome to society, rather than just enjoying our lives and loving who we can in a legitimate way. While the history of LGBTQ+ people in the UK shows that we have come a long way, the fact that our existence continues to be challenged within those stereotypes is a shame.

**Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Member’s speech. She touched on how our community has always been around and we are not going anywhere, but I would like to pay tribute to the people whose views have changed, even since my childhood in the ’80s—the people who go to Pride, celebrate it and recognise us as part of the community. It is important when we debate matters in this House that we do not leave children, or people who are starting to work out what they are in life, thinking that the world is really different from how it is. The vast majority of heterosexual people, frankly, could not give two hoots and would quite enjoy a nice party. I want to add that balance to her serious point. Does she agree?

**Olivia Blake:** Absolutely. As I have said throughout my speech, I do not think prejudice is defined by one part of this. We are learning collectively, and I am happy for people to make mistakes, get language wrong and learn, but I want people to be on the right side of history on this. We know that people in this House and the other place have said horrific things about gay people in the past, but they have been on that journey, and I welcome that allyship. I married a straight man—a heterosexual man—and I welcome that allyship, but we need to recognise where we are at the moment and the dangers we are facing as a broader community.

We need to take pride in ourselves. We need to be at those Pride marches. We need to be the ones who are educating. We need to be the pioneers. We need to be the ones who are saying, “Love is love. Hate is hate”, and calling that out and spotting that difference. Through the determination of our continued struggle, we continue

to tackle stereotypes that are just as harmful for heterosexual men as they are for gay men. A lot of people like to talk about toxic masculinity, but there are lots of different stereotypes that are harmful.

Everyone is an individual. Everyone’s individual love and individual identity is valid, wonderful and beautiful to me, and is why humanity is so exciting. It is so great to represent communities with all of that in. It is the fantasticness of being human. We need to stop dehumanising people and recognise that humanity is fantastic, and that has to include every part of the LGBTQ+ community.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the shadow Minister.

2.59 pm

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Obviously, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing it. This debate has been one of the most interesting and inspirational that I have had the privilege of being here for in a long time in this House. I thank everyone who has contributed so powerfully, especially those who have shared sometimes very personal experiences. That came across in the previous speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). Many have been trailblazers in the journey towards greater LGBT+ representation in this House and campaigned for the transformational change in LGBT+ equality that we have seen over the past 30 years. In this debate, it has again been remarked that we have the gayest Parliament in the world, but I repeat what I have said before when that comment has been made: no Parliament in the world is likely to contain no LGBT people, it is just that in our country people can be who they are and can love whom they love.

We gather together in LGBT+ History Month to celebrate progress towards LGBT+ equality, where this has been achieved, and those who secured it. For me, equality is about everyone having a fair shot at life and a fair opportunity to achieve, and removing barriers and discrimination based on whom you love or who you are. Those are British values and what our country is built on: inspirational people who have worked hard to achieve their dreams and have changed the world.

The contribution that LGBT+ people have made to this country is nothing less than awe-inspiring. We have heard so much about that this afternoon, and I felt that awe last summer when I visited the new Queer Britain Museum in London and its fantastic celebration of our country’s LGBT+ history, in all its glory. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington detailed that rich history, but of course my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), who is not in his place, indicated that although that has been a history of tremendous resilience, it has also been one of utterly appalling prejudice and oppression. I recommend to everyone in this House, although many will have seen it, the Pride of Place website that was created in collaboration with Historic England, which shows how that history of LGBT+ people is so important to every part of England. There are incredible stories on that website.



Those incredible stories are clear from our LGBT+ role models. I cannot help but mention my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey at this point, as others rightly have. She was a redoubtable member of the Government when she was one, and she is an Opposition Member who, it is fair to say, very much strikes fear into current Ministers. She has been such a steady campaigner for LGBT+ rights. Of course, it is people such as her and other pioneers of LGBT+ rights in our movement, from Maureen Colquhoun to Chris Smith and many more, who make me proud not only of my party, but of this place.

When we look back at that history, I am proud to see that it was Labour that voted, in 1985, for a resolution committing to lesbian and gay rights; that we removed the terrible section 28 law from the statute books in 2003; that we passed the law that gave trans people the right to legally change their gender; that we introduced the Equality Act, which others have mentioned; that we lifted the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces; and that we introduced civil partnerships and laws to allow unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to apply for joint adoption—both of those were done in the face of hostility and strong opposition. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) set out that although those advances were made, so often that was in the face of tremendous hostility.

However, we need to do far more, because many LGBT+ people and their allies feel they may not have much to celebrate this LGBT+ History Month. So many promises have been made, from the LGBT action plan and the LGBT advisory panel, which of course has been disbanded, to the international conference that did not take place and the GRA reform that has not happened.

These are worrying times. Hate crime has increased across all categories, but particularly anti-LGBT+ hate, including acts of physical violence. Waiting times have soared for the services that LGBT+ people need, and particularly for gender identity services. Meanwhile, conversion therapy is going unchecked, as we have heard many times in this debate. I fear that future historians may not look kindly on every detail of this period of LGBT history; I hope that the Minister will provide some reassurance today that I am wrong.

Like other hon. Members, I have some simple questions for the Minister. Five years after the promised ban on conversion therapy, can he guarantee that a Bill will definitely be introduced in the current Parliament? Will it definitely protect trans people? Will the Minister for Women and Equalities actually support it? Will it finally close the ridiculous loophole that allows adults to consent to being subject to abuse? What are the Government doing to address the awful rise in hate crime? Five years have passed since the Law Commission first recommended equalising the law so that perpetrators of anti-disability and anti-LGBT+ hate crime get longer sentences. Can the Minister explain why the Government have not acted on that recommendation? Finally, what discussions has the Minister had with colleagues about bringing down waiting lists for gender identity clinics? Where, for example, are the three new clinics promised by the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)? I do hope that the Minister will answer those questions today.

We need a different approach: one that does not treat LGBT+ rights as a political football or an afterthought, but that restores our country's reputation as a beacon of LGBT+ freedom and equality. I take as my guide the legacy of the 1997 to 2010 Government, who worked hard to bring people together to deliver greater LGBT+ equality even when that was difficult. Labour did not duck the big challenges then, and we will not do so now.

The next Labour Government will break new ground by introducing a full, trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy, and we will do so without putting legitimate talking therapies at risk. We will fix the historic injustice by equalising the law so that crimes motivated by sexual orientation, gender identity and disability are treated as aggravated offences. We will keep our promise to modernise the process of gender recognition to remove indignities while upholding the Equality Act, including its provision for single-sex spaces.

We will appoint an international LGBT rights envoy to raise awareness and improve rights across the world—rights on which many countries are sadly going backwards, as has been so ably detailed in this debate. We will bring in a new deal for working people that will require employers to create and maintain workplaces free from LGBT+ harassment, including by third parties. We will undertake one of the biggest expansions of the NHS workforce in history so that everyone, including LGBT+ people, can access the treatment they need on time.

LGBT+ History Month teaches us that positive and enduring change for LGBT+ people is possible when Governments have the bravery to deliver. That is what the next Labour Government will be determined to do, because everyone deserves equality, dignity and respect.

3.8 pm

**The Minister for Equalities (Stuart Andrew):** I thank the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this debate and for their really important work with the all-party parliamentary group. It is a real pleasure to close today's debate: not only has it has been moving—at times very moving—and funny, but it has been the House at its best. The tone that all hon. Members have set in their contributions today has been a fitting tribute to an important date in our calendar.

As we have heard, LGBT people have existed throughout history, long before the first Pride march wound its way through the streets of London in 1972. I put on record my thanks to and my admiration for a former Member of this House, Eric Ollerenshaw, who was one of the participants in that Pride march back in those very difficult days.

LGBT people have existed at every level of society in all periods of our long and rich history, but much of that history, including the numerous achievements and experiences of people whom we would today call LGBT, is sadly lost to history. Although, the chat-up lines of bygone days, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington alluded, made me blush for a moment.

On our journey from partial decriminalisation in 1967 to the modern day, we have seen increasing visibility and acceptance of LGBT people. Today, we rightly celebrate their contribution to a modern United Kingdom. Gone are the days, thankfully, when LGBT people had

[Stuart Andrew]

to live secret lives for fear of imprisonment or death, which was no better articulated than by the many examples given by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant).

Today, LGBT people are able to be themselves, whether they are openly serving in our armed forces, working in the NHS as doctors and nurses, teaching in our schools or working in any other workplace. In fact, when I first stood for election to this House, it was noticeable that people were more interested not in the fact I am gay but in the fact that my partner works for Marks & Spencer and I can get a 20% discount.

We should also be proud that this Parliament has the most LGBT parliamentarians, or did until recently, of any democracy in the world. I place on record my thanks to those who made that possible by being open when it was challenging to be so, including Lord Smith of Finsbury. They paved the way for others, like me, to follow.

As we look back, as a community and as a nation, we have much to be proud of. This year marks a decade since the introduction of same-sex marriage in England and Wales, a process since repeated in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is great that, since then, tens of thousands of LGBT couples have taken the opportunity to stand in front of friends and family to declare their love and commitment to one another, safe in the knowledge that their relationship, their family, is no less recognised or valid than any other.

However, as great as our accomplishments may have been, challenges remain. Harassment, discrimination and violence against LGBT people continue to exist in our society, and the Government and I are clear that everyone should be free to be themselves, without fear of harm. I say that as someone who, some years ago, was knocked unconscious in a queer-bashing episode. The episode itself was hard enough, but it was being locked up at home afterwards that I found really challenging. For me, tackling that sort of prejudice will be a key priority in this role.

That is why we will publish a draft Bill to ban conversion practices, also referred to as conversion therapy. It is important that we end practices that falsely claim to cure or change LGBT people to something that is considered far more preferable. Let me make it perfectly clear that such practices are harmful and do not work. Being LGBT is no less valid or fulfilling a life than any other. We only have to see films such as “Prayers for Bobby”, which gives a true account of what actually happens when people are forced into conversion practices. Rather than changing someone’s innate feelings, such practices leave victims with lasting mental and emotional trauma and have no place in society.

We also know that, sadly, these practices continue across the UK, which is why the Government will publish draft legislation in this parliamentary Session to ban this targeted threat to our LGBT citizens. This ban will include targeted efforts to change someone from being or to being transgender. This Bill will go through pre-legislative scrutiny, and my officials and I look forward to progressing it in the coming months.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** The sympathy of the whole House is with the Minister for his sad and difficult experience of gay bashing. What kind of timetable do

the Government envisage for this Bill, because draft legislation can hang around for a very long time? Will he take this opportunity to confirm from the Dispatch Box that the Bill will not have loopholes that allow people to consent to conversion?

**Stuart Andrew:** The allocation of parliamentary time is not within my gift, but I assure the hon. Lady that we are working extremely hard to get this done as quickly as possible. Many of the points that she has raised explain why we will go through pre-legislative scrutiny process.

In the meantime, that is why we funded in October a conversion therapy victim support service, providing expert advice and assistance in a safe and confidential environment. I urge anyone who has been a victim or is undergoing any experience of conversion practices of any kind to get in touch with that service through its website or helpline.

As I touched on a moment ago, too many people sadly experience violence and discrimination because of who they are. In the UK, the police and the courts have considered the aggravating factors when determining sentences, but we know that we must do more. For me, that will also start with education. We cannot deal just with the symptoms—violent acts. We must educate people about the importance of treating everyone with dignity and respect. That is why, since 2020, age-appropriate sex and relationship education in primary and secondary schools across England has quite rightly included LGBT families and relationships. Not only does that reflect the reality of modern society, teaching our young people that families come in many forms; it is also vital for our LGBT youth, so that they know that they are not alone, that they are valued, and that they can lead full, open and happy lives. That will, I hope, reduce many of the awful suicides that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) quite rightly mentioned.

The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke about faith. I have also talked in this place about faith and my personal battles. Faith is not the preserve of heterosexuals. That is something that I have sometimes had to reconcile myself to, but I have come to the conclusion that he is my God, too.

We have learned a lot along the way, and as global leaders on LGBT rights, it is also incumbent on us to support other countries, as hon. Members have said. That is why at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the UK announced just under £3 million to support civil society organisations in the Commonwealth to amend discriminatory laws and practices. It is why, since 2018, the UK has invested £11 million in the promotion of such rights across the Commonwealth. And it is why, in 2022, Lord Herbert, the Prime Minister’s special envoy on LGBT rights, was delighted to join Ukrainian LGBT organisations and activists for the joint Warsaw-Kyiv Pride in Poland. We continue to consider how the specific needs of LGBT people are met as part of the humanitarian response to the illegal invasion.

We are also working to encourage British overseas territories that have not put in place arrangements to protect LGBT people to do so. Nine of the overseas territories now have legal recognition and protection for LGBT people, and six have also introduced legislation on civil partnerships or have legalised same-sex marriage.

We regularly engage with all the British overseas territories to ensure that their legislation is compliant with their international human rights obligations.

I will touch on health before concluding. We want to ensure that all our citizens, including LGBT people, are healthy and able to reach their full potential. I am pleased to say that the numbers of new cases of mpox—formerly known as monkey pox—have been steadily falling since the end of July. We have seen a negative growth rate in cases indicating mpox, and the UK is now in a declining epidemic. I am assured that the UK Health Security Agency is working closely with partners to increase awareness of the signs and symptoms, and of how people can seek vaccinations, information and help if they have concerns. We have provided more than £200,000 to fund an outreach programme to encourage hard-to-reach demographics to take up their first or second vaccines, and we will announce those bids very soon.

On our ongoing efforts to eradicate HIV and AIDS, I am really proud that we have committed to trying to achieve a target of zero new HIV transmissions and zero AIDS and HIV-related deaths in England by 2030. This is an important fight. I am pleased to see that the milestone ambition of an 80% reduction by 2025 is on track.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am sorry if I am about to nick what the Minister is about to say, but next week is National HIV Testing Week. Does he agree that the indicative results from the roll-out pilots, particularly in London, have been very positive, and will he commit the Government to consider rolling out opt-out HIV testing nationwide as soon as humanly possible?

**Stuart Andrew:** I am more than happy for my hon. Friend to steal my lines, because it means I have the chance to repeat the message and hammer it home. He is absolutely right: testing is an important part of this, and we are pleased that the opt-out HIV testing has resulted in more diagnoses. I will continue to have those conversations with Department of Health and Social Care colleagues.

While I am on this point, I want to take the opportunity to thank Ian Green, who has stepped down as chief executive of the Terrence Higgins Trust after almost seven years, and to congratulate Richard Angell, who has today been announced as the new CEO. I wish him the very best of luck in the role as he continues the trust's inspirational work.

Finally, I want to talk about our transgender friends. I am glad that many Members have talked about trying to take the toxicity out of this debate. Mature discussion is how we will get to a compassionate and sensible solution, I am sure. We are taking meaningful action to address many of the problems of the long waiting list. We are doing that by establishing a more modern, flexible care model to support transgender people. We are working to tackle the long waiting lists and are establishing new pilot gender clinics, the first of which was opened in 2021. In addition, we have established four new community-based clinics in Manchester, Cheshire and Merseyside, and London and east of England.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** The Minister is being very generous in giving way.

On the issue of transgender people, could he say something about the Government's intentions with respect to the delisting of up to 18 countries that issue gender certificates via legal declaration rather than by following a medicalised model? It was announced in a written ministerial statement that the Government have launched a review.

**Stuart Andrew:** I thank the hon. Lady, and I apologise that I forgot to mention this point. The Government will be updating the list of approved countries and territories. That power was part of the original Gender Recognition Act 2004, to ensure that the integrity of the Act was not compromised. The list was last updated in 2011 and needs to be updated again, as a commitment was made to keep the list under review. We are thoroughly researching each overseas system in question at the moment and will announce the countries that will be removed from the list via an affirmative statutory instrument in due course.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** The Minister has just confirmed that there will be a removal of countries that are on the list. Are those the 18 that currently do legal declaration rather than a medicalised model? Are we looking at a huge change that will take away rights from transgender people in this country?

**Stuart Andrew:** As I say, these lists are being looked at carefully at the moment, and none of this will be about retrospective stuff for transgender people in this country.

In conclusion, this debate has been really powerful. It has celebrated the accomplishments and contribution of LGBT people to this country since decriminalisation, which was extraordinary in itself at the time and something about which we should be immensely proud and glad. As Minister for Equalities, it is my privilege to work at building on the achievements of the past and furthering LGBT equality in the future, both at home and abroad.

Of the many commitments that I have outlined that advance LGBT protections and equality to the next stage, the publication of a trans-inclusive Bill to ban conversion practices is key, not only to protect LGBT people from harm, but to prevent efforts to invalidate our existence. I look forward to working with hon. Members on both sides of the House to deliver this landmark legislation for our community, and the many other important commitments that I have outlined. I join the hon. Member for Rhondda in quoting Ru Paul about love, because at the end of the day, that is what this is all about—simply, love.

3.25 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle:** It gives me great pleasure to wind up this extremely enjoyable and profound debate about LGBT History Month, which has demonstrated that there is much on which we can agree across the House and that there is much still to be done across the globe and in our society. It has also flagged up a couple of things that I worry about, not least the potential ongoing battles over GRA reform, which I had hoped we could avoid—the delisting issue is definitely a worry. I look forward to working with the Minister to achieve an inclusive and effective ban on conversion therapy sooner rather than later.

I have enjoyed, and hope to continue to enjoy, the work that the all-party parliamentary group is doing to assist those across the globe where LGBT communities

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

still suffer from oppressive laws. We will continue to do all that we can to assist the Government and their diplomatic forces to minimise that. We have had some of the most profound and important speeches that I have heard in a debate. We have had some pretty good jokes and a bit of spicy stuff, which I will not repeat, in case Madam Deputy Speaker worries about it.

At the beginning of LGBT History Month, I leave the thoughts of the House with my predecessor, the first out lesbian Member of the House, Maureen Colquhoun, who was a doughty battler for the rights of lesbians and women. She was a feminist and a campaigner, and she was well ahead of her time in this House in the 1970s. She was fearless, committed and brilliant. We lost her last year, but as she was the first out lesbian MP—she was outed in the columns of the *Daily Mail* in terrible circumstances; what a surprise—we owe her a great deal. Those of us who are lesbians in this House have followed her trailblazing and we remember her today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered LGBT history month.

## Wild Deer Management and Sustainable Food

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

3.28 pm

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): Before I turn to the topic of my debate, I was lucky enough to hear the last 40 minutes of the previous debate. When I was a young Member of Parliament, I sat on what was then the Public Administration Committee, and the then Government wanted to identify what made a great Britain. I did not intervene in the last debate, because I had not listened to it all, but I have mulled over that question for many years since. I want to put on the record that one of my personal great Britons is Peter Tatchell.

May I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I am chair, unpaid, of the Country Food Trust. This is relevant to this afternoon's debate about wild deer management and sustainable food, so if the House will indulge me, I will spend a minute talking about the Country Food Trust.

The trust was founded in 2015 in memory of the philanthropist and businessman Michael Stone, who was the original driving force behind the idea. Its express purpose is to feed hungry people with nutritious, protein-based meals. As I speak here now, the trust is on the cusp of delivering its 3 millionth meal. That is a cause for celebration. I am certainly celebrating it, as the unpaid chair.

Meat and protein are important because they are an essential part of our diet; even if you are vegetarian, you need protein. But given its higher cost in the main, protein has always been harder for food banks to source. There is a relatively plentiful supply of white carbohydrates. We know what they are, but for the benefit of *Hansard* and the House I shall mention four of them—rice, potato, bread and pasta. Carbohydrate is relatively abundant, but there is a scarcity of meat and many food banks would like to have more of it so they can offer their clients and the people they support a more varied diet.

That is where the Country Food Trust comes in. Since its inception just about eight years ago, the trust has worked with about 1,000 charities and food banks, providing them with butchered frozen meat in 20 kg blocks that can be broken down and turned into casseroles and stews, or our own brand, long-life, pre-prepared meals. These are very important because they come in packages with a shelf life of about 1 year, they can be stored at room temperature and they only take about 30 or 40 seconds to heat up in a microwave, or maybe a minute on a stove. Given the current cost of energy, that is welcomed by a lot of people who are struggling to put food on the table and heat their homes.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that, as Chairman of the Administration Committee in this place, I take a keen interest in food, because this House has many restaurants, largely used by our staff, and flavour is the key to success. The trust has pheasant curry, a pheasant casserole and venison bolognese—we have venison, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am warming up for the task ahead. That is what people like to eat, but of course we are expanding our range to include vegetarian options and turkey.

Before turning to the substantive part of my debate, I want to thank two people. I thank Tim Woodward, the trust's previous CEO, who set it up and was the driving force. Tim was awarded an MBE last June for all his efforts, particularly during the covid lockdown, making sure people had nutritious food. And I thank our current chief executive, SJ Hunt. We could not have had more committed, determined CEOs. They are driving the organisation forward and we are very lucky to have them.

Before you rule me out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, I know this afternoon's debate is about, not the Country Food Trust, but the effective use and management of deer. At around 2 million animals, the UK's deer population is estimated to stand now at its highest level for 1,000 years; there are more deer now than when William the Conqueror arrived. Our immense national herd keeps on growing. To put that in context, to keep it stable at 2 million, we would need to cull between 500,000 and 750,000 deer each year—that is just to keep things stable. At present, however, we are culling only about 350,000 animals, so each year the national herd keeps growing, and more trees and crops are nibbled away.

We always say in this place, "Something needs to be done" but clearly it does need to be done in this case. There is now almost universal agreement between conservationists, environmentalists and the farming community that a structured deer cull needs to be put in place to manage what is becoming quite a significant problem.

I do not want this House, or anybody watching this debate live or on catch-up, to think that I am alone in putting forward this argument. In 2020, the much-respected organisation the Woodland Trust, which the Minister knows well, published a position paper on the problem, stating:

"Evidence tells us that high deer numbers are leading to significant negative impacts on the structure and biodiversity of many of our most valued woodlands. Pressure from deer browsing causes declines in characteristic herbaceous plants, birds, invertebrates and mammals like the dormouse because it removes the structural complexity of woodland by limiting the growth of many shrub and tree species, and preventing their regeneration (including coppice regrowth)."

The paper also stated:

"Evidence shows voluntary approaches are not maintaining deer at sustainable levels and that better regulation and incentives focused on cooperative action between landowners could ensure lower and more natural densities... Regulated management for deer would also support the UK's climate change targets and tree disease recovery through woodland expansion."

Furthermore, a joint paper commissioned by the British Trust for Ornithology and the Forestry Commission observed that,

"the overwhelming message from studies in both North America and Europe is that the effect of sustained heavy grazing and browsing pressure is a reduction in the richness of biological communities."

Something has to happen, but there is a major barrier to mounting a successful deer cull and that, bluntly, is a lack of a venison-eating culture in the UK. As it stands, there is only a limited domestic market for venison meat. To explain the problem briefly, the more animals shot, the greater the supply of meat. The greater the supply of venison meat, the more the price for the carcase drops. An oversupply, for the moderate size of the existing venison market, creates a negative drag on

the culling effort—as I mentioned earlier, we are only culling 350,000, when we should be culling a great deal more. Why is there a drag? It is because depressed carcase prices mean stalkers can no longer cover their costs and therefore have a reduced incentive to manage deer stocks.

At this point I want to make it clear to the House that we have a duty to the deer we shoot. There is no way of sugaring the pill—we are taking the life of a large animal. The deer is a large animal and it is a noble creature. Stags are part of our heritage and have always been celebrated. Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been in Parliament longer than I have, and you know that they are celebrated in this Palace. We see them in the murals, in the paintings and in the architecture—they are everywhere. Deer are also celebrated in my county, because I am an MP from Hertfordshire and "hert" means deer. They are a prominent feature of my county's crest and part of our heritage.

When culled, we owe these animals our respect. We need to dispatch them humanely and put as much as possible of their carcase into the human food chain. Sadly, while the culling is done with great respect, increasingly one hears of these animals' having nowhere better to go than into dog food. Game dealers are telling me they cannot get rid of the carcasses and they are now looking at putting grade A meat into dog food. I have nothing against dogs, but I would rather see deer feeding people. That is an unconscionable situation and it needs to be remedied. We are putting fantastic meat into dog food and not into the human food chain.

In seeking a remedy to this, I welcome the Government's excellent consultation, published in early autumn last year, on their proposed deer management strategy. I must tell the Minister how much I appreciate the fact that she took time before this debate to sit with me in the Tea Room for a chat, that her officials and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Whip asked for an early copy of my speech, and that the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), is well across the brief as well. I thank the Minister, the ministerial team at DEFRA and the officials for their interest in this matter.

The deer management strategy is important. The Government's commitment to it was restated in its "Environmental Improvement Plan 2023", published yesterday, which is an update on the comprehensive 25-year plan to make serious changes and improvements to the environment. As the Minister knows, the Government's earlier "Consultation on the proposed deer management strategy" recognises the need—and this is probably the most important paragraph in my speech—to pump-prime the venison market to ensure that this protein-rich, low-fat, low-cholesterol meat finds its way into food banks, schools, hospitals, the bases of the armed forces, and prisons.

I want to prove to the Minister that I have read the consultation in close detail—and to prove it to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I know you do not like to have your time wasted by Back Benchers, particularly the Member for Broxbourne—so I will quote directly from page 6, which states:

"The sustainable management of the deer population can also support the development of the wild venison market as a carbon-positive healthy meat and a product of sustainable woodland

[*Sir Charles Walker*]

management. Venison sales are a key part of the deer management cycle and the revenue can help landowners offset deer management costs.

We are proposing that government support the development of a financially and environmentally sustainable wild venison supply chain. We are considering making small grants to contribute to the costs of purchasing and installing the necessary facilities and equipment, where capital costs are a barrier”.

Small grants are pump-priming—and there is more good news on page 6: the Department wants to facilitate the Great Britain Venison Working Group, and to work with the Food Standards Agency and local authorities and regulatory enablers.

I see that a member of the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), is present. I know that this is a devolved matter, but I also congratulate the Scottish Government—if, as a Tory MP, I am allowed to do so—on doing a lot of good thinking about this, because it is not an isolated problem confined to England and Wales.

Let me say to the Minister that an intervention on the scale outlined on page 6 of the consultation would be welcome, because venison production is by its nature diffuse in scale, with many small organisations and businesses operating on a local level with limited procurement, marketing and distributing power. There are plenty of willing organisations that would love to do something to help, but their scale makes it difficult for them to act. Anything that the Government can do through pump-priming and bringing people together and creating collaborative alliances will be hugely appreciated, and will give a huge return on every pound spent.

Because I have become a bit of a policy wonk on deer and the food chain, I have looked at what is going on in other markets. There is an amazing scheme run by the United States Department of Agriculture, called Farm to Food Bank Projects. The USDA makes funds available to the projects to cover the costs associated with harvesting, processing, packaging and transporting privately donated food. Let me briefly list the scheme’s objectives. They are to reduce food waste at the agricultural production, processing, or distribution level through the donation of food; to provide food to individuals in need; and to build relationships between agricultural producers, processors and distributors and emergency feeding organisations through the donation of food. Let me add for the benefit of any officials who may look at it—and I hope they do—that the USDA’s paper was published on 24 August 2021.

We cannot, of course, read across exactly into the United Kingdom what is happening in the United States, but I think the Minister can envisage the seeds of a similar idea in what we are thinking about here with the deer management strategy. Abundance is abundance, and we have an abundance of deer. It would be fantastic if we could harvest it better, and find a way of using it to feed people who would appreciate it.

We need to bring great energy and thought to getting deer meat eaten and enjoyed by a population that, through cultural conditioning, too readily associate venison with the expensive choice on a restaurant or gastro pub menu. “Deer is not for people like me”, they might think. “That is what you eat at a posh west end restaurant.” That is creating a cultural barrier to getting it eaten more widely in this country.

I will now conclude this part—the substantive part—of my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I can assure you that I wish to refer just briefly at the end to the environmental improvement plan.

I hope that the Government can progress their deer management strategy with cross-party support. This is the Adjournment debate, and I know that most Members have gone home, but I think that there should be cross-party support for such a project. I hope that we can cull deer, and that when we do so we respect the animal and put it to good use; respect for the animal is so important. I hope and am sure that Ministers will work with interested parties such as farmers, game dealers, conservationists, food charities, the Forestry Commission, Forestry England and all the other agencies that can help bring this to life, and I hope, as I have just said, that venison becomes a sustainable and more widely accepted part of our diet in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

I will sit down in a minute, Madam Deputy Speaker, but before I do so, let me say that there is a lot of heat and light about the environment. Some of the behaviours at the margins of the debate have caused me great concern. I feel passionately about many things, but that does not give me the right to shout at anybody—be it at an MP or a colleague—or to turn up with 150 people and picket a colleague’s office in their constituency. A demonstration of 20,000 people around Parliament is a really good thing. There was a demonstration yesterday by many unions, and a member of my family was present. I think that that is fantastic; it is democracy at its best. But turning up and picketing an MP’s office—whoever that MP might be, from whatever party—is intimidation and, quite honestly, those people doing it know that it is intimidation. Sometimes it has gone beyond just turning up in large numbers. There has been antisocial behaviour, graffiti and worse.

May I urge anyone who, like me, has an interest in the environment and conservation to maintain the passion, but read the environmental improvement plan and read what the Government are doing? This is a long journey. I am a passionate fisherman and I do a lot with the Angling Trust. I would like to see our rivers cleaned up tomorrow, but it is a long journey. It will take time, whoever is in power. I ask people to please not get their news about the environment from social media and allow themselves to be wound up and made angry. They should actually read what is happening, because there is so much exciting stuff going on.

This environmental improvement plan is a 250-page report. It is fascinating. By all means people should have a constructive dialogue with their Member of Parliament. They should send them a letter, saying, “On page 197, there is a bit on restoring peatland damage. I’d like it to happen a bit faster.” I say to them, please do that, but we must treat each other with respect; we are all travelling in the same direction. But today I am here to talk about deer, so the wider conversation that I have just touched on can perhaps happen in another Adjournment debate.

3.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison):** I must start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) on securing this debate. In a fascinating and informative speech, he set out with clarity, sensitivity

and practicality what must be done to ensure that, when we treble our tree planting in this country, we maintain healthy forests and a healthy deer population.

I commend my hon. Friend's work with the Country Food Trust charity. This debate is a fitting tribute to Michael Stone and his inspiration to provide food, often game food, to hungry people. What we have heard today about the work of the Country Food Trust is inspirational. I would certainly like to look into that trust working in my area in Cumbria.

Last year we published our food strategy, which builds on existing work across Government and identifies new opportunities to make food systems healthier, more sustainable, more resilient and more accessible for those across England—very much what the Country Food Trust and many other organisations are already doing. It sets out how we will deliver a low-carbon, nature-positive food system that provides choice and access to high quality products that support healthier and sustainable diets for all.

My hon. Friend raised a very important point about the need for protein. There is an abundance of carbohydrates and starchy carbohydrates in rice, pasta, bread and potatoes, but it is also essential to have low-fat protein, and that is exactly what venison provides. The food strategy sets out our vision for a sustainable proteins sector, including alternative protein research and innovation, British-grown beans and pulses, and proteins from non-traditional livestock sectors. I know from my own experience just how tasty venison is. It is versatile and sustainable. Whether minced or diced, steaked or in sausages, stroganoffed or stewed, it is very, very tasty meat.

We recognise that England's wild deer are an important part of the nation's biodiversity. They are beautiful and iconic; a wonderful feature of our countryside. As my hon. Friend set out, they are deeply cherished in our cultural heritage, with significant historic significance. Deer encounters can also be valuable in connecting people with nature.

It is more likely than ever that people will have that encounter, because there have probably never been more deer in England as there are today. The distribution of deer has dramatically increased over the last century. At these levels, deer pose a significant risk to our woodlands and the other animals that rely on them. An unsustainable deer population can also result in poor welfare for the deer themselves, leading to malnourishment and the prevalence and spread of disease.

Trees are at the forefront of the Government's plans to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, but more than sequestering and storing carbon, trees are vital for forestry, construction, furniture and flood resilience. Trees and hedgerows are vital for habitat and for food for so many species, great and small. They will be especially vital for halting the decline of nature and increasing its abundance after 2030. That is set out in our environmental improvement plan, which my hon. Friend raves about with jolly good reason, all 260 pages of it, and which we published earlier this week. We recently set a stretching target to increase tree canopy and woodland cover across England to 16.5% by 2050. Trees will play a critical role in supporting the delivery of our 10 goals in the environmental improvement plan and in meeting our statutory environmental targets. It goes without saying that healthy trees are vital for the productive timber sector, which supports thousands of jobs right across the country.

Our England trees action plan sets out the Government's long-term vision for trees and woodland, but recognises that without a reduction in deer impacts, much of that ambition will be seriously compromised. A growing deer population, which is likely to be higher than at any time in the last 1,000 years, is putting more browsing pressure on woodlands and ground flora. Deer are damaging trees and inhibiting the natural regeneration of existing woodlands and the use of natural colonisation to establish new ones. I wholeheartedly welcome the support of my hon. Friend for the proposal in our deer strategy consultation that the Government should support the development of the wild venison supply chain. We recognise that sustainable management of the deer population supports the market for wild venison, and that the sale of venison can offset some of the costs of culling.

Income generated by the sale of venison may also help to offset the economic losses to land managers caused by the effect of deer on trees and crops. We have been working with Grown in Britain, game dealers and shooting and conservation associations to develop new markets and promote British wild venison. This group will be launching a quality assurance and branding scheme during the spring to raise awareness of venison with the public and to increase the supply of venison into supermarkets. That is with good reason, because as well as being tasty, low in fat and high in protein, venison has extensive nutritional value and bring nutrition that is important for a varied natural diet. Like all red meats, it is high in iron, zinc and vitamin B12. Being lean, venison is an easily digestible protein source. Hospitals in this country are already recognising that and adding venison to their menus.

Our England trees action plan committed to the development of a deer management strategy, led by the Forestry Commission. Last summer we ran a public consultation on our proposals, and following a high level of responses we are now completing our analysis and continuing stakeholder engagement. Ahead of launching our strategy in 2022, we launched our first deer management incentive payments as a supplement to woodland improvement grants. These supplements will increase deer management effort and reduce impacts. That option was taken up by half of applicants to the grant, providing £1.4 million of additional funding a year on more than 16,000 hectares of woodland. We continue to work closely with the sector and the Forestry Commission, and we are due to publish the Government response to our consultation on the deer strategy in the summer.

As has been set out, it is important to ensure not only the health and wellbeing of our forestry and the deer themselves, but that this versatile, sustainable, increasingly available, nutritious and tasty meat is brought to our plates while our native and iconic deer species thrive. Our woodland organisations—including the Forestry Commission and the Woodland Trust—the game and food sector and all other organisations that have an interest in ensuring that we meet our environmental targets and bring healthy, nutritious food to our plates can play a part in achieving that.

I once again commend my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne on his work with the Country Food Trust and on sparking this debate today. I very much look forward to supporting him. As he recognises, I have already been speaking with the Minister for Food,

*[Trudy Harrison]*

*Question put and agreed to.*

Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), who agrees entirely that this is a fantastic initiative, and it will be supported across our Department. I also pay tribute to the officials who are working hard on this programme.

3.58 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 2 February 2023*

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Cystic Fibrosis: Living Costs

1.30 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of cystic fibrosis on living costs.

It is a real pleasure to be here in Westminster Hall—a bit breathless, but we are here. This is a massive subject, and I am very pleased that many colleagues have been able to attend in support. Looking around the room, I see many Members who have personal stories to tell; they will do so, and their stories will reinforce the questions that we all wish to ask the Minister. I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place, as well as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). He and I seem to be in many debates together; indeed, we are a bit of a tag team. It is also a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Harris.

I am the DUP spokesperson for health, so I am pleased to be able to highlight the struggles of those with cystic fibrosis and other lung conditions who have been affected by the spiralling cost of living. As the Minister knows, I will make a number of asks of her in my speech. Most Members will be aware that cystic fibrosis is a progressive, life-limiting genetic condition that primarily affects the lungs and the digestive system. The condition is due to inheriting a faulty gene from both parents that causes the lungs and the digestive system to become clogged with mucus, making it hard to breathe and to digest food—that is the graphic way of explaining what it means. It is common for those with CF to also have CF-related diabetes; I did not know that until I read the research, but I was aware that other effects include osteoporosis and being malnourished. Some 80% of people with CF are pancreatic insufficient, and therefore need a higher calorie intake to maintain a healthy weight.

Roughly 11,000 people in the UK have CF: 9,000 here on the mainland in England, 1,000 in Scotland, 500 in Wales and 500 in Northern Ireland. In 2021, the median age of people with CF who died was 38. Wow—this disease really puts life into perspective. People with CF are particularly susceptible to lung infections, and therefore cannot meet each other face to face due to the risk of cross-infection. Again, the life of someone with CF is really restricted, and is much more difficult.

That brings us to the crux of the issue: living with CF demands an incredibly high burden of treatment, taking at least two to five hours and up to 70 pills each day. People with CF have higher food bills because they need a higher calorie intake to maintain a healthy weight, and higher energy bills because they need to keep their homes warm to stave off lung infections and they may need to power an additional fridge to store

sterile medications or essential medical devices such as ventilators. Life as a person with CF is so different from everybody else's life.

People with CF living in England must pay for their NHS prescriptions, unless they are exempt. Those with CF living in England and, at least until 2024, in Northern Ireland also have to pay hospital car parking charges. The Cystic Fibrosis Trust, in conjunction with Bristol University, commissioned a report entitled “The Financial Costs of Cystic Fibrosis”. I urge the Minister to take time to process that report; if she has already done so, we thank her for that. It will give her a good perspective on my speech, and perhaps on other Members' speeches as well.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing another debate in Westminster Hall—he is very successful at doing so, and I thank him very much. According to research, an adult with cystic fibrosis will, on average, incur an additional £209 per month in living costs, while a parent carer of a child with the condition will incur an additional £291. Very few people on an average income have that kind of money to spare. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that dropping prescription charges for people with cystic fibrosis, as has been done in Scotland, would be one way of easing the burden on families?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I agree with her. In Northern Ireland, there are no prescription charges—there is no cost—which I believe makes a difference. That is one of my asks of the Minister; there are a lot of asks, most of which are financial, but they are very important.

To follow on from the hon. Lady's intervention, the report also revealed that the additional cost of living due to cystic fibrosis is over £6,500 per annum. The financial burden is made up of both extra spending to keep well and the loss of income. The key findings indicate:

“Families with CF are more likely to be struggling with their finances than the public—24% of adults with CF and 35% of parents of children with CF described meeting their bills each month as a ‘constant struggle’—

life is really hard for people with CF—

“compared to 17% of UK households overall.”

The findings continue:

“Food and rising energy bills were the biggest financial concern for people with CF and their families—both are essential to the health and quality of life of people with CF.

For the average family the combined impact of extra spending” includes “heating, expensive dietary needs” and “attending medical appointments”—the local hospital is not always where they go to meet a consultant or specialist—and “home medical equipment”. Life for a CF patient in their home is almost like being in a hospital.

There is also the loss of income: treatment takes two to five hours every day, which means that they cannot keep down a full-time job; indeed, it would be difficult to keep down a part-time job. The extra spending and loss of income means

“they are thousands of pounds worse off than comparable families.”

The findings continue:

“Three-in-five (59%) of adults with CF had also incurred some form of income loss as a result of their condition in the last two years—for example, reducing working hours, taking unpaid leave to attend appointments or leaving work altogether”, as many have to.

[Jim Shannon]

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust has seen a significant increase in the support needed, with 72%—a big figure—of helpline inquiries since October 2022 relating to financial support. Between October and December 2022, it provided cost of living fund grants to hundreds of households and increased its grants for essential household appliances and white goods. The figures are real—they are quite detrimental and very hard to comprehend.

According to the Marmot review of health inequalities,

“Those living in the poorest neighbourhoods are twice as likely to develop a lung condition, and seven times as likely to die from one than those in the richest areas.”

We have seen the pressures on those with CF, but those pressures are even greater if they live in households where money is tight, where they cannot keep a wage and where they are probably more dependent on benefits. I will talk about that in my requests to the Minister. I know that benefit payments are not the Minister’s responsibility, but they are one of the issues that come off the back of this debate.

Because poorer communities are disproportionately impacted by the cost of living crisis, many of those living with a lung condition are more likely to be struggling from the outset. Asthma and Lung UK found that almost two thirds—63%—of those surveyed with a lung condition are

“buying and eating less food.”

That is when they need food more, need the right food and need it in the right quantity. Eating less food can lower immunity and increase the risk of

“viruses that are the top trigger of asthma attacks”.

It is clear that those who suffer from cystic fibrosis, or from other lung conditions, are in grave need of help. That is my ask of the Minister today. Some of the issues will take cross-Department co-operation, but I believe the Minister is best placed to take them forward. The collective asks that I and others in this debate have are so important.

I should have said at the beginning—I apologise for not doing so—that I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate. The Committee is very good when we propose debates to it, and it granted this one without any thought whatsoever. We also hoped to have the debate at this time, because it ties in nicely. There are people in the Gallery who have helped me, and probably others in this room, to prepare our contributions for today.

Ask number two, which I have raised before but will raise again, is that benefits must continue to rise in line with inflation. Some 83% of parents of children with CF are receiving one or more type of benefit, and 68% of adults with CF are claiming at least one form of benefit, according to the new report. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that consumer prices index inflation for 2023 will be 7.4%. Those are the figures. If the Government—I always say these things respectfully and they are not meant critically, which is not my form, but I ask them because they need to be said—do not continue to increase benefits in line with inflation, not only those with CF but all the poorest will suffer a detrimental blow.

**Margaret Ferrier:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is being very generous. Research conducted by the University of Bristol found that a

surprising number of cystic fibrosis patients had applications for personal independence payment or disability living allowance rejected, and others did not apply because they did not know what support might be available. Does he have any thoughts about how the DWP could improve awareness of the condition and ensure people are getting the right support?

**Jim Shannon:** It is almost like the hon. Lady read my next point. That is one of the focuses of my request. It is my next sentence, would you believe?

We must remove unnecessary PIP reassessments for people with long-term conditions such as CF. There has to be an understanding of what CF is and how it affects people. There has to be an understanding that their lives are not like anybody else’s lives. I said earlier that the median lifespan for people with CF in the last year was 38 years. It is sad to say this, but it is a life-limiting condition.

There is a requirement for claimants to report any change in health to the Department for Work and Pensions—wow! It would be great if every person with cystic fibrosis could say, “I tell you what, I’m better today. I won’t need those 70 pills and the medication for the next wee while.” That does not happen. It would be a miracle. I believe in miracles—you know I do, Ms Harris—but they do not happen every day. The fact is that people sometimes have a sickness or a disability—this is one of them—that means they need help. I have always been a great believer that society is marked by how it helps those who need help, and that is what we need to do.

These people have a progressive lifelong condition and their health is unlikely to improve, but there is the threat of constant reassessment—my goodness, reassessment again. We know the condition is life-changing and life-limiting, and that they probably need a transplant. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is always here in these debates. I welcome her to her place—not that it is my job to welcome people to Westminster Hall, but I like to see her because I know she makes very helpful contributions. The reassessments provoke anxiety and are costly and unnecessary. Streamlining the assessment system would mean that those with progressive, long-term conditions such as CF do not have to undertake reassessments. That would not only remove the anxiety but provide cost savings to the DWP. We do not need to do those reassessments because it is a life-limiting disease.

I feel very frustrated—I am sure others do too—when people with life-limiting diseases have to go through reassessments for employment and support allowance, PIP or DLA. It is absolutely unbelievable that that should happen.

**Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about the reassessment process. Does he agree that many people with cystic fibrosis are unfortunately unable to access PIP because it is treated as an illness, rather than a disability? The assessment process assesses what people may theoretically be able to do, rather than what they can do in practice on a daily basis.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman has summed it up in that one sentence. I said when he made his maiden speech last week that his contributions will add much to this House. That is one of them, and I thank him for it. I wholeheartedly support him.

I again ask the Minister—she knows these requests, because I have made her Department aware of them—to remove VAT on energy bills. That is important for people with CF because, at a time when energy bills are already astronomical, the median energy bill for an adult with CF is £26 higher every month than for typical households. For parents of children with CF, the figure rises to £36, because they do more and keep more heat in the house for their children. Adults can sometimes bear with it a wee bit, but there is still a cost factor.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is really important that people with lung conditions have the right environment at home and the right heating? The additional costs, especially given the rising energy costs, mean that we must take care of those people who need extra heat. That applies especially to people with CF.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I thank her for her contributions on this subject. She brings much knowledge to these debates. I am pleased to be a member of the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health with her. We work with others to ensure that we can pursue matters, and today we are pursuing this matter for our constituents.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): It is good to be in a Westminster Hall debate led by the hon. Gentleman; he is often a fixture here. I thank him for his kind words about my presence in previous debates.

On the energy bill issue, is the hon. Gentleman as concerned as I am about the reports of forced prepayment meters, including for people with extreme vulnerabilities and disabilities? Often those forced prepayment meters lead to self-disconnection because they are more expensive and people cannot afford to keep them topped up. I welcome today's announcement that there is to be a moratorium on forced prepayment, but we should not have that at all, particularly for people with conditions that require their homes to be heated.

**Jim Shannon:** I do not have that in my notes, so I thank the hon. Lady for her knowledgeable intervention. That issue is hard to comprehend. If we have a decent wage, energy is not a big problem. On the minimum wage, it becomes a problem. When someone is disabled, it becomes an even bigger problem. She is right and I thank her for that reminder. We are all making points that we look to the Minister to respond to. Those with prepayment meters are under especial pressure and we look to the Minister to respond to that.

Removing VAT from energy bills would benefit not only CF families but all of the poor, as they spend a larger percentage of their income on energy bills.

Hospitals should provide free parking. I call on NHS England hospitals to provide access to free hospital parking for people with chronic medical conditions. Most hospital car parking charges are already abolished in Wales and Scotland, and Northern Ireland is set to abolish them in 2024. For once, the mainland needs to catch up with the regions. However, there are worries about potential delays to that coming into effect, given that there is currently no sitting Northern Ireland Assembly.

The guidance from the Department of Health and Social Care for NHS trusts in England makes it mandatory for parking to be free for those with blue badges, those attending as an out-patient three times a month for at least three months, and parents of sick children staying overnight, but it is rare that those with CF meet those criteria. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) referred to the assessment process, and that has to be addressed.

I am on to ask No. 5. Some 80% of people with CF are pancreatic insufficient, meaning they require a higher calorie diet. During hospital appointments and in-patient stays, it is vital that they have access to affordable food. However, NHS England's national standards for healthcare food and drink do not refer to a need to ensure that affordable food is available in hospital cafés and canteens. That must change because there are people who cannot afford the right sort of food, but who need it.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate speech, but I want to pull him up on one point. The City Hospital in Nottingham has its own cystic fibrosis unit. The in-patients get a personal chef who cooks them whatever they want 24 hours a day. They have access to snacks, cakes and all the junk food that CF patients need, so what the hon. Gentleman says is not correct in my neck of the woods, where they have their own chef and can eat whatever they want, whenever they want.

**Jim Shannon:** I am really pleased to hear about that initiative in the hon. Gentleman's hospital. That is a model for the rest—well done! We look forward to that scheme being taken on board by the Government.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) made a point about ending prescription charges for people with cystic fibrosis in England. I am on my last page, Ms Harris—I am conscious that I committed to a timescale, and I will try to keep to that. I am thankful for the exemption in place in Northern Ireland, but I cannot in all conscience leave it out of any debate on this issue for my fellow British citizens. As everyone knows, I am a great supporter of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am pleased that my friend, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who will speak shortly for the Scots Nats party, is part of this great United Kingdom as well.

The list of medical conditions that are exempt from prescription charges was written by the Government in 1968, so I think it is time to look at that again. The reality is that, at that time, children with CF were not expected to live to be adults, so CF was not included in the list. However, there are now more adults than children living with CF and it continues to be one of the few chronic, life-shortening conditions where people pay for their prescriptions. One of my asks of the Minister is for that to change.

**Lee Anderson:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. Is he aware that there is a loophole in the system? Although people with CF cannot get free prescriptions, if they have diabetes caused by CF, they can. It is crazy and unacceptable that they have to rely on getting another disease before they can get a free prescription.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which reveals another anomaly. The list of questions for the Minister is getting longer, but I know she will be able to respond.

Ending prescription charges for the estimated 2,500 people with CF who are not currently eligible for free prescriptions could cost the Exchequer as little as £270,250 per annum. That is not a big cost. The Cystic Fibrosis Trust believes that ensuring that people with CF receive free prescriptions will mean they can live better, healthier and longer lives, ultimately reducing the burden on the NHS. It is vital that there is an urgent review of the medical exemption list to ensure that people with CF across the UK have equitable access to free prescriptions.

I thank all Members for their contributions and interventions. I look forward to the contributions by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish. I thank the Minister pre-emptively for her response, for which I have high hopes. I genuinely know that the Minister has a heart for effecting real change—and that, I believe, is what is needed today.

1.52 pm

**Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Harris.

I have an interest in this subject because, as hon. Members will know, I am part of the CF community, in that my wife has cystic fibrosis. She was not diagnosed until she was 18 years old, so her journey was a little bit different from that of most CF patients, who are diagnosed at birth using a simple test. Obviously, at the age of 18, having just finished school and done her A-levels, she was getting ready to head off to university and start her new life, so it was a shock to be told by the doctor, “You’re not going to live beyond the age of 30.”

However, she did live longer than the age of 30. With medication and care from our health service, she has led a decent life. Six years ago, she had a double lung transplant at Royal Papworth Hospital and she is doing all right—she is getting about and going about her business. We are forever grateful to the NHS. So I know a little bit about cystic fibrosis. I know what it is like to live with somebody who has CF and about the extra challenges and costs involved.

There are costs—just little things—that you would not even think about if you did not know someone with CF. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is quite right that heating your home is crucial. It is also the food: my wife has to eat about 4,000 calories a day. She is basically like a stick insect, my missus—she is ever so thin. She cannot put weight on; she has to eat 4,000 calories just to maintain that weight.

Pre-transplant, my wife had to stop in the house to keep warm. If we went out for food, as we did on many occasions and wished we had not, the cold air made her sick—it made her cough. People with CF cough and cough until eventually they are sick. That messes up their diabetes, and then they have to eat more food to keep the weight on. It is a 24-hour challenge.

When you wake up in the middle of the night, your partner can be coughing. It is not just coughing; there can be a cup full of blood at the side of the bed, because blood is coming out of their lungs. You think, “My goodness, this is horrible. They’re going to die.” But they

are not, because that is normal for a CF patient; that is what they do. You have to spend the night pounding their backs and giving them percussion, to make sure the mucus comes up.

But since I have been here we have made great leaps with this new drug—Trikafta—which we agreed to fund a couple of years back. That is a game changer, and although there are challenges for CF patients, and they have the extra costs involved, we are also seeing great innovations in medicine, which are making sure that they live longer and have a better quality of life. CF patients nowadays can have—if not a more normal life—a good quality of life compared to what they did 20 or 30 years ago. As I said, Trikafta is a game changer. When it was introduced a few years back, I got lots of emails from families with little children saying, “We’re over the moon.”

In Ashfield, we have a little CF warrior called Amelia Rose Ratcliffe. She was a lockdown baby and was born on 12 October 2020. I have been to see her. She is a gorgeous little girl and dead clever. She lives with her mum and dad and her brother, Alfie. To be told, as a parent, that your kid has CF—I really don’t know you cope with that. At one time, it was a death sentence, but now, with innovations in medicine, it is a lot better.

The family is a middle-income family, and they are really feeling the pinch. Like I say, keeping the house warm is so important. Then there are the nappies: CF patients, whether children or adults, go to the toilet more—it is as simple as that. So if you have a CF baby, the nappies are another extra cost. There is other equipment you have to buy; you can buy these vibration vests, which shake the chest and clear it of mucus. People have to buy them privately; they are about four or five grand—they are a lot of money, but if you have the money, I am sure you would do anything for your children.

There are the constant trips to the hospital—it is a lot of trips. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned parking fees. We are lucky at our local CF unit, because the patients can park for free, so that is not a problem, but I wish other trusts would take a leaf out of their book. Blowing machines and percussion machines are other stuff you can buy—the NHS is pretty good at supplying them. Parents are always looking for lots of stuff to make their child’s life more comfortable and to prolong it, and to give their child a better quality of life.

That is what it is about: having that quality of life. Since my wife had a transplant, her quality of life has been a lot better, and we thank our donor’s family every day. That is another thing we do not really think about in these discussions: eventually, without the right medication, some patients will need a transplant, and that is a matter of life and death—my wife would not be here now without a transplant.

I spoke to Amelia’s mum, Holly, last night and asked her if she wanted me to say anything in this debate, because she cannot be here and obviously cannot speak here. She wrote a few words down for me, and I want to read them out:

“Being a cf parent is one of the hardest things I have ever had to go through. Not just physically, but mentally too. Dealing with the condition in itself is hard enough, having no cure available. Endless physio, daily routines, no days off, hospital stays, hospital trips and constant need for medications just to keep her... well... and ... it’s sometimes not enough to keep her well. The constant worry for the future and what the future holds for Amelia, really

plays heavy on our minds. But we try and stay as positive as possible, as we have no other choice but to take every day as it comes. It's draining physically, from running around finding the medication, as there are a lot of shortages for certain CF medicines. So going to a number of pharmacies to find medication is a strain. There is no break, and it is a full-time condition 24/7. The price increase on everything with the cost of living adds extra strain and other things in life have taken a back seat."

She finishes by saying that she wishes the Government could help the whole CF community as much as possible, and she thanks us for discussing these matters today. That is quite good coming from Holly.

I spoke briefly about prescription charges. My wife was diagnosed with CF at 18. She obviously had to pay for her prescriptions, but then, when she got to 23 or 24, she was—not fortunately—diagnosed with diabetes. Because she had diabetes, she then got free prescriptions. The two diseases are so contradictory: for one disease, CF, you have to eat a lot of high-calorie junk food such as burgers and chips, which is a dream for most of us, but that totally contradicts diabetes, so regulating your insulin is a constant struggle. My wife always says to me that she would sooner have CF than diabetes, even though CF can be a killer. That is the struggle people have to manage, and it is a constant job.

We have talked about free prescriptions. The hon. Member for Strangford said that the cost would be £200,000; that is about the average wage of a Premiership footballer, so I do not think it is too much money. But we have to be careful, because not every CF family is poor; there are a lot of CF people who go to work and have good jobs and careers, and any support should be targeted at the most vulnerable families, because there are some very vulnerable CF families out there who do not have much money. For a CF family like mine, I am prepared to pay a little bit more and not have a benefit to make sure that my neighbour, who does not have that money or that support, gets a little bit more.

I know that the Minister is listening, and that she has a big heart. There are lots of little Amelias all over the country, and there will be lots of CF families watching this debate—I know that Amelia's family is watching. There are lots of people in the CF community and from the Cystic Fibrosis Trust who will be encouraging people to keep tagging me on Facebook and making a nuisance of themselves, but I am glad they do, because we need to debate this important issue in this place; if we cannot change things here, I am in the wrong place. So thank you, Ms Harris; this is a great debate.

2.1 pm

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Harris, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing what is an incredibly important debate, in which I will speak on behalf of my constituent Penny Mitchell and her family. Penny's daughter, Eva, is 15, and cystic fibrosis affects all her organs. As we know, CF is a degenerative, life-shortening disease. I will not go through the symptoms, as colleagues are already aware of them—the hon. Member for Strangford set many of them out—but I will focus on some of the challenges that Penny has taken the time to tell me about, and I will share just some of her correspondence with me.

For Penny and Eva, the problem with the current system of support is that CF is seen as an illness, not a disability. CF adults are not eligible for free prescriptions,

because that list was last reviewed in 1968, and at that point—as the hon. Member for Strangford highlighted—those with CF were not expected to live to adulthood. The need for a review is clear: when we consider that Eva was born with CF and is currently taking around seven different medications a day, we can see what an injustice that is.

However, Penny's biggest concern is that when Eva turns 16 in June, she will no longer be eligible for disability living allowance for Eva, who will have to claim PIP. As I highlighted in my intervention earlier, that can be a challenging process for those with CF, because PIP is assessed on difficulties doing daily tasks and on mobility and does not necessarily reflect the struggles of people with illnesses such as Eva's. In many ways, she is quite unlikely to be eligible for PIP, even though the things for which Penny was given DLA still need doing and funding. Penny is scared that, without financial support as an adult, Eva will simply decide she is unable to do those things—things like attending hospital, buying the extra food she needs or keeping herself warm and clean. The risks to her health are obvious.

Eva is currently in school year 11. Because she is constantly fatigued and trying to battle chest infections, and also suffers from anxieties related to living with a medical condition that will shorten her life, she has only been able to physically attend school for 50% of this school year and the previous year. That has an impact on her ability to get good qualifications and secure a good, well-paid job in future.

**Kerry McCarthy:** My hon. Friend mentioned anxiety. As many people will know, I have a niece with CF, who has just turned 18. She is very much at the healthy end of the spectrum, which is good, but there comes a point, particularly with access to social media, when young people start to learn that they have a life-limiting condition. They learn far more about it than they perhaps would have done in the days when they would have relied on their parents to tell them about it and at a time when their parents thought they could handle it. Supporting them from a mental health point of view while they are going through that is really important too.

**Andrew Western:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have talked about some of the associated conditions that can come with CF, such as diabetes, but the mental health implications for some sufferers are acute. I hope the Minister will take account of that in her response.

Penny is incredibly concerned—given how difficult it is for Eva to attend school and the support she needs from Penny to do that—about how difficult it will be for Eva to secure work. That is something they worry about a considerable amount; with the current cost of living, it is a huge concern, because without receiving funding to support her living costs, Eva will be left in a vulnerable position. She will be less likely to earn a decent living, as she may be able to work only part time and will not necessarily have the same qualifications as somebody who has been in school full time.

Eva's illness is not properly recognised by the current criteria, which seem to assume that people need financial help only because they are unable to do certain physical daily tasks and lack mobility. In theory, Eva can do

[Andrew Western]

those things, but she does not usually feel well enough to do them and so relies heavily on help, but that does not necessarily come across in the current system. Why does current financial support not consider the impact of an illness on a person's ability to get an education and gain decent employment, and recognise that providing support would enable them to maximise their potential and earn the best living that they can in the circumstances?

If young people such as Eva were routinely financially supported with PIP, it would take some pressure away from them so that they could focus on doing what they can manage to do, and it would help them to meet their costs of living. Penny faces the prospect that, in order for Eva to attend college, she will have to reduce her hours at work to be able to take her there. That would obviously have a significant impact on the family finances, but getting a bus early in the morning and back again after college may add to Eva's fatigue, so Penny taking her there is the only way for the situation to be manageable and for Eva to avoid missing college too often.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The hon. Member is making a great speech. People with disabilities such as cystic fibrosis find it harder to maintain employment and, as he says, worry about keeping up with bills. It is estimated that only half of employers have occupational sick pay schemes. Does the hon. Member share my concern about the impact of the UK's very limited statutory sick pay rate on vulnerable people who need to take time off work?

**Andrew Western:** I share the hon. Lady's concern. She is absolutely right that this impacts significantly on people's ability to function in the workplace. It also impacts on the mental health issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), so it is an important issue, and the hon. Lady is right to raise it.

Let me return to Penny and Eva's plight and the concerns that Penny has set out to me. Because Penny will no longer get DLA and Eva is unlikely to get PIP to help with costs, there appears to be little support for Eva, moving forward. I have had correspondence with Penny beyond what I have shared with colleagues here. Eva needs multiple prescriptions, which she will have to pay for as an adult. She has frequent hospital visits. These are familiar concerns, which we have heard about. Travelling to hospital incurs parking costs, but also petrol costs. Eva needs extra food to prevent her from being malnourished, as she cannot digest food properly; extra water to be clean, as she sweats excessive salt out; and, of course, extra heating—an issue that colleagues have mentioned—to keep her warm.

The cost of living is tough for us all, but it is having an especially acute impact on those with CF. Given that it is so hard for them to work full time and that the benefits system does not necessarily look after them in adulthood, this is a real crisis, so I hope action can be taken. I am pleased to associate myself with colleagues who have so far spoken in highlighting the many ways in which the Government could take action. A review of the now 55-year-old list of conditions for which there are free prescriptions is one such way. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted an uprating of benefits. There could also be some practical support around VAT on

energy bills. Other support could be offered to help people with the rising cost of food, and the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) mentioned the potential clash in managing diet when balancing the impacts of cystic fibrosis and diabetes, which can in itself add to food costs, although that may be offset by the free prescriptions.

There is a considerable amount going on here. As I said, I associate myself with the comments of my colleagues, and I hope the Minister will indicate in her response what action can be taken.

2.10 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate on the impact of cystic fibrosis and for covering the issue quite comprehensively. Cystic fibrosis is a chronic condition that affects the lungs and has many other serious side effects. It is one of the UK's most common life-threatening inherited diseases; about 10,800 people across the UK currently have it.

There can be little doubt as to the profound impact of cystic fibrosis on one's life. We must recognise that the current cost of living crisis disproportionately affects those with disabilities, including those with cystic fibrosis. This has been well illustrated in today's debate by a range of Members who gave examples of direct lived experience from their families and constituents, in particular the hon. Members for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who both did so excellently.

A report from the University of Bristol put the additional cost of living with cystic fibrosis at £6,500 a year. The dietary requirements alone—good nutrition is vital to support the need for 150% to 200% more energy—represent an alarming cost for many. As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, people with cystic fibrosis may have to take as many as 70 enzyme pills to help to digest food: an absolutely staggering number. As well as that, most people with the condition require 20% to 50% more calories a day than people without it, while some may need considerably more.

Some people with cystic fibrosis use a wheelchair to get around and oxygen to help them breathe, with sufferers often having to undergo a rigorous daily regime of treatments to stay healthy. All this comes with costs attached, and often relies on an individual or their family having sufficient income to cover it.

Cystic Fibrosis UK's report, "The cost of cystic fibrosis", shows that 87% of people with cystic fibrosis are worried about the cost of living, and that this is a growing concern for many in the community over the coming months. The report also found that one in three people with cystic fibrosis had missed a hospital appointment due to the cost, one in three had run out of food before they had enough money to buy more, and one in three had to prioritise one basic essential over another.

The impact of shielding and lockdowns as a result of the covid-19 pandemic and the rising cost of living have added even further financial burden for many people with cystic fibrosis. Extra life costs for sufferers and their families—spending more on essential goods and services such as heating, insurance, specialist diets, equipment and therapies—mean less money in their

pockets, with the result that they are more likely to have a lower standard of living, even when they earn the same as an adult without the condition.

In England, cystic fibrosis is currently not one of the medical conditions that exempts people from paying prescription charges. In contrast, as we have heard already, the Scottish Government have scrapped all prescription charges. It is particularly concerning that 25% of people with cystic fibrosis use their benefits to pay for prescriptions that are essential to live with the condition. Some 44% of people with cystic fibrosis said that they rely on statutory sick pay while sick. I continue to oppose the rules around statutory sick pay, which fall far short of meeting a dignified standard of living and are not flexible enough to meet real needs, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) highlighted earlier. Workers need to earn at least £120 per week to be eligible for statutory sick pay, meaning the lowest earners and those working part time are more likely to miss out on income support. As we have heard, many with cystic fibrosis fall into those categories. The UK has one of the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD. The current rate of £99.35 is wholly inadequate, and one in five workers is not eligible for it. Groups most likely to miss out are women and those in insecure work. I have repeatedly called on the UK Government to increase statutory sick pay in line with the real living wage, make it available to everyone by removing the qualified worker and earnings requirements, and extend it to 52 weeks instead of 28.

Heating and energy costs are another area where sufferers typically face higher monthly bills than others. As has been mentioned, removing VAT from energy bills would help. I also support the idea of reimbursing additional costs for lifesaving medical equipment powered at home. Perhaps it is time to investigate the possibility of effectively prescribing energy for some conditions.

The SNP will continue to urge the UK Government to use all the reserved powers at their disposal to tackle the cost of living crisis on the scale required. That includes access to borrowing, providing benefits and support to households, and ensuring that those benefits rise in line with the cost of living. Tackling VAT on fuel, taxation on windfall profits and regulation of the energy market are all areas where the power is currently reserved to Westminster. Until the Scottish Parliament has full power over those areas, we require action from this place. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.16 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to respond on behalf of the shadow Health and Social Care team, and to see you in the Chair, Ms Harris, guiding our proceedings. I sincerely thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate—I know the convention is to call him the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), but he is my friend. He always manages to find a way of getting pressing issues such as this one, which are all too often overlooked by this place, discussed on the Floor of the House. I am grateful for that, and for the comprehensive and detailed way in which he set out the case before us. This has been a good debate.

I thank the hon. Members who made short contributions, such as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and my hon. Friends the Members

for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). Coming to the substantial contributions, I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for sharing his personal experiences. It is often difficult to do that in this place, and he added a great amount of knowledge, detail and worth to our considerations. I am sure that the Minister will feel the same. On behalf of the whole House, I send our best wishes for the future to him and his wife, and to Amelia and her family. Sharing our constituents' personal experiences is also important, because we are sent here to advocate for them.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). He has certainly hit the ground running as a newly elected MP. He is already making eloquent contributions following the by-election, including today on behalf of his constituents, Penny and Eva. In a similar vein to what I said about the hon. Member for Ashfield, it is important that real-life experiences are articulated in these debates.

The cost of living crisis is impacting people right across the country, as we are all too aware with our constituency caseloads. We all hear regularly that many constituents are having to make the difficult choice between putting food on the table or heating their home. It is all too commonplace for constituents to open their energy bills with a feeling of dread in the pit of their stomachs. Many have no idea how they will get through the next week, let alone month.

For those with cystic fibrosis, however, the problems are even more challenging. As many Members highlighted, they are much more likely to be struggling with their finances than the general UK population. They are at a significant social and economic disadvantage. As we have heard, CF is a genetic condition that affects almost 11,000 people in the United Kingdom. People with CF experience, as we heard graphically from the hon. Member for Ashfield, a build-up of sticky mucus in the lungs, digestive system and other organs. It can affect multiple parts of the body, with symptoms including, but not limited to, reduced lung function, increased susceptibility to infection, weakened bones, liver disease, diabetes and more.

Households affected by CF face a median loss of about £564 a month. That financial hit would be extremely difficult in favourable economic circumstances, but in the current financial context it is nothing short of devastating for too many people who live with CF. As the Cystic Fibrosis Trust points out, many people with CF incur a "double-hit" to their finances by having to spend more to keep themselves healthy and being forced to make different decisions about education or employment opportunities.

Jess, an adult living with CF, said:

"Living with CF has always caused my life to be unpredictable, which has cost me financially as well as in many other aspects of my life".

Jess sums up what many people living with CF know all too well: in almost every aspect of day-to-day living, it is more expensive to be a person with CF.

Energy bills are a prime example. Many people with CF have to use nebulisers, feeding pumps, electric sterilisers and other energy-intensive appliances for their health. That means that the median energy cost for an adult with CF is £26 more than a typical bill. For a child with CF, that climbs to £36 more. I would be interested, then,

[Andrew Gwynne]

if the Minister could set out what assessment the Government have made of the current support available to those living with CF.

Furthermore, like Members from across the House—this is not a party political point—I am really concerned that, although energy bills are predicted to rise to an average of £3,000 from April, the Government have still not yet set out their plans to support households beyond that date. Will they explain what is likely to happen, particularly for people with additional costs that they cannot do anything about because of the need for medical assistance? Extra support would benefit people across the country and households affected by CF, which are particularly vulnerable to energy price rises.

I also want to raise the issue of access to benefits with the Minister. I know this is not her direct responsibility, but I am sure she is in dialogue with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions. As has been said, disability living allowance and PIP were the most commonly claimed benefits from people living with CF. However, as the Cystic Fibrosis Trust makes clear, a surprising number of those with CF have either been turned down or have not applied for support because they expect to be refused.

CF is a changeable condition. Many people living with it have good days as well as bad days, and that can lead those applying for benefits being unfairly declined or facing stigma in accessing support. What assessment has the Minister made of access to welfare support for people with CF, and are the Government taking any steps to improve access for those with the condition?

Labour has committed to overhauling routes into work for sick or long-term unemployed people and doing away with some of the gruelling reassessments. We have pledged to guarantee extra support for flexible working for those with chronic conditions, and I would like to see that pledge matched by the Government today. It is something that the shadow Front Bench would be willing to support the Minister in pursuing, as she has responsibility for this matter. I appreciate that the Minister works in the Department of Health and Social Care, but she must realise that many of the levers to improve the lives of people with cystic fibrosis sit in other Departments, including the DWP. Will she commit to working cross-departmentally on the issues we have discussed to improve the lives of those living with serious conditions such as CF?

CF is a difficult enough condition to manage without having to face systemic, financial, employment and social barriers, too. The Government need to take the experiences of those living with cystic fibrosis seriously and try to fix the issues we have been discussing. The tools are there for the Government to act. That means ensuring that support is in place to guarantee that those living with acute conditions like cystic fibrosis cannot just make it through the cost of living crisis, but in future can lead lives that are meaningful, joyful and supported by us in this place through the welfare system and employment support. The Government will have our support in making that happen.

2.27 pm

**The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)

for not just securing the debate, but the tone in which he conducted it and his well-established support for the cystic fibrosis community. His continued presence at cystic fibrosis debates over the years has impressed on the Government the vital role that public services play in supporting people with cystic fibrosis, as well as driving home the stark realities of living with the condition. I also thank him for his kind works to me as a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care.

I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have taken the time to speak in the debate. The hon. Member spoke powerfully about what it is like for people living with cystic fibrosis and the challenges and costs, including the cost of medication, food and energy and the loss of income, drawing on the good work in the Bristol University report, “The Financial Costs of Cystic Fibrosis”, which I have indeed read. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who spoke powerfully from his personal experience of his wife living with cystic fibrosis. He talked about the extra heating and food costs and the need for 4,000 calories a day for somebody with the condition, which practically is expensive to do. He spoke about how it is a 24-hour challenge and, indeed, what the nights are like living with someone with cystic fibrosis. I welcome the optimism he brought to this Chamber as he spoke about some of the improvements to quality of life thanks to medical innovations.

My hon. Friend spoke powerfully about the CF warrior in his constituency—little Amelia Rose Ratcliffe—and what her life and, particularly at the moment, the life of her parents looking after her is like. Again, there are a lot of extra costs and all the extra trips for appointments and to the hospital. It was good to hear that there is free parking at his local hospital. He spoke powerfully about the constant worry for parents and how there are lots of little Amelias and their families all around the country. As a parent myself, I can imagine how worrying it would be for the parents of a child with a condition such as cystic fibrosis.

I think this is the first time that I have spoken in a debate with the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), so I welcome him to Parliament. He spoke about Eva, who is older than Amelia and in school year 11, and about how she has missed a lot of school and the challenges and worries that brings—for instance, in respect of what her life will be like after school and what employment opportunities she will have. In particular, he brought into the conversation the issue of the anxiety that adults and especially young people with cystic fibrosis experience, as well as the broader mental health impact. Those are really important issues for us to discuss.

It was also good to hear from the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and, of course, from my fellow Front Benchers, the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). It has been good to have this number of people contributing to a debate on this subject in Parliament.

I wish to recognise the fantastic work undertaken by the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, which advocates on the behalf of people living with cystic fibrosis and their families and continues—very effectively indeed—to bring their needs to the attention of parliamentarians. The work of the trust to help people with the increased financial burdens associated with cystic fibrosis, be it through



direct financial assistance or by providing advice and information to those in need, is substantial and should be commended. The trust's continued support for people with the condition, along with the support provided by other voluntary sector organisations, is invaluable.

During this debate, we have talked and heard about the pressures that face people with cystic fibrosis because of the increased cost of living; indeed, those pressures are set out clearly in the report from the University of Bristol. Although the increased cost of living affects us all, it has been rightly acknowledged by the Members present that the cost of living situation for people with cystic fibrosis is far more acute than the pressures that face most people.

The majority of people with cystic fibrosis will claim at least one form of benefit, with many claiming two or more benefits, and I know how important that money is to those who rely on it. As a country, we will spend around £66 billion this financial year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. In fact, specific spending on the main disability benefits—personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance—is more than £7 billion higher in real terms than it was in 2010. Significant amounts of money are going to those who claim benefits, including disability benefits, but I have clearly heard the conversation today about how life can still be very hard for those with cystic fibrosis who claim benefits.

The Government are committed to helping those with cystic fibrosis who are able to work to do so. Our goal of reducing the disability employment gap remains, and we continue to support disabled people to start, stay and succeed in work. We do this through a range of mechanisms which, particularly for cystic fibrosis, take into consideration the impact of such a condition on someone's ability to work. For instance, mechanisms include increasing work coach support in jobcentres for people with health conditions who receive universal credit or employment support allowance, and disability employment advisers in jobcentres who offer advice and expertise on how to help disabled people and people with health conditions into work.

For people who are in work, the Disability Confident scheme encourages employers to think differently about disability and health, and to take positive action to address the issues that employees face in the workplace. Also, the information and advice service provides tailored guidance on supporting and managing health and disability in the workplace. In addition, we support Access to Work grants towards the extra costs of working beyond standard reasonable adjustments, to ensure that people such as those with cystic fibrosis who can work have the support that they need to do so.

Several Members spoke about the cost of energy. To help with the rising cost of energy, our energy bills support scheme is delivering a £400 non-repayable Government discount in instalments over six months to help 29 million households with energy bills over the winter. The energy price guarantee, which saves a typical household around £900 this winter, will be extended to April 2024. Also, over the past year there has been extra support for people on means-tested benefits such as universal credit, to help them with the higher energy costs we have been talking about. Sums of £650 were paid out in two payments last summer and November to households in that situation, with an additional £150 for those on disability benefits.

The household support fund, which is £1.5 billion in total, has gone to local authorities to provide support to the most vulnerable people in their communities. Local authorities judge who most needs that help and how best to give it. Local authorities have provided support to help with energy costs, and sometimes specifically to help people whose health needs contribute to their finding it difficult to afford their extra energy costs. The fund was intentionally distributed in such a way as to give local authorities the flexibility to use it most effectively to help their communities and the people they know most need help.

Let me address some of the concerns expressed about the costs directly linked to cystic fibrosis, such as prescription costs and challenges in attending appointments. It is true to say—it has come up this afternoon—that not everyone with cystic fibrosis will qualify for free prescriptions, but there are prescription charge exemptions in place in England to help patients with the greatest need to afford prescriptions. For instance, people with cystic fibrosis who receive benefits may be exempt through the NHS low-income scheme.

Those who have to pay NHS prescription charges and need many prescription items can save money with a prescription prepayment certificate, which allows people to claim as many prescriptions as they need for a set cost. A three-month prescription prepayment certificate, which costs £30.25, or an annual one, which costs just over £108, will save people money if they need four or more items in three months or 12 or more items in 12 months. A holder of a 12-month certificate can get all the prescriptions they need for just over £2 a week.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I understand what the Minister is saying—it is said every time we raise this issue—but the only reason why people with cystic fibrosis are not covered by the rules that apply, say, to people with diabetes is that cystic fibrosis was seen as a childhood disease, and it was thought that people with cystic fibrosis would not live past the age of 16. That is an anomaly. It is good that they can get the season ticket, but they should not be treated like that. If they had survived beyond the age of 16 when the rules were brought in, they would not be treated like that now. Does the Minister therefore agree that it is still unfair?

**Helen Whately:** I absolutely hear the hon. Member's argument, and similar points were made during the debate. As the Minister with oversight of major conditions, cystic fibrosis is not the only condition about which I have received letters, parliamentary questions and lobbying in general asking for exemptions to prescription charges. We cannot just look at cystic fibrosis in isolation; a similar argument could be made in relation to a number of other conditions. As I have set out, the way the system works is specifically designed to help people on low incomes with the cost of prescriptions and make it more affordable for people who have to get a lot of prescriptions during the course of a year.

**Jim Shannon:** I want to follow on from what the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said. I think I referred in my contribution to the 1968 legislation. The perception at the time was that children who had CF were not going to survive, and that therefore there was no need to include CF, but today there are more adults who have CF than ever. The point that I am

[Jim Shannon]

making is that things have changed. Will the Minister convey that information to the DWP in as strong a fashion as we have in this Chamber, and ask the DWP to look at that? I know it is not the Minister's responsibility to look at that, but if that is agreeable to her, it would be helpful.

**Helen Whately:** As ever, the hon. Member is extremely persuasive. I will be happy to take that up with ministerial colleagues who are responsible for prescription charges, but I do say that this is the case not just for cystic fibrosis. We should be aware that we would be similarly lobbied on behalf of other conditions, so we need to be aware of the breadth of the issue raised. However, I shall be happy to take up the matter with ministerial colleagues.

I want to pick up on the cost of attending medical appointments, which was also raised. To help people to get to appointments, the NHS healthcare travel costs scheme provides financial assistance to eligible patients who need assistance with their travel costs. That includes patients in receipt of a qualifying benefit and those on the NHS low-income scheme.

Another way to alleviate the cost pressures of medical appointments for people with cystic fibrosis—I stress that this is only where appropriate; I do not want to be misconstrued—is for appointments to be virtual. NHS England is supporting NHS providers to embed and spread the use video consultations innovatively, where that is the right thing for a patient, and in discussion with the patient in respect of their individual needs. For some patients, that is helpful in reducing the number of journeys they make to appointments—but I am clear, and I know very well, that some appointments should and have to be in person, particularly whenever anybody wants that.

**Jim Shannon:** I tried to illustrate this point earlier, but although I understand that, with the restructuring of hospitals, not every hospital can specifically respond to everything—hence the centralisation of medication and healthcare—when it comes to cystic fibrosis and getting an appointment with a consultant, physio or whoever it might be, one factor is the distance that a great many patients have to travel, especially those in rural areas. The Minister has said that those on benefits can qualify for travel costs, but for some people it is not the cost alone; it is the travel itself. I am sorry for going on a wee bit, Ms Harris, but as I said earlier, for most people with CF that means two to five hours every day of their lives, so the impact on them is greater. The Minister has talked about the physical and mental health aspects, but there are wider aspects, which include the long distances that people have to travel just to get the treatment they are after.

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about having to travel further for appointments and treatment, which affects people in rural areas generally. Those costs will clearly affect those who have to travel regularly and frequently, such as patients with cystic fibrosis who need many appointments. I am very happy to take away the point he raises and to look at whether we should do something different or specific for those living further away from wherever they need to go for treatment.

I want to pick up on the point about hospital parking, which is clearly another cost that might be affecting people. The Government committed to introducing free hospital car parking for those in great need, including frequent out-patient attenders, as part of our election manifesto. NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts are required to comply where applicable with NHS car parking guidance, which outlines that disabled patients and visitors should receive free parking for the duration of their attendance at, or visit to, hospital. It also makes it clear that parking will be provided free to all out-patients who attend hospital for an appointment at least three times in a month and for an overall period of at least three months. Importantly for parents of children with cystic fibrosis, parents of children who are admitted as an in-patient overnight should receive free parking between the hours of 7.30 pm and 8 am while visiting their child. I was glad to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield that, as I have heard in other places, there is indeed free parking for the patients with cystic fibrosis he mentioned and their families.

I want to mention the innovative work—which also touches on the virtual appointments that I mentioned a moment ago—that Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust is doing in partnership with NuvoAir, whereby patients use spirometer devices at home to measure lung function and access the results on their phones or tablets via Bluetooth. The results can be shared with a specialist cystic fibrosis clinical team at the Royal Brompton Hospital during virtual consultations, saving the patients time and money while ensuring effective monitoring by the clinical team. There is a balance here, because although the many appointments mean extra journeys, we are doing things to improve the lives of people with cystic fibrosis and to help with the practicalities of the necessary extra treatment and care.

This debate has powerfully brought to life the extra challenges facing people living with cystic fibrosis and their families. It has been helpful to air the issues relating to extra costs and anxiety and the practical difficulties of living with the condition. I pay tribute to all those involved in supporting people with cystic fibrosis and all those living with it. The drive and determination to improve things is inspirational, and I hope that I have reassured everybody about the Government's commitment to supporting patients with cystic fibrosis and their families.

2.46 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank all Members for their contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for her interventions on costs, benefits, and employment issues; she is always very wise. I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for bringing her knowledge about lungs and asthma, which are part of this subject matter, from the APPG for respiratory health. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her efforts over the years. She referred to mental health, because physical ailments sometimes spill over into mental health issues.

We are all indebted to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for his personal story, because he described what it is like to live with extreme CF. We thank him for that story and for what he does for his wife—I know she appreciates it greatly, particularly with her diabetes. We also appreciate the other personal story about Amelia; I never realised that people so young could be affected.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) referred to his constituent Penny Mitchell and her daughter Eva, to DLA and PIPs, to the extra water and food that people may need, and to the problems that some experience in securing employment. My friend the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) emphasised how CF sufferers can pay £6,500 a year and referred to how CF patients have to prioritise aspects of their lives, to acceptable levels of benefits, and to energy costs.

I genuinely always love the contributions of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), because they are full of detail and evidence-based knowledge and propose many good ideas. He referred to people choosing between putting food on the table or heating their home, to how the condition affects multiple body parts, to its unpredictability—people do not know what the next day will be like—and to welfare support and the DWP.

I am pleased that the Minister showed her heart in how she responded to our requests. I welcome what the Government are trying to do with the steps they are taking. The Minister has heard our stories both individually and collectively on the behalf of our constituents. We want the benefits to be reviewed, and I am pleased that the Minister is prepared to take that to the DWP. Adults with CF today need the system to change. While every person with CF would love to be able to work, the reality is that they cannot.

I thank the Minister for her response and thank everybody else for their contributions. I hope that on the behalf of those in the Gallery today representing people with CF, we can do better collectively. That is what this is about, and I am sure that the Minister will be as energetic as we are in making that happen.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the impact of cystic fibrosis on living costs.

2.50 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## High Income Child Benefit Charge

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the High Income Child Benefit Charge.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I put on record my thanks to the hon. Members who supported my application for this debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and the Minister for attending.

I invite the House to consider the unfairness of the high income child benefit charge, and the ineffectiveness of its administration. The high income child benefit charge, which for brevity I will forthwith refer to as “the charge”, has its origins in the 2010 Conservative party conference, when George Osborne—the Chancellor at the time—proposed withdrawing child benefit, a previously universal benefit, from higher-rate taxpayers. One might initially approach that as a reasonable proposal; however, the reality is that the charge has consequences for some who do not consider themselves to be on a high income, as it ignores family size, how many earners are in the household, and what disposable income is available after basic needs such as food, housing and energy costs are all met.

Mr Osborne modified his proposals in the 2012 Budget, and went on to announce that, from January 2013, child benefit would be clawed back from families when the highest earner had an adjusted net income of between £50,000 and £60,000. The detail of how the adjusted net income works after taking account of any gift aid or pension contributions, and how those with a £60,000 adjusted net income effectively lose all entitlement to child benefit, was well set out in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) during a debate that he secured on the charge in 2019.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The high income child benefit charge is too complicated, which leads to many households that are entitled to child benefit not claiming it. What they may not realise is that not claiming means that they do not accrue the national insurance credits that claimants are given until a child turns 12, impacting on state pension and other benefits if one parent is not working. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about that knock-on effect?

**Martyn Day:** I do indeed share my hon. Friend’s concerns, and I will come on to them in my speech, although she has summed them up more succinctly than I have in the verbiage I am about to read.

In the previous debate, the hon. Member for South Thanet said that he had

“not found figures for how much the clawback and the lack of take-up of child benefit have saved the Treasury”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 60WH.]

but estimated it to be £2 billion to £3 billion a year. I would be interested to know from the Minister whether the hon. Member’s estimate was accurate; I will return

[*Martyn Day*]

to the financial implications of the charge later. The hon. Member went on to say that its administration was

“a salutary lesson in how not to withdraw a universal benefit through the tax system. What we have on the statute book, which runs to many tens of pages of tax law, is the truly mad basis of trying to claw back a benefit. It is not related to overall family income, which many people describe as one of the real drawbacks of the system.”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 63WH.]

I have several constituents who agree with the hon. Member—indeed, this goes to the heart of why the charge is seen as unfair. One of my constituents, Andrew Malloy, summed it up when he asked why a family with one parent earning £50,100 could be hit with a tax payback, while a family with two parents earning over £49,000 each was not affected. He has a valid point: a household with a total income of over £99,000 can still receive its full entitlement to child benefit. Shaun Boyle also struggles to understand why that is the rule, as households earning much more than his are entitled to benefits that his household is not. After deliberations, he concludes that

“this cannot be a fair system.”

From my questioning and research, I am inclined to agree with him entirely.

David Stuart is another constituent who stopped his child benefit payments in 2018 after only becoming aware of the high income tax threshold when his second child was born in November 2017. However, that did not stop His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs pursuing him for an overpayment of £6,000 with interest and five years of penalties covering the years from 2016 to 2020 for his two children. I raised David’s case directly with HMRC. It agreed it had made an error both in its assessment and in asking him to contact the child benefit office to get proof of the cessation. The HMRC respondent added:

“I will be providing feedback to the business in order to learn from our mistakes and avoid the same from happening again in the future.”

So far, so good. But David had to contact me again just last month as he had once again been asked to provide proof of how much child benefit had been paid. It therefore appears no action was taken to rectify the failings highlighted in his initial complaint, which HMRC said it was going to address.

David also raised the Wilkes case with me, on which the Court of Appeal ruled on 7 December last year. For those not familiar with the case, it addressed whether HMRC could impose the charge by means of “discovery assessments”, which allow HMRC to demand tax outside of the normal four-year assessment limit. The Court of Appeal conclusively determined that HMRC was wrong to impose the charge by discovery assessments—not just in the Wilkes case but on hundreds of thousands of taxpayers in the UK.

Yet a retrospective change in tax law that was announced by the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), in his 2021 Budget, which was then enacted in sections 97 to 99 of the Finance Act 2022, meant that HMRC ensured in advance of the Wilkes judgment that the hundreds of thousands of other taxpayers who were similarly subjected to the charge discovery assessments could not benefit from the Wilkes case.

As David’s case was delayed awaiting the Court of Appeal judgment, he has now received a further discovery assessment for the charge between the 2016 and 2018 tax years. Understandably, he is “totally miffed” that one person’s case was upheld against HMRC, yet HMRC can continue to pursue others in exactly the same circumstances. In light of the Wilkes case, David hopes that today’s debate will shine a light on the poor handling and unfairness of the discovery assessments.

Another constituent, Stephen Waldron, calls the charge “wholly unfair” because child benefit is a payment to support people with the additional cost of raising a family. Stephen also says the charge is “unjust” because it is not based on a household’s total income. He has questioned why, when people decide to pool their resources and live and raise a family together, does the charge not reflect that? Perhaps the Minister can answer that question for Stephen today.

It was 2006 when Stephen first claimed child benefit. In 2013 he received a letter to advise he was not entitled to it, but it continued to be paid over the next seven years by HMRC, who then reclaimed it and blamed Stephen for not telling it. What really upset Stephen was that the demand for over £8,200 included interest and a 20% penalty for “failure to notify” the tax office to file a self-assessment for all those years, despite HMRC being fully aware of his household’s finances.

The circumstances of Stephen’s experience with HMRC over the charge was robustly argued in the 2019 debate, yet nearly two years later HMRC has not dealt with the previous criticisms of its practices. Things worsened for Stephen and many others as the clawback came in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic at a time when job stability was under one of its greatest threats, and he had to use his “safety net savings” to pay the demand.

I fully appreciate that the abbreviated examples of my constituents that I have highlighted today do not reflect the sense of injustice and stress that they have felt. None the less, it is important that the empirical impact of such an unfair policy is illustrated by individual experiences.

I have been tabling parliamentary questions on the charge since April 2019, after it was first brought to my attention. The answers I received at that time stated:

“If total household income was taken into account, information on the incomes of everyone in each of the eight million households receiving Child Benefit would need to be collected and would effectively introduce a new means test. The Government’s approach withdraws Child Benefit from those on high incomes, whilst having no impact on the majority of claimants.”

That implies that the charge affects only a minority. On means testing, the answering Minister in the 2019 debate stated that this would create

“a substantial administrative burden on both the state and families.”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 73WH.]

However, we should not forget that the increase in the number of self-assessments that the charge creates brings its own administrative burden.

Another written answer, which referred to the £50,000 and £60,000 thresholds, said:

“The Government believes these are currently the correct level for the HICBC thresholds, but as with all elements of tax policy this remains under review as part of its annual Budget process.”

Those answers are in keeping with the response to a petition I presented in October 2021, which urged the UK Government to re-examine the charge policy to

address the disparities it creates and ensure that any revised threshold was aligned with the basic-rate tax threshold. The basic rate of tax breached the £50,000 threshold on 6 April 2022 and thereby brought basic rate taxpayers within the scope of the charge. It is therefore operating beyond its original policy objective to affect higher rate taxpayers.

After presenting the petition and receiving the Government's response, I was contacted by a non-constituent who works in financial services, thanking me for presenting the petition as it was

"of national interest to any tax payer who earns over £50,000 GROSS per annum".

They went on to refer to the Government's response as seeming to say that it was

"too hard to calculate for little benefit",

and suggested that indexing the base threshold of £50,000

"would be a simple but effective solution to hundreds of thousands of households."

I am aware of a letter from the Treasury, dated 26 January 2023, that dismisses the suggestion to index the threshold of the charge as it

"only affects a minority of Child Benefit claimants whilst helping to ensure the fiscal position remains sustainable."

It appears that the Treasury's position is somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, it thinks the threshold that was set for the charge 10 years ago is regarded as "high income", and on the other it thinks it is acceptable for the basic rate tax band to breach this threshold.

Another tax-related conflict arising from the charge is that, although ignoring total household income and focusing on the single or only highest earner, at the same time it breaches the principle of independent taxation. It just does not add up to me.

That brings me back to the financial implications of the charge. When claiming child benefit, an affected individual can receive child benefit payments and pay the charge at the end of each tax year by means of self-assessment, and that is the case even if they are employed and normally pay their tax through pay as you earn. Alternatively, they can claim child benefit, but choose not to receive the payments and hence not pay the charge. That is known as "opting out", and that is what my constituents David and Stephen, whom I mentioned earlier, have chosen to do. However, opting out impacts tax revenue going into the Treasury, with the most recent available figures showing a £15 million drop between the tax years 2013-14 and 2019-20. If the Minister is able to give figures for how much the clawback and the lack of take-up of child benefit have saved the Treasury, it would be helpful to know that the drop in tax revenue has also been accounted for in any figures that might have been found.

The drop in revenue is surprising when we consider that 7,000 more individuals have declared a liability for the charge over the same period. I would be interested to hear any explanation for that anomaly. The most recent available figures also show that the number of people who opted out of receiving child benefit increased by 252,000 between 31 August 2013 and the same date in 2021. That is 252,000 more families being impacted by the charge over an eight-year period. By my reckoning that is a rapidly growing minority, but a minority is what the Treasury's response from 26 January still insists it is.

Of course, those figures do not account for those who do not make a claim for child benefit. Not everyone with a gross adjusted net income of £50,000 will go through the process of claiming child benefit, which effectively signs them up to completing a yearly self-assessment for the charge.

The latest data on child benefit from August 2021 shows a decrease of 122,000 families claiming child benefit when compared with the previous year, which equates to 215,000 children. Many people will see claiming child benefit as a complete waste of time and effort for little or no gain, or they will simply not make the claim to avoid finding themselves in a position similar to my constituent David, who was pursued for a period that he had opted out of. Therein lies a danger, because those who do not make a claim to child benefit due to the thresholds of the charge, will lose out on vital national insurance credits that protect their entitlement to contributory benefits, not least the state pension. That situation invariably affects many women.

There is also the scenario that, for various reasons, not everyone is aware of what their partner earns, respecting the principle of independent taxation. That further deters those people from making a claim for child benefit and, again, it is mainly women who lose out. Will the Minister advise me today if there is any way for women, or indeed affected men, caught in those circumstances to make a retrospective claim for national insurance credits? If not, can that be rectified at the earliest opportunity?

Another unintended consequence of not claiming child benefit is that the child is not then automatically allocated a national insurance number when they reach the age of 16. The scale of that future impact can only be imagined if we use the latest data on child benefit that shows that that will affect 215,000 children in just one year.

Referring to the number of families who claim child benefit, the latest child benefit statistics state

"following the introduction of the HICBC in January 2013, these figures decreased sharply... Following the sharp decrease in August 2013, there has been a downward trend in the number of families and children for whom Child Benefit payment is received. In August 2021, the number of children for whom Child Benefit payment is received is at its lowest level since HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) began producing these statistics in 2003."

Given the passage of time since its introduction and the constraints of the current economic climate, does the Minister not agree that it is time to address the many failings of the unfair high income child benefit charge? Is it not time to finally review this flawed policy, make it fit for purpose and thereby truly support households with children?

Ultimately, the best solution to meet the needs of families in my constituency is for the full powers of social security and taxation to be in the hands of the Scottish Parliament. Meanwhile, I hope the Minister will join me, my constituents and organisations such as Child Poverty Action Group in calling for making child benefit a universal benefit again, restoring the value of child benefit and increasing the take-up of child benefit. At the very least, will the Minister commit to reviewing the current policy?

3.17 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on raising the issue here today. I try to come to

[*Jim Shannon*]

Westminster Hall as often as I can, but when I saw the subject of the debate I was very keen to come along and support the hon. Gentleman. I congratulate him on setting the scene so well.

I want to specifically focus on the child benefit threshold. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, one person could earn £52,000 and their partner could earn £10,000, and they would be disadvantaged. However, partners who both earn £49,000 do not have the same issue. That is an anomaly that we have to try to address.

My party discussed this issue at our parliamentary meeting last Tuesday. We have a slot to move a ten-minute rule motion, and we are minded to bring forward this matter when the time comes. I have raised the issue in the Chamber on numerous occasions, as has my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson).

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place—I always am, by the way. I know she always tries to give us a response that helps with where we are, so I await her response with anticipation—no pressure, Minister. We are pleased to see her here and we look forward to her contribution.

The cost of living crisis has had a detrimental impact on people's finances across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have spoken in countless debates on this issue. Those who are struggling the most—working families—are among those who cannot make ends meet.

Child benefit is a great benefit. It was designed to be a helping hand, but instead the concept has become a hindrance for working-class families, and even some who were previously considered to be working class and are trying their best to provide their children with all they can. I am a grandparent now, but when we were endeavouring as parents, we tried to give our children as much as we could, as every parent would. That was not to spoil them, but to give them the opportunities that we perhaps did not have when we were younger.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The hon. Gentleman mentioned the cost of living crisis. The fact that the charge is not uprated in line with inflation means that thousands of liable families are losing part of the child benefit that they are entitled to. Does he agree that this must be swiftly addressed?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; yes, I do agree. Later in my contribution I will ask for the very same thing, because I think it is important that we do so.

We were hoping to present a ten-minute rule motion on this issue in the near future. Our slot is probably in July of this year. I and my party feel that it is grossly unfair that the child benefit cap has remained the same for 10 years, while the price of bread has risen by 30% in Northern Ireland in this year alone. The cost of the diesel needed for people to get to work is up by 30p a litre from 2013, or 20%, while those who invested in electric cars have seen the price of electricity consumption increase from an average of £577 in 2013, with a current price cap of £2,500. Increases are not limited to those essentials. The Government's retaining of the cap is nothing more than another squeeze of the middle class

through taxes. The real burden falls on the middle class, and I, my party and others will do all we can to battle that.

I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), in her place, and I look forward to her contribution. No doubt she and others will be saying the same thing.

I am attempting to bring about a change that I encourage the Government to consider. I find it extremely unfair that two parents could be on £49,000 a year and receive child benefit, but one parent can be on £10,000 and the other on £52,000 and they must pay an additional tax charge as a result. That anomaly is critical. A family on £98,000 are okay, but a family on £62,000 are not because one parent earns over the £49,000 or £49,500.

Another issue is that working families feel unable to take a pay rise because they would lose their child benefit and be worse off. I know families who were offered a wage increase from £49,500 and said, "Actually, I'm going to be worse off," and did not take it, so it is a fact of life for many.

A conversation took place in my office just last week on this subject. I always like to put the issues that we debate to my staff members, who give me their perspective. When we discussed it, they said that £50,000 sounded like a very decent yearly income, and it is, but when the cost of living is taken into consideration, these statistics are nowhere near as realistic as they seem. In addition, the high income child benefit charge is collected completely through a self-assessment, whereby individuals who are liable to pay it are required to find an annual tax return and, if they do not do so, they may be charged legal penalties for failing to register their liability and to pay their charge through their tax return, as some 180,000 families have had to do.

It has got to the stage where even families who are entitled to child support are opting out for fear that they will be hit with tax returns that they should have done but perhaps were unaware of. For my generation and the one after that, that was not a problem; we went to work, we received our child benefit, whatever it was, and we were thankful for it. There has been no uplift to the individual salary allowance since 2013—that is 10 years. There has been uncontrollable inflation since 2013, but no uplift for parents.

The Child Poverty Action Group has been in touch with my office, stating that benefit freezes and sub-inflationary upratings mean that child benefit has lost 30% of its value since 2010. One way that can be fixed is for the Government to increase child benefit by just £20 a week per child. That would pull half a million children out of poverty—the very issue that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to.

I said earlier that more families are choosing to opt out of child benefits due to the tax self-assessment that must be done. Covid also played a part in the reduction in the number of people applying for child benefit, mainly because parents were unable to register new births due to lockdown and there was reduced contact between parents and health visitors. Now that we are more or less out of that era, efforts should be made to reverse that trend.

Many Members, and more importantly many of our constituents, have raised issues about child benefits. No parent should have to sacrifice good work or a pay rise

to get the full amount. That is ludicrous. No parent should have to get an accountant to fill in a separate tax return if they earn over £50,000. We must do more to support those parents through child benefits. More importantly, we must ensure that children are protected and that poverty statistics are dealt with. This has become a critical issue in my office, which is why my party is considering introducing a ten-minute rule Bill on it in July. I am sure the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk will be one of the signatories when the time comes. We are asking the Minister for some more compassion, understanding and sympathy, given that the process denies some people what they should have by right.

3.26 pm

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing this debate, which is timely because many families are concerned about their finances and are struggling to make ends meet in the current financial crisis.

There are three key measures or themes that have emerged in the debate. The first is that the changes introduced by George Osborne way back in 2013 are unfair and flawed. Secondly, Members from across the Chamber have said that they can help the Minister make the child benefit system fit for purpose. Thirdly, we are asking the Government to implement changes. Even a Conservative Government can introduce the concept of universality again and see whether that is a better solution than the one we have at the moment.

On the first point, like other hon. Members I cannot understand for the life of me why a family with two parents both earning £40,000 a year—a total of £80,000 between them—can claim child benefit unhindered by any other consideration, yet another family in which the main earner's salary is £50,000 is penalised and the children get less benefit or no benefit at all. How is that fair? How is that equitable?

Claimants whose earnings rise above £50,000 have their benefit clawed back through the tax system, which means that they are exposed to the self-assessment system—in many cases, for the very first time—and incur additional costs in hiring an accountant or tax specialist. How is that fair? How is that equitable?

The £50,000 threshold has never been uprated since 2013 to reflect wage inflation during that period, so more and more families are being unwittingly sucked into the tax trap set by Mr Osborne all those years ago. To compound the situation, taxpayers have been charged penalties for failing to register their liability. It is like the WASPI scandal mark 2: people are not given sufficient information about the changes made by the Treasury, so parents get trapped in the tax liability net without even knowing it.

For many parents, it is simply not worth the hassle of having to navigate through our clunky system, so more than half a million people have elected not to receive child benefit. I thought that might be a win-win for the Government—they save on all those admin costs, get off scot-free by not having to pay child benefit at all and, of course, they do not have to worry about these pesky kids—but my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk has raised some questions that put

those assumptions under some scrutiny. Again, I urge the Minister to reply to him so that we can get some clarity about that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk pointed out, not claiming has some serious ramifications for both the parents and the child. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) alluded to in her intervention, for many parents—particularly women, or the lower earner—it means losing out on vital national insurance contributions, which could impact their state pension entitlement. As for the child, my hon. Friend has already highlighted the issue about national insurance cards for 16-year-olds.

The case is clear. The Government need to scale up the threshold from £50,000 to reflect pay inflation from 2013, but also to iron out some of these anomalies to ensure that child benefit is not only fair and equitable, but seen to be fair and equitable for all those families who are currently being penalised.

My second point is about the system being fit for purpose, which, from today, becomes a challenge for the Minister. I genuinely want to hear the solutions that are within her gift. Will she uprate the threshold beyond £50,000 in line with pay inflation from 2013, for example? If the clunky system has to remain, will she look carefully and sympathetically at the inequity of the families I have talked about, where family No. 1 is on £80,000 and has full child benefit, while family No. 2, on £50,000, is caught in the tax trap and offered limited or no benefit?

Will the Minister also consider devolving child benefit to the Scottish and Welsh Governments? Tackling child poverty is a national mission in Scotland. As part of our delivery plan, we already invest £8.5 billion to support families, a huge amount of which—£3.3 billion—is specifically targeted at supporting children. To help to mitigate the effects of the current cost of living crisis on households, our Government have also introduced the Scottish child payment, which they have uprated on one occasion. Better solutions can be found, and I hope the Minister is open to working with the Scottish Government and others to see where further devolution of budgets can take place. Will the Minister also solve the inequity of parents, especially women, who remove themselves from the child benefit tax trap but suffer other consequences, as other hon. Members have already highlighted?

I have left one issue until the end, which is universality. This policy is being driven by the needs of the Treasury, when it should be the needs of children and families. This is not just a challenge for the current Government, but, as the next election looms, a question for the Opposition, who aspire to be in Government. Is it therefore the policy of the Opposition to introduce universality to child benefit? It would be wonderful if that could be confirmed and a firm commitment given today in the summing up.

3.33 pm

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am covering for my colleague who cannot be here today because of a constituency commitment. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for bringing forward a really important debate today. He spoke compassionately about his constituents, who are clearly struggling, and I applaud him for bringing this matter to the House. He will be

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

pleased to know that Labour always welcomes the opportunity to highlight the significant pressures that families are facing across the United Kingdom, including in my constituency, as the cost of living crisis gets worse.

We have heard how hundreds of thousands more families are being pulled into the high income child benefit charge. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it well when he said that a lot of them are not from wealthy families, yet they are still being pulled into that charge. It is sad that hard-working people are having to pay for the chaos caused in recent months, and for 12 years of economic failure.

I want the Minister to explain the fiscal drag of freezing the threshold for the high income child benefit charge. I am sure she will make the case that maintaining the threshold at £50,000 allows the Government to prioritise the majority of families, particularly the poorest households, and that she will talk about difficult choices that have to be made and how taxpayers' money is best spent. We all agree with that, but the truth is that the current benefits system is not working for anyone, least of all the poorest. A report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation last week found that the benefit system is fundamentally "not fit for purpose" and has "trapped" millions of children and families in poverty.

Helping more people into good-quality work must be a priority of social security. Over 1 million people are out of work, despite wanting a job, and yet employers are struggling to fill over 1 million vacancies. I looked at the figures. Employment in the UK is lower now than it was before the pandemic, and the employment rate has had the biggest drop out of the major G7 economies.

A shocking 2.5 million of those who have fallen out of the workforce have done so because of ill health. We know that being out of work is bad for health. The longer someone is out of work for sickness reasons, the more difficult it is for them to return to a job. Unfortunately, it feels like nothing is being done to break that dangerous cycle. We cannot simply write people off. Only 4% of people in the employment and support allowance support group return to work each year. That is a huge waste of the potential of British people, who we know can contribute a lot to the economy.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) wanted to know about Labour's approach. We would take a very different approach to the benefits system. We would modernise jobcentres, turning them into new hubs that focus on work progression. They would be no longer just a conveyor belt to lower-paid work, but an escalator to well-paid, secure jobs.

I looked at the figures again. Only one in 10 older or disabled people who are out of work are receiving any support to find a job. That is because the Government impose programme after programme on local areas, regardless of their local economic needs. A massive £20 billion is being spent across 49 schemes, administered by nine different Government Departments. Even that statistic sounds so confusing.

The fragmented system is wasting taxpayers' money and failing to get people into work. In contrast, when some limited local design has been allowed in pockets of the country, such as the inspirational "Working Well"

initiative in Greater Manchester, there have been real successes in helping people get back into employment. That is why the Labour party will shift resources and power to the local level and guarantee local innovation in the design and delivery of employment support services.

We also want to address the hindrance to work in the social security system by empowering jobcentres to help to broker flexible working opportunities for those who have caring responsibilities. Crucially, we will reform the Access to Work scheme, for which the waiting list for an assessment has trebled. People now wait months for a decision, and overall the work capability assessment regime leaves too many people trapped in unemployment.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. This is not a high-pressure debate and there is plenty of time, but the title is the high income child benefit charge. I am willing to relax and let the hon. Lady go a bit off-piste, but I think she is wandering quite a long way off the subject of the debate.

**Tulip Siddiq:** Apologies, Mr Stringer. You will be pleased to hear that I am on the last bit of my speech.

I ask the Minister to respond to the specific concerns raised today, especially in relation to the growing number of people pulled into the high income child benefit charge. I sincerely believe we need a proper plan to lift families out of poverty. We need to get our economy growing, and we need to offer opportunities for people in every part of the UK. I want to hear what the Minister has to say.

3.39 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day)—I hope that I pronounced that correctly—on securing this important debate. I say from the very outset that I understand the experiences of his constituents that he described, and I hope that in previous correspondence we have acknowledged the tension—I suppose that is the word—of these points in the tax system, not just in the context of child benefit but across the tax system. There are points of tension where the next rating, if you like, of taxation falls, and those have repercussions. I promise him that I spend a great deal of my time considering that, not just in this context but, as he will appreciate, across many other forms of taxation.

Child benefit is an incredibly important form of state assistance. Historically, many decades ago, in previous generations when women did not tend to work or were not permitted to work in the way that, thankfully, we are nowadays, child benefit was often the way in which they could feed and clothe their children. Although our working economy has, thankfully, changed in so very many ways since then, we as a Government want to maintain that link between the state and helping families to raise children who need the help.

We genuinely understand that, for the lowest paid or the poorest of families, child benefit payments are vital to help families pay for clothing, food and other essentials. Some 7.7 million families are helped with the cost of raising their sons and daughters, and the Government are keen to continue that tradition. That is why, when we had to make difficult decisions in the autumn statement, we protected child benefit in real terms, which means



that from April this year, subject to us approving it in due course in the Finance Bill, child benefit will rise in line with the consumer prices index, or 10.1%.

Of course, there are other ways in which the Government and local authorities offer support to parents with childcare responsibilities and costs, including for example early education through the Department for Education's free hours entitlements and financial support for childcare through tax-free childcare and universal credit childcare offers. We all want to ensure the very best start in life for our beloved children.

The difficult challenges that we face in the wider economy, not just domestically but internationally, are having an impact on families up and down the country. Many of the worries circle around rising prices, or inflation. That is precisely why, in his new year speech, the Prime Minister pledged to halve inflation by the end of the year. We understand that if prices are rising, our money does not go as far. We want to ensure that we can halt the pace at which prices are rising, so that our hard-earned money goes further.

We have also taken decisive action to support households with those pressures over this year and the next, including by helping millions of the most vulnerable households through the additional cost of living payments over this year and next; the energy price guarantee, which will save households £900 this year and £500 next year; and the support for all UK households provided through the £400 energy bill support scheme. But we need to continue with our plan for stability and fiscal prudence and to be responsible with the nation's finances. That is why we want to ensure that welfare spending remains sustainable and focused on those who most need the help. We continue to support the vast majority of families with child benefit payments, but the high income child benefit charge allows us to maintain that sustainability.

The charge affects a small proportion of child benefit claimants—namely, those who have relatively high incomes. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) questioned the threshold. I hope that I can offer him some reassurance, on a national scale. In 2019-20—the last year for which I have been provided with figures—about 373,000 individuals in the UK declared a HICBC liability, HICBC being the acronym that the Treasury uses; I prefer what the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk said—“the charge”. However, the vast majority of those 373,000 individuals have incomes above the UK higher rate income tax threshold of £50,270. That is in the context, as I have said, of 7.7 million families being assisted with the cost of raising children.

Many of the individuals who earn above the £50,270 mark will earn between £50,000 and £60,000, so they will not be required to pay back the entire value of their child benefit, because it is tapered in that £10,000 spectrum. We have, I am told, never aligned the threshold for the charge with the UK higher rate threshold or, indeed, other thresholds for income tax. Of course, I note that in Scotland the Scottish Government have set the higher rate threshold for Scottish income tax at a lower rate of over £43,000. We are very concerned that raising the threshold above the £50,000 figure would come at a significant cost to the Government at a time when support is needed for vital public services.

**Douglas Chapman:** Will the Minister give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I was just about to come to the hon. Gentleman's question about universality, if that is the point on which he is seeking to intervene. He raised the issue of universality, and my response to that would be that he and others are rightly focusing on the challenge of people just over the £50,000 mark or, indeed, making comparisons with couples who individually earn under the £50,000 mark but together obviously earn nearly £100,000. I do not quite know how I would justify extending child benefit to couples who earn significantly in excess of £50,000 each. Perhaps a mile or two down the river, in the City, there may be couples in banking, the finance sector and so on who are earning not just hundreds of thousands of pounds but even more. I for one would much rather that the tax paid by our constituents—those of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife and mine—was focused on those constituents on whom we have rightly focused, namely the poorest paid, rather than those earning astronomical salaries.

**Douglas Chapman:** The point that I wanted to make was actually about whether we could get a view on the example that I gave of family 1 and family 2 and the inequity that there is for certain families. It may be that both parents or partners are under the limit but in total they earn a lot more than £60,000. I think that that is something that the Government could look at a bit more generously.

**Victoria Atkins:** I very much understand this point. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was involved at all in the scrutiny of the Bill that became the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which I had the privilege of taking through the House a year or two ago. Interestingly, one of the challenges that his SNP colleagues put to me, in the context of universal credit, was that universal credit is paid per household. They made the point that, particularly for victims of domestic abuse, they would prefer it to be paid to the individual. The reason why I raise that is that we have a long-standing tradition—since, I am told, the 1990s—of individual taxation. I, as a feminist, am entirely comfortable with being—indeed, demand the right to be—taxed on my income, rather than that of my husband. The system of independent taxation being what it is, every individual, including each partner in a couple, is treated equally and independently within the income tax system. That means that the child benefit charge, sitting as it does within the income tax system, must adhere to those principles; that is the idea behind it. I acknowledge the tensions that the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk have raised regarding those families where people fall just below the threshold, but Governments of all colours must do that kind of balancing when setting thresholds and rates of taxation, and so on. That is why the charge is set as it is.

**Jim Shannon:** I am a very simple person, and I am trying to work this out—the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) referred to this example as well. If two people earn £49,000 a year, it is okay for them to have the benefit, but if one person earns £52,000 a year and their partner earns £10,000, that makes them liable for extra tax. Surely, the Government should look at that again—a collective income of £98,000 against a collective income of £62,000.

**Victoria Atkins:** It is precisely because we are taxed as individuals. When HMRC considers the self-assessment forms that, I hope, colleagues across the House sent in in good time before the 31 January deadline, those forms will be considered on the basis of individuals' own circumstances: we do not look at the circumstances of those individuals' partners and tax them on their partner's income. That is the underlying principle.

I accept that that principle rubs up against this particular policy, but I would be concerned about doing otherwise, and not just from the perspective of it chipping away at the principle of individual taxation. When we debate means testing, we ought to consider that we would be beginning to ask HMRC to collate data about people's relationships and family setups in the context of collecting taxation. While there may be circumstances in which that happens, I do think we need to tread very carefully: for example, means testing would mean that individual taxpayers would have to explain their family setup to HMRC. Of course, family situations can change—relationships break down and relationships are formed—and at the moment, that sort of information is not collected by HMRC through self-assessment. I think we would all want to be sure we were comfortable with that information, and the burden of telling HMRC about it, being part of an individual's self-assessment.

HMRC holds records on individual incomes, allowing it to identify who is liable for taxes, and communicates with those people as appropriate to encourage compliance. Basing the high income child benefit charge on household income would require all families in receipt of child benefit payments to report their household income data to HMRC in order to ensure compliance, which I think would be a significant administrative burden on not just HMRC but, more importantly, the families we are seeking to represent. Of course, as the hon. Member for Strangford has highlighted, some of those claimants will be on very low incomes, nowhere near the threshold of £50,000. Again, I wonder about the unintended consequences for such people.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk asked me a question about men. I am sorry that I did not have a chance to note it down, but I hope we will be able to discuss it after the debate and that I will be able to provide him with an answer, even if not immediately.

I am keen to address the matter of complexity because, again, I have heard and understood the experiences that hon. Members have highlighted of the complexities for people who perhaps are PAYE employees but have to submit a self-assessment tax return. The reason for that—this is where the tax technicalities of my role come to the fore—is the charge is based on the amount of an individual's adjusted net income, which is an individual's total taxable income before any personal allowances and less certain tax reliefs. Using that measure avoids using estimates of income that could result in too little or too much tax being paid. For example, it allows people who have saved more into their pension or have donated to charity to have that reflected in their income self-assessment. That is the only way we have of establishing a person's adjusted net income, but we have tried to help people with the administration of this. Indeed, there is a calculator on gov.uk to help people work out how much tax they may have to pay, which I hope will be of assistance for colleagues corresponding with constituents.

HMRC takes steps to notify those who may need to complete a tax return, including writing to 70,000 people each year to notify them and outline what they need to do to pay. Of course, families can claim child benefit but opt out of getting payments. That means they do not have to pay the charge but can keep the non-monetary benefits of claiming child benefit, such as the national insurance credits for state pension reasons, which the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk referred to.

On the point of families deciding not to claim child benefit, the question was asked, "What does that mean in terms of national insurance credits and numbers?" I hope I can assure the hon. Member by telling him that a national insurance record can be filled in a number of ways, not simply through child benefits. Not everyone will require the national insurance credits that come with child benefits, and individuals may build up sufficient qualifying years over an expected working life of 50 years even if there are some gaps in their NI record, which of course may happen because of caring responsibilities. Most individuals under the age of 50 will get a full state pension with 35 qualifying years, and we encourage people to claim child benefit regardless of their income to help them build the qualifying years of national insurance. In terms of the child's national insurance number, if a person claims but opts out of receiving payments, HMRC will give that national insurance number to the child automatically, but if the family do not claim at all, there is an online service provided by DWP to enable the child to obtain a national insurance number. I ask Members to please let their constituents know of that service if they are not aware of it.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Wilkes case and made the point that the changes arising from the case were retrospective. Obviously, we have to have heed to the ruling in that case, so we have legislated to put beyond doubt that the longstanding rules that HMRC uses to recover tax that it discovers has not been assessed can continue to operate in relation to the charge. All the taxpayers who have been assessed were still liable for the charge and nothing in the court's judgment called that into question. Indeed, I am told that this has been operationalised in recent times. Anyone who has concerns about bills or letters that they receive should be encouraged to contact HMRC, because, when tax is owed, time can be given in the right circumstances to pay it, for example, so that we ensure that we are supporting people with their tax affairs.

I hope that I have addressed many of the interesting points raised by hon. Members across the House on this important topic. I very much understand and welcome the scrutiny that the House brings to this important benefit and the operation of the policy to ensure that the benefit is paid to those families who need it the most. I assure colleagues that we will always keep this and any other tax policy under review. We will listen to colleagues on how the system can be improved for the benefit of families, carers and children. I hope that I have reassured hon. Members or at least explained the Government's position on the policy, with the need to keep the public finances and, importantly, child benefit on a sustainable footing.

4.1 pm

**Martyn Day:** I am grateful to hon. Members who attended and supported the debate. I am grateful to the Minister for her comments. It will probably not come as

a surprise to her that I remain convinced—perhaps even more so—that universality is the easiest and simplest way to resolve the problems that the system has.

One way or another, my constituents still face so many anomalies, with the obvious one being family income versus that of the individual. There is also the fact that the rates have not changed in such a long period of time, so something needs to be reviewed. I look forward to becoming a firm pen friend of the Minister as we go further through these debates.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the High Income Child Benefit Charge.

4.2 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statement

*Thursday 2 February 2023*

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Myanmar

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** Yesterday marked two years since the military seized power from the democratically elected Government in Myanmar. The military continues to instigate violence across the country and inflict acute suffering against the people of Myanmar.

The consequences for domestic and regional stability are clear: over 17 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance—a staggering increase of 16 million in just two years—over 1.5 million people are displaced within Myanmar, with a million more in neighbouring Bangladesh, Thailand and India; illicit economies are thriving; and democratic gains have been reversed. Recent figures indicated that Myanmar suffered some of the most intense violence in the world in 2022, with conflict-related deaths second only to Ukraine. There is a clear trajectory of increasing violence, human rights violations and abuses, to which the UK has responded with a range of tools.

Since the coup, we have provided around £100 million to support those in need of humanitarian assistance, deliver healthcare and education for the most vulnerable, and protect civic space. We are proud to work with civil society organisations in Myanmar who have access to vulnerable communities in the most remote and hard-to-reach places, even where others have been unable to do so.

We have led a strong, co-ordinated international response to the coup, through our G7 presidency and our leadership role on Myanmar at the UN Security Council. On 21 December 2022, the UNSC passed the first ever resolution on the situation in Myanmar, led by the UK. The resolution demands an end to violence and urges immediate action by the military regime to fully implement the Association of Southeast Asian Nations five-point consensus and release all those arbitrarily detained.

We have also used our role at the UN Human Rights Council to highlight violations, including gender-based violence.

The UK condemns the brutal actions of the military regime. The military continues to use indiscriminate air attacks on schools, hospitals and places of worship, to suppress, intimidate and demoralise the civilian population. In Myanmar, the security forces are committing atrocities with impunity, including reports of sexual violence, torture and village burnings bearing many of the hallmarks of the atrocities against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. In response to this violence, the UK has announced its 14th tranche of targeted sanctions, to target companies and individuals who are responsible for supplying aviation fuel to the Myanmar air force. We will continue to use all possible measures to target those who seek to facilitate and profit from the military's human rights violations.

We support all those working peacefully to restore democracy in Myanmar. The military must engage in inclusive and meaningful dialogue with the full range of opposition voices, including the NUG—National Unity Government—and respect the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar. In 2022, UK Ministers spoke regularly with counterparts in the NUG. We call on the military to immediately end its campaign of violence and release the thousands of people it has detained arbitrarily, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The military must engage in inclusive and meaningful dialogue with the full range of opposition voices in order to respect the federal, democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar.

The Rohingya in Myanmar continue to suffer systemic discrimination. Sadly, this is leading to desperate attempts to reach third country destinations, often ending in tragedy. We will support all efforts to seek accountability for the atrocities they suffered in 2017. This is why, in August, we announced our intention to intervene in the International Court of Justice case brought by The Gambia.

We remain committed to supporting efforts to hold perpetrators of violence to account. We have provided funding to the independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar and established the Myanmar witness programme to collect and preserve evidence of serious human rights violations and abuses, including those against women, girls and LGBT+ people.

I reiterate my steadfast support for the people of Myanmar, and my desire to work towards a peaceful, inclusive and democratic future for the country.

[HCWS540]



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