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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 February 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON (MARKETS) BILL

Bill read a Second time.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Resources

1. **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase police resources. [903478]
12. **Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase police resources. [903491]
15. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase police resources. [903494]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): On 31 January, the Government confirmed a total police funding settlement of up to £17.2 billion for 2023-24, an increase of up to £287 million on this year, providing the police with the resources to fight crime and keep the public safe. As a result of our police uplift programme, we are on track to meet our target of 20,000 new police officers, meaning that England and Wales will have the most police officers ever.

Sara Britcliffe: I welcome the work this Government are doing to increase police resources and tackle antisocial behaviour, with many initiatives—such as the youth investment fund, the youth justice sport fund and the safer streets fund—acting as preventive policy measures. However, in my constituency of Hyndburn and Haslingden, it is not just individuals who are impacted by this; it is also businesses, which have associated costs and fear for their staff. Will my right hon. and learned Friend work with me to see how we can address this issue for businesses on our high streets?

Suella Braverman: I share my hon. Friend's deep concern about antisocial behaviour, and I was pleased to discuss the issue with her very recently. She will obviously be aware of the 435 new police officers on the ground in Lancashire, thanks to this Government. She

will also be aware of the 18% fall in neighbourhood crime in Lancashire since 2019, thanks to this Government, and the £1 million safer streets funding in Lancashire, thanks to this Government. Lancashire police are building a specialist antisocial behaviour unit to make the most of those extra resources, and have already had some progress with Operation Propulsion, aimed at tackling nuisance bikes. There is more to do, and that is why I will be setting out the antisocial behaviour plan in due course.

Mr Speaker: And it is the finest constabulary in the country.

Dean Russell: In Watford, I have been fortunate enough to join dawn raids and have seen at first hand the important work the police do in tackling serious and organised crime. However, once the police successfully carry out these types of operations across the country, often with extensive multi-agency work, it is important the right support is in place to maintain security within the community. Will my right hon. and learned Friend please confirm what further support is in place to ensure the long-term dismantling of these awful gangs and to guarantee that no new criminals take over and reinstate the lines of supply to this criminality?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent work in Watford, working hard for the communities he serves.

Through our successful county lines programme the police have arrested thousands of individuals and closed down 2,900 county lines. The programme focuses on charging line holders, ensuring we put offenders behind bars and putting deal lines out of action. Together with "Clear, hold, build", an initiative that I launched recently, we will also be taking more robust action on serious and organised crime gangs that blight communities through drug dealing.

Mrs Drummond: Hampshire and Isle of Wight constabulary is one of the lowest-funded police forces by central Government. Can my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that this historically unfair funding settlement will be looked at, and that the people of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight can look forward to the same levels of funding as similar areas?

Suella Braverman: We will be consulting very shortly on police funding formulas, but I am very pleased that the excellent police and crime commissioner in Hampshire, Donna Jones, has made very good use of the funding flexibility that I brought into force very recently by raising the precept. That will increase the amount of funding available to the frontline in policing, and together with the safer streets funding and millions of pounds for violence reduction units, it will mean more police, less crime and safer streets in Hampshire.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Linking police records of gun certificates to medical databases was a key ask of the community in Plymouth after the tragedies we suffered in 2021. How is that linking of GP records with police-held databases and other medical records going, and what additional policing resources is the Home Secretary making available to ensure that, no matter where in the country someone

lives, if they present to their medical professional with a mental health issue, it will be clear to that medical professional whether they have a firearm?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about access to firearms or other weapons for people with a track record or indication of mental health vulnerabilities. We must wait for the coroner report to be issued, so I will not comment substantively, but we are looking very closely at this and I hope to report on it in due course.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): There have been too many examples of misogyny and sexism in public services in recent times, so can the Home Secretary reassure the House that sufficient resources will be provided to clear out the worst offenders and help change the culture so we can once again have confidence in our important police services?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is right that recent instances have really shaken confidence in the whole of the policing family throughout the country, and although there are many thousands of professional, expert men and women who put themselves forward every day, it is clear that policing must do better. That is why I have asked the College of Policing to strengthen the statutory code of practice for police vetting, we have tasked the Angiolini inquiry to look into the specifics of the David Carrick case, and we have commissioned the inspectorate to conduct a rapid review of all forces' response to the inspectorate's recent review into vetting and counter-corruption. It is clear that standards need to rise so that cases such as the tragic ones we have seen become a thing of the past.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): North Shropshire is obviously a safe place to live, I am very glad to say, but headteachers and health professionals have recently reported to me an increase in county lines drug-running activities and child exploitation. Can the Home Secretary confirm that North Shropshire will receive additional police resource, particularly at night-time, and the multi-agency approach we need to close down these county lines gangs?

Suella Braverman: There has been considerable success through our county lines programme over the last few years, shutting down over 2,000 county lines across the country and making thousands of arrests of those caught up in propagating this evil behaviour of drug supply. It is vital that we go further and that this success reaches every part of the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Some Government Members will be celebrating the Prime Minister's first 100 days—it is remarkable that that is considered an achievement these days—but during those 100 days in office around 30,000 people, mostly women, will have been raped, and 20,000 of those rapes will have been reported while only about 320 will ever lead to a charge. The Home Secretary has responded by slashing Government funding for forensics, cutting this year's funding for local police forces by £62 million and

heaping pressure on to council tax payers to fill the gaps. Is that because of the Government's disastrous mini-Budget, is it because of the Government's failure to grow the economy over 13 years, or have they simply given up on tackling violence against women and girls?

Suella Braverman: I must gently point out that the hon. Lady has got to get with the programme, get with reality, and come back down to earth. The facts are that we have increased police funding by over half a billion pounds, I have just brought in more flexibility so police and crime commissioners around the country can increase their resources on the frontline, and we are on track to have the highest number of police officers on the ground in the history of policing. That is thanks to this Government's funding and policies.

Of course we must do better on violence against women and girls and on rape and sexual offences; that is why we are pioneering the roll-out of Operation Soteria, which will improve operational support for victims of rape and serious sexual offences on the ground throughout an investigation. It is also why we are going to have specialist measures in court so that victims of rape and serious sexual offences give evidence in a much more appropriate manner. We are taking the steps; that is far better than carping from the sidelines.

Iranian Regime: Threat to UK

2. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the level of threat posed by the Iranian regime to people in the UK. [903479]

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): The director general of MI5 recently outlined that, since January 2022, there have been at least 10 Iranian threats to kidnap or even kill UK-based individuals. The level of the Iranian threat is kept under constant review. The Home Secretary and I are working with our partners across Government to ensure that all tools at our disposal are used to protect individuals in the UK against any threats from the Iranian state.

Mr Sharma: It has been patently obvious for years that the whole Iranian Government are rotten. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps leaders are allowed to travel to the UK and store their stolen wealth almost with impunity. The people of Iran are fighting back. Why do we not stop their abusers stealing the wealth of the country and sanction more than just 50 people at the top of the organisation?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Member is absolutely correct: the IRGC is a vicious organisation and its first victims are the Iranian people, who have been brutalised and murdered by that despotic regime for far too long. I hope he will be encouraged by the actions the UK Government are taking at the moment in looking into various of these areas, and also by the work being done by some of our partners. It is interesting to note that, of the so-called E3+3, Germany and France appear to be looking at proscribing the IRGC, as the United States has already done. It seems that not only is there international agreement on the point the hon. Member raises, but that action is absolutely ready to go.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): As part of the sanctions the Government are imposing on this evil regime, will they please shut down the Islamic centre in Maida Vale, which is the voice of the supreme leader in this country? It should not have charitable status and should be shut down.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend has raised an extremely important issue, of which I am acutely aware and which has not gone without notice.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Minister seemed to say in response to the original question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) that we were considering proscribing the IRGC. Is that the case?

Tom Tugendhat: The Government always keep all areas under review, and speculation has certainly been in that direction. What we have already done is sanction various different elements. Any further action will no doubt be announced as soon as it is ready, and we will see as soon as that can be done.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, the threat from the IRGC to people in this country—be they opposition journalists reporting on what is going on in Iran at the moment or UK citizens—is paramount. Foreign Office Ministers have responded to all the urgent questions the Speaker has granted and the debates we have had, but will my right hon. Friend now take the obvious step, which is supported by all political parties in the Chamber, and proscribe the IRGC in its entirety?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend will know that it is not me he has to persuade in this matter and that there are many areas where I would like to go. I can assure him that the Government are absolutely listening to exactly what he is saying. The Home Secretary and I are as one on this.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Minister has been explicit, as have others, about the threat we face in the UK from the Iranian regime. I really welcome what he has said, and we stand ready to work with him on this issue, but the truth is that we have not seen anything like the sanctions and immigration controls that have been deployed against Russia being deployed against Iran. Will the Government go further and be clear? Will they proscribe the IRGC using either existing terror laws or new state threat variations to drive out this threat and keep people safe?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady knows very well that the Government have already sanctioned many individuals inside the Iranian regime and have taken action on individuals who may have had access around Europe and indeed into the United Kingdom. Those people have been either controlled or not allowed permission to travel. She should also be aware that our embassy in Iran is keeping us closely informed of how the sanctions are playing out and making sure that we target appropriately individuals who are a threat to the United Kingdom.

It is completely wrong that any foreign state should be able to threaten anybody in the United Kingdom. Anybody in the UK should have the same protection and be afforded the same rights as anybody else. The action

we have taken to protect some journalists in the UK, which was highlighted only recently by some of our agencies, is absolutely vital to the security of our whole society.

Refugees: Accommodation

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help ensure that refugees are placed in adequate housing. [903480]

7. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What progress she has made in ending the use of hotels as contingency asylum accommodation. [903484]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Our first duty is to break the business model of the people-smuggling gangs, stop the boats and reduce the number of those coming to this country illegally. Alongside that, we are working to ensure that decent but not luxurious accommodation is available while asylum claims are being processed. We are working with local councils and providers to develop regional dispersal plans and are pursuing a range of options to increase supply.

Mr Sheerman: I am very pleased to hear what the Minister says. When the dreadful invasion of Ukraine took place, many people welcomed with open arms refugees from Ukraine. Does he agree that it is still not safe for many of them to go home? Many have outstayed their time with their host, so can we have a coherent plan going forward to ensure that refugees from Ukraine are decently protected and housed?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is right to celebrate the good work that we have done in this country to support people who came here from Ukraine. That has been the largest humanitarian visa effort in this country's history. I have benefited from that personally, having had a family stay with me, as I know many Members across the House have. Over 500 individuals continue to come to the UK every week under the Ukrainian visa schemes, but he is right to say that the challenge now is as much about ensuring re-matches are available for people who, for whatever reason, are coming to the end of their stay with their original families. We are working very closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that those changes are as seamless as possible so that nobody ends up homeless.

Greg Smith: The Best Western hotel in the town of Buckingham was originally acquired by Clearsprings on a six-month lease, which in theory runs out in March. The loss of the hotel as a valuable local business is noticeable in the town, as is the diversion of precious primary care resources, with an on-site clinic required at least once a week on top of the usual services of the Swan Practice. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the use of the Best Western in Buckingham will end soon, so that Buckingham businesses can get back to normal and health resources are freed up?

Robert Jenrick: The Home Secretary and I are as frustrated as my hon. Friend that too many people are staying in hotels, costing too much money to the taxpayers of this country. We want to ensure that hotels such as

the one in his constituency are exited as swiftly as possible. That is why we are pursuing a full dispersal model with local authorities and considering a range of other options, including larger sites. The enduring solution to this problem is to break the business model of the people smugglers and to stop the boats. It is for that reason that the Home Secretary and I will shortly bring forward further legislation, which I hope will command support across the House.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Do the Government have any plans to make use of the former Atkinson Court care home in east Leeds as part of their dispersal policy?

Robert Jenrick: I am not aware of that site, but I am very happy to look into it and revert to the right hon. Gentleman. The mandatory dispersal model we are pursuing is one of agreement with local authorities, where every local authority works with the Home Office and our providers to agree a number of bed spaces in their local area and then to choose appropriate ones that meet the needs of the local community. I am happy to revert to the right hon. Gentleman on that.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the severity of the risks, it would not be appropriate to house asylum seekers in a Pontins holiday camp in my constituency? Will he take the opportunity to confirm at the Dispatch Box the reports at the end of last week that the site will not be used?

Robert Jenrick: The Home Office is reviewing a range of options and having exploratory conversations with a number of local authorities. If the local authority, Sefton Council, does not wish to proceed on the Pontins site in my hon. Friend's constituency then the site will not proceed, because it is the freeholder of that site. He should really speak to Sefton Council to get that assurance, but the task for all of us is to stop the boats, or else we will continue to have troubles like this in the years ahead, with thousands of individuals crossing the channel illegally and placing unbearable strain on our asylum accommodation.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Home Office accommodation provider Mears has made significant profits providing substandard facilities for asylum seekers. Community InfoSource in Glasgow has found that Mears' practices are retraumatising and causing unnecessary stress and suffering. Mears is now back to using hotels such as the Muthu in Erskine, which the Park Inn incident in Glasgow proved to be entirely unsuitable for vulnerable people. Why are the UK Government encouraging rapacious companies to profit from misery, rather than investing in community-based alternatives and more effective decision making?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Lady has specific allegations, will she please bring them to me and I will be happy to investigate them?

The answer to this issue, in Scotland as across the country, is for local authorities to step up and make more accommodation available. As I have said many times at the Dispatch Box, including to the hon. Lady,

the Scottish Government are taking fewer asylum seekers and refugees than any other comparable part of the United Kingdom. The SNP's record on this issue is frankly shameful. It was, after all, the Scottish Government whose failed Ukrainian scheme meant that they had to house Ukrainian refugees in cruise ships.

Crime: Lancashire

4. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help prevent crime in Lancashire. [903481]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I know that questions about policing in Lancashire are of particular interest to you, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased to report that since 2015, there are 467 more police in Lancashire. Next year, the available funding will increase by £12.3 million. Over the last three years, Lancashire police have had £5.5 million for their violence reduction unit and £4.7 million for their hotspot policing. I met this morning with Lancashire's excellent police and crime commissioner, Andrew Snowden, who talked to me about Operation Warrior, which has seen on average each week 2 kg of drugs being seized, 17 arrests and £55,000 of illicit cash being taken off the streets.

Cat Smith: When I tabled my question, I had planned to raise the issue of rural crime in the Wyre area of my constituency, but events over the last few days have changed that. As part of the intensive search for Nicola Bulley, Lancashire police are asking drivers for dash-cam footage from the Blackpool Lane and Garstang Road area of St Michael's from Friday 27 January between 9 and 10 am. Will the Minister echo my request for people from the local community to come forward, even if they think their dash-cam footage does not contain anything of interest—the police will be able to make that decision—and for all of us to do our best to find Nicola and bring her home?

Chris Philp: I completely echo what the hon. Lady says about this awful, tragic case. I agree with everything she said and I join her in urging anyone who thinks they may have any information, however innocuous it may seem, to come forward, including dash-cam footage and any other information that may be relevant. The whole local community and the police are desperately doing everything they can to find out what happened, and I urge everyone to help them in that endeavour.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It almost seems like Lancashire day today, Mr Speaker.

I join the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) in praising the hard work of our constabulary and the many local people, particularly my constituents, who have been out searching the river banks of the Wyre estuary looking for clues as to what has happened. Will the Minister join me in imploring people to avoid the speculation, gossip and guesswork that has been going on? People have been descending on St Michael's on Wyre and it is hampering the investigation and causing inordinate distress to Nicola's family.

Chris Philp: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. It is important that the public respect the family's need for privacy at what is obviously an extremely difficult, upsetting and unimaginably distressing time. It is important

that the public let the police and the local authority get on with their work. I repeat what my hon. Friend said and what the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said a moment ago: if anyone has any information, however minor or innocuous it may seem to them, I ask them to share it with the local police. Anything at all could help them to get to the bottom of this, and I urge people to do everything they can to help the police at this terribly difficult time.

Domestic Abuse: Serial Perpetrators

5. **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking ensure effective (a) management and (b) monitoring of serial perpetrators of domestic abuse. [903482]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Domestic abuse is an abhorrent crime and tackling it is a priority for this Government. Our tackling domestic abuse plan, which was published last year, is clear that our response to perpetrators will be uncompromising and relentless. We are investing unprecedented amounts in perpetrator interventions and technology for the police to identify abusers. We are also considering the feasibility of putting dangerous offenders on the register.

Ellie Reeves: In response to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister admitted that the Home Office does not routinely collect data on the number of domestic abuse victims killed by a partner who had previously been convicted of domestic violence. When domestic abuse offences reported to the police have doubled in the past five years while charges have nearly halved, this puts lives at risk. Will the Minister back Labour's call for a domestic abuse register to track offenders, protect victims and help prevent more crime?

Miss Dines: The feasibility of such a register is being looked into. I remind the House that 911,000 reports of domestic abuse are made to the police every year. The Government are carefully considering technological answers and ensuring that police forces look carefully at the situation. We are looking at multi-agency forums for improving the track record on this issue. The Government are spending unprecedented amounts in a cogent, targeted way and I am proud of the commitments so far.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I was pleased to see that last year's tackling domestic abuse plan recognised the link between domestic abuse and child abuse. My hon. Friend will be aware of the horrendous child sexual exploitation case in Rotherham and will agree that we need to end child abuse of all kinds. Does she agree that we need a child criminal and sexual exploitation commissioner, working alongside the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, to stop CSE, punish perpetrators and ensure that anyone linked to CSE has no link to public office ever again?

Miss Dines: I know my hon. Friend is a strong campaigner on this issue and that it is very important locally, but it is also hugely important nationally. I was privileged to visit the National Crime Agency and other groups that work in the field. A huge amount of work is going on. It is clear that the Government need to have a

detailed response to the recent report to ensure that we have joined-up thinking across all Departments to stamp out child sexual abuse, because it is a dreadful crime.

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

6. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When she plans to appoint an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. [903483]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): The role of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, as set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, is to encourage good practice in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of slavery and human trafficking offences and the identification of victims. The Home Secretary recognises the importance of the role of the anti-slavery commissioner and has committed to running a new competition to recruit for the role. The process will begin imminently.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister most warmly for that answer. She illustrates perfectly the need for my private Member's Bill, which would allow Parliament to make this most important appointment, rather than the Government. The post has been vacant for 10 months already. In the third quarter of last year, no fewer than 4,586 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the Home Office—38% up on the previous year. What is it about their record on this issue that makes the lack of scrutiny so attractive to the Government?

Miss Dines: I do not accept that narrative. The competition is opening shortly. There will be a large number of very good candidates, and there needs to be a proper process. These things cannot be rushed. Sometimes the best things come to those who wait.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): In the third quarter of 2022, over 4,500 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the national referral mechanism—a record since its introduction—and 43% of those were children. Just last month, people up and down the country were shocked to learn that over 200 children seeking asylum have gone missing from Home Office hotels. The Home Office ignored repeated warnings that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would make things worse. What have we seen since then? A failure to appoint a new anti-slavery commissioner and just one conviction for child trafficking last year. Does the Minister think that that one conviction shows that the Government are on top of this? Does it not show that they are continuing to let dangerous criminal gangs get away with their crimes?

Miss Dines: There is a big history with trafficking, and dangerous gangs have to be looked at. However, it is this Government who have the confidence to do something about it. There are issues that other Members of this House were reluctant to look at. It is important, for example, that the ethnicity of each and every alleged criminal in the field is noted, so that greater statistics and knowledge can be held. A commissioner will be appointed at the appropriate time, as soon as possible.

Neighbourhood Policing

8. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of levels of neighbourhood policing. [903486]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): We are in the middle of recruiting an extra 20,000 police officers. We are on track to deliver that by March, in just a few weeks' time. As of December, we had recruited over 16,000 of them. When we hit the target in a few weeks, we will have more police officers than at any time in this country's history: approximately 148,000.

Liz Twist: Neighbourhood policing is vital in cracking down on antisocial behaviour. I am very glad to say that our excellent police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, is fully aware of that issue and is addressing it. Nationally, why have we seen an overall drop of 8,500 in the number of police community support officers over the past 13 years? Locally, in Northumbria, there has been a drop of 395, and we are still down by 565 police officers since 2010.

Chris Philp: As I explained a moment ago, we are on track very shortly to have more police officers than at any time in this country's history, but let me tell you what has dropped since 2010, Mr Speaker. According to the crime survey, criminal damage has dropped by 65%, domestic burglary has dropped by 56%, robbery has dropped by 57% and violence has dropped by 38%. That, Mr Speaker, is what has dropped.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): In Kent, burglary has decreased by 41% and crime overall has decreased by 7%. I am pleased to report that by the end of next month, we will have 358 extra officers operating across Kent. However, in Medway we have been blighted by the new phenomenon of car racing and car meets, which have created terrible antisocial behaviour and lots of problems for local residents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Kent police working with the council to implement a public spaces protection order is a great way to tackle this nuisance, which is a very dangerous activity?

Chris Philp: I am happy to confirm that the county of Kent already has a record ever number of police officers. I pay tribute to its fantastic police and crime commissioner, Matthew Scott, who is doing great work—along with Kent's MPs, of course. I agree with my hon. Friend that public spaces protection orders are a very good way to combat antisocial behaviour, whether it is antisocial racing or nitrous oxide consumption. I encourage all local authorities to use PSPOs.

Asylum Applications: Backlog

9. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on reducing the backlog of asylum applications. [903487]

16. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on reducing the backlog of asylum applications. [903495]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): We have committed to clearing the backlog of asylum applications over this year and to introducing a faster, more productive system. Since making that commitment at the end of 2022, we have made excellent progress: recruiting more caseworkers, working towards a doubling in their number, establishing dedicated caseworkers per nationality and designing a more streamlined process, which is already raising productivity substantially.

Rachel Hopkins: Luton is a compassionate town and is always proud to support those seeking sanctuary, but the backlog and delays in the Home Office's asylum system have led to Luton receiving a disproportionate number of dispersal placements in comparison with the rest of the east of England. Luton Borough Council's services are already stretched beyond their means, following a decade of Government cuts, so how is the Minister working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that councils receive clear funding settlements to cover the costs of the increased impact on local services?

Robert Jenrick: We provide funding for every asylum seeker who is in a local authority's care of about £3,500, and we work closely with local authorities through the mandatory dispersal system to make sure that each one plays a fair and equitable part. However, the answer to this problem is not more accommodation; it is stopping the boats and ensuring that we have some of the most robust laws in the world, so that those who come here illegally do not find a way to a life in the UK. I hope that the hon. Lady will support us when we introduce our legislation.

Vicky Foxcroft: My constituent arrived here from Syria and claimed asylum in July 2021. He is a doctor and applied to volunteer with the covid vaccination programme, but was turned down because he had no documentation. After more than a year and many interventions by my office, he finally had his asylum interview and was given a job as a healthcare assistant, but that was delayed because he had to wait for his national insurance number. The NHS is crying out for staff. When will the Government sort this out?

Robert Jenrick: We are working to bring down the backlog of cases. Let me gently point out that the last Labour Government left a backlog of cases of not 450,000, as I said during the last session of Home Office questions, but 500,000, as has been shown by further research. So bad was the backlog that there was even a room colloquially known as the "room of doom" into which cases were put. We will get the backlog down, and create a streamlined and efficient asylum system.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Tensions in the community are rising in my constituency owing to the use of hotels to house asylum seekers in and around Cannock Chase and, in particular, in Bridgtown. There were protests in Cannock at the weekend. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the local police, who are doing everything they can to respond to issues as they arise, and will he meet me to discuss the situation and ways in which we can alleviate the concerns of my constituents?

Robert Jenrick: I should be pleased to meet my right hon. Friend and work with her to ensure that that hotel, like others, is cleared as quickly as possible. I hope she will see from the work we are doing that we are straining every sinew to tackle this issue. For example, following the communiqué that was signed with Albania at the end of last year and is now being implemented, we are seeing weekly return flights of illegal migrants to Albania and a faster process, involving 400 caseworkers dedicated to those Albanian cases.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One group with a strong claim to be here are the former interpreters in Afghanistan and other locally employed civilians who helped our armed forces. Will the Minister explain to the House whether such applications are caught up in the general collection of applications made by people who have come here illegally, or whether any form of priority and extra attention is given to those very deserving Afghan refugees?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend has raised an important issue. We take our moral commitment to those who supported our troops and our efforts in Afghanistan extremely seriously. We have helped more than 20,000 individuals to come to the UK, some before Operation Pitting, some during that operation and some since, under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and subsequently the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. The Foreign Office is drawing up a further list of individuals for the ACRS. The people to whom my right hon. Friend has referred should be applying to that scheme, and we hope we will be able to bring them to the United Kingdom as soon as possible, if they are not here already.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In 2019, the then Conservative Home Secretary said that she would end small boat crossings in a matter of months. Since then, the number of crossings has increased from 1,000 to 45,000, with the criminal gangs laughing all the way to the bank. Last year, Ministers promised that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would deal with the crisis, but in fact it has caused the asylum backlog to spiral out of control, forcing the British taxpayer to foot the bill for an extra £480 million in six-monthly accommodation costs. Now, Ministers are making all the same empty promises again. The Refugee Council says that the latest Government proposals will cost the taxpayer an extra £1 billion every six months, without anyone being returned anywhere. Does the Minister agree with Albert Einstein that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is a definition of madness?

Robert Jenrick: The problem with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues is that they vote against every step that we bring forward. In an age of mass migration in which millions of people are on the move and want to come to our country, either as economic migrants or asylum shoppers, we have to take the most robust action we can. The system we are building is a simple one in which those who want to come here illegally in small boats will find no way to a life in this country. They will be returned home, or to a safe third country such as Rwanda.

We will fulfil our commitment to those fleeing genuine persecution, war and human rights abuses, such as through the schemes that we have created for Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine, but we on the Government Benches are capable of seeing the difference between genuine asylum seekers and economic migrants. I hope the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will join us in voting for that further legislation when we bring it forward shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Delays even when decisions have been made are all too common. To give an example, a constituent had his appeal allowed but is still waiting for the tribunal's decision to be implemented nine months later. He cannot get on with his life. In a written answer to me, the Minister for Immigration was unable to provide my constituent with a timescale, or to establish the longest time that people have been waiting, or even how many appeals are still in Home Office limbo. Can he tell me what is the longest time that people like my constituent will have to wait, or is Home Office bureaucracy now completely out of his control?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady does not want us to tackle this issue because she believes in open borders. We want to take action to ensure that this country is not somewhere where economic migrants and asylum shoppers seek to come. That means suffusing deterrents throughout the system. She should support plans such as Rwanda and our efforts to bear down on illegal migrants. We will bear down on the backlog of cases. As I said in answer to an earlier question, we will clear it over the course of this year. We are ensuring that productivity rises every week.

Police Officers: Protecting Communities

10. **Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that police officers protect communities. [903488]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): The Government have committed substantial extra funding to invest in policing and to reduce crime, including the recruitment of an additional 20,000 police officers by March. We recently confirmed a total police funding settlement of a maximum of £17 billion for 2023-24. We have seen great results: a fall in overall crime since 2019 thanks to this Government, a fall in domestic burglary since 2019 thanks to this Government, and a fall in violent crime since 2019 thanks to this Government—more police, less crime and safer streets.

Dr Offord: Hendon Police College was once an exemplar of British policing, but there have been accusations of police staff officers being assaulted, inappropriate use of pain compliance techniques and multiple cases of cheating in exams, where the perpetrators subsequently lied about it—all by trainee police officers. How can there be trust in the police to protect the public when the recruitment process fails to identify the fundamentally dishonest?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point about standards in policing and, in particular, the recruitment methods used to increase the forces. That is why we need to improve our standards. I am glad that many forces have committed to a face-to-face interview—that is absolutely vital to weed out the inappropriate applicants. We need to ensure that there is a rapid review of all forces' responses to the inspectorate's recent report on vetting and counter-corruption. I know that the Met commissioner is taking this issue incredibly seriously and has put in place a rigorous plan to improve standards and restore confidence.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Kids in my constituency are razzing around the streets illegally on motorbikes. Sadly, two have died as a consequence of accidents they were involved in. The worst of it is that, on both occasions, the police have been caught on the hop by impromptu vigils that have taken place at the accident spots. Hundreds of other kids are defacing public and private property and intimidating residents, and the police are powerless to act. That shows that turning the police funding taps off and on has lost us experience. What will the Home Secretary do to get that experience back?

Suella Braverman: I will tell the House why the hon. Gentleman is absolutely wrong in his analysis. We are on track to recruit 20,000 police officers. That is the highest number of police officers ever known in this country—higher than in the Labour years and higher than in the 1990s, so I am sorry, but the facts do not support his accusation of reduced funding and reduced resources. He raises an important point about antisocial behaviour, and that is my priority: graffiti, vandalism, drug dealing, nuisance boy racers—they all have to be stopped. That is why increased numbers of police officers and neighbourhood policing on the ground are going to be able to tackle exactly the problem he talks about.

Topical Questions

T2. [903504] **Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I am going to make a short topical statement.

It is very important that our passport system runs as efficiently as possible. This is an issue that matters a great deal to our constituents. Covid had a global impact on passport processing times. In 2022, His Majesty's Passport Office served more customers than ever before. Staff numbers have increased by over 1,200 since April 2021 and many staff have been trained to deal with a broader range of applications. I note that last spring there were serious concerns about the performance of the Passport Office, which prompted the Home Affairs Committee to inquire into the issue. I have made it a priority to fix that issue since I became Home Secretary, and I am pleased that since September the team at the Passport Office have worked hard to reduce processing times and that, despite very high demand so far this year, last week, approximately 99% of all UK applications were completed within 10 weeks. Indeed, last week, approximately 97% of all UK applications were completed within

three weeks. We expect elevated demand for passports throughout the year, so customers should continue to allow 10 weeks, and I urge people to apply in good time, not at the last minute, to avoid delays.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Home Secretary that it is not appropriate to make such statements at the start of topicals. If there is a statement, she should come to the House. Topicals are meant to be short bits of business, not to be dragged out. If we stay long today, she will understand why. If there is an urgent question tomorrow, she should not be shocked if somebody has to answer it.

Jason McCartney: Whereas most countries have police forces, we are proud to have a police service in Britain, with police officers playing an integral role in the communities in which they live and work. That is why I particularly welcome the 16,000-plus police officers who are being recruited. In West Yorkshire, in my patch, that means 589 additional police officers. What extra will the Home Secretary do to ensure that we recruit high-quality police officers while also retaining those experienced officers in our local forces?

Suella Braverman: West Yorkshire police have recruited 837 additional police officers to December, against their total allocation of 852. This is an unprecedented recruitment drive and it gives forces the opportunity to recruit the brightest and the best into policing. It is thanks to this Government's commitment to policing, to police numbers and to funding that we are on track to recruit a historic level of police officers on the frontline, something that the Labour party has failed to support.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The whole House's thoughts will be with Turkey and Syria after the terrible earthquake.

Sentencing is under way today for David Carrick's truly appalling crimes. It is shocking that he was able to serve as an officer for so long, and we think of his victims. After Sarah Everard's murder, Ministers said "Never again", but barely anything changed. Can the Home Secretary confirm that, if a police officer is under investigation for rape or domestic abuse, there is still no requirement for them even to be suspended, and that many, like Carrick, are not?

Suella Braverman: We are going through an overhaul of our processes when it comes to disciplinary procedures applying to those officers who are under investigation. That is why I have announced a review and am looking into measures over the disciplinary process, so that we make it easier for chief constables to exclude those officers who have fallen short, whether that is criminal behaviour or other professional misconduct. It is right that we change the system and, if necessary, I will act.

Yvette Cooper: But nothing has changed in two years. Everything the Home Secretary has said is too little and too late, and far, far too weak. I have been contacted by a woman whose police officer partner was actually charged by his force with domestic abuse, but he still was not suspended and he is still a serving officer. This kind of thing is too unfair on victims and on police officers working hard. Labour will change the law to bring in compulsory standards for policing and to tackle abuse. Why won't the Home Secretary change the law?

Suella Braverman: I think the right hon. Lady needs to keep up, because we have the College of Policing already strengthening the statutory code of practice for police vetting; we have tasked the Angiolini inquiry to look at the specifics of the Carrick case; and I have launched a review into the disciplinary process.

But let us be clear: the right hon. Lady is trying to talk tough and to sound robust on the issues, but her actions and those of her party have completely fallen short of protecting the British public. It is the Labour party that has voted against police funding for several years now, and it was the Labour party that voted against our legislation that would have given the police greater powers and increased sentences.

Mr Speaker: Home Secretary, these are topicals. You took advantage; don't take it on every question, please.

T3. [903505] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the steps being taken to further the aims of the Green Ribbon Policing campaign, to support the mental health of our police officers—particularly those with serious conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder—and to hold the forces to account for delivering that support?

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. It is something we work on regularly via the police covenant oversight board, which I chair. One of the steps we have already taken is to appoint a chief medical officer for the police, to deal with exactly the issues that he rightly raises.

T5. [903507] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): The broken police funding formula means that Bedfordshire police are continually reliant on special grant funding each year to tackle serious and organised crime. Will the Minister tell the House when he expects the review of the police funding formula to be completed, and can he assure my Luton South constituents that that review will take account of the level of complex and organised crime in Bedfordshire?

Chris Philp: Yes, there is an intention to consult on the police funding formula in the near future. That is very important, but I ask the hon. Lady to join me in welcoming the fact that Bedfordshire now has about 150 more officers than it did in 2010.

T4. [903506] **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Recently, we have seen an increase in instances of antisocial behaviour, especially around shops in Rubery and in particular the Co-op in West Heath, an incident that involved a knife. Can my right hon. and learned Friend explain how we can help to protect those who work in retail, and also reduce instances of antisocial behaviour?

Suella Braverman: Tackling antisocial behaviour is a priority of mine, and my hon. Friend is right to mention this issue. When it comes to retail staff—people who are on the frontline of our public services—we have taken steps to protect them. We introduced an aggravating factor in legislation, so that an assault on a retail staff member will be taken into account at sentencing; we have a retail crime group within Government chaired by

the Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), to bring together the relevant agencies; and ultimately, more police and less crime is going to do the job of protecting those in retail.

Mr Speaker: Can I say that I am quite serious about trying to get through topicals? When the right hon. and learned Lady is still here much later than was expected, do not try and complain.

T6. [903508] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): On 14 December, the Home Secretary said to the House regarding people who are smuggled into the UK,

“they are coming here unfairly and illegitimately. That is not the right way to come to the United Kingdom and they are not welcome.”—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 1123.]

When I meet with asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow North next week, if it transpires that some of them have come to the United Kingdom on small boats or in the backs of lorries, at what point in the meeting should I tell them that the Home Secretary says they are not welcome here?

Suella Braverman: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is living on another planet if he thinks that everybody who is coming to this country on a small boat—breaking our laws, putting themselves at risk, and paying huge amounts of money to unlawful and criminal people smugglers—is welcome. Those people should not be taking that journey, and there will be a robust response from our laws if they continue to do so.

T8. [903510] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What is being done to reduce the impact of fraud?

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): My right hon. Friend is right to ask the question, because fraud has been a blight on too many communities. I assure him that the fraud strategy that many of us have been working on for a number of months is coming out very soon.

Mr Speaker: That was a quick answer.

T7. [903509] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last Wednesday, it was a pleasure to meet Home Office staff who were out on strike over pay and to protect their pensions. What interventions is the Secretary of State making to resolve that dispute, so that Home Office staff can process their many asylum applications, which have been mentioned today?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is talking about industrial action, and there were instances of that by Border Force officers in the run-up to the new year. I was very grateful for the preparation and planning by Border Force management, and for the incredible support from members of the military to enable swift operations at the border, despite the industrial action.

T9. [903511] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Does the Minister agree that in addition to funding for town centre improvements, there is the safer streets fund, which plays a vital role in levelling up places such as Ilkeston and Cotmanhay? They will benefit from more

than £400,000 of safer streets funding to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, which far too often blight our communities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): My hon. Friend represents a seat in an interesting county, and I know that she works hard on this issue. I believe that there are three projects of the kind that she mentions in Derbyshire, on which more than £1.5 million has been spent. These projects do level up, and they include spending on measures such as closed circuit television and street lighting. Crime has fallen in her constituency, and that is partly due to her work with the outstanding Conservative police and crime commissioner, Angelique Foster. I urge my hon. Friend to continue that work.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Following the news this week that Australia's medical regulator, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, has moved to reschedule psilocybin for medicinal use from 1 July, when can we expect the Home Office to finally reschedule psilocybin, so that people with conditions such as treatment-resistant depression and post-traumatic stress disorder do not have to travel to Europe, the United States or, now, Australia for psychedelic therapy treatment that they should be able to access safely, where appropriate, here?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is raising an important and reasonable point. I have carefully read her moving letter on this issue. We are getting advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and will act on this as soon as we can.

T10. [903512] **Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** I have been contacted by a number of medical professionals working for us in the NHS who are trying to get extensions to their skilled worker visas. They have waited for months, but emails and telephone calls to the Home Office are going completely unacknowledged and unanswered. Surely people who are doing a service to this country should at least have a dedicated hotline, so that they know where they stand.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): We introduced the health and social care visa to make it easier for the NHS to recruit internationally. A benefit is that there is an enhanced service standard of 15 working days for extensions to those visas. That is being met at present. If my hon. Friend has concerns, I would be happy to look into them.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister meet me to discuss the continued pressures arising from the use of hotel accommodation in my constituency and others across the Liverpool city region?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support our legislation in due course, which will tackle the root cause of the issue.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Over Christmas, a 17-year-old boy in Leigh-on-Sea was able to buy a terrifying 2-foot "zombie knife" machete online and have it delivered directly to his door. Does the Minister agree that we need to close the loophole regarding the definition of zombie knives, and get them out of circulation once and for all?

Chris Philp: Yes, I entirely agree. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing this issue to my attention a few weeks ago. We are looking to consult in the very near future to make sure that the law prohibits dangerous weapons where necessary.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): A man was stabbed to death outside Asda in Walsall town centre, and an 18-year-old was stabbed to death in Cook Street, Darlaston. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with the new chief constable about reducing serious violent crime in Walsall?

Suella Braverman: Violent crime is devastating, which is why we need to get knives and other offensive weapons off our streets. I am pleased with the targeted interventions made through violence reduction units, hotspot policing and, of course, increased police resources, which are all working towards a reduction in knife crime and violent crime.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is quite extraordinary that Members of this House complain about the number of asylum seekers, but oppose all measures that the Government bring forward to tackle them coming here illegally? Will she therefore join me in encouraging all Members to back our plans to stop small boats, which is what my constituents and the British public so manifestly want to happen, so that we can save lives and break the model used by illegal people traffickers?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. The tragedy is that Labour Members have opposed every measure that we have proposed. They voted against our Bill, which would have provided tougher penalties for people smugglers. They voted against our measures to improve the situation. We delivered the ground-breaking partnership with Rwanda and they would scrap it. Labour's plan is to invest more money in the National Crime Agency. Let me tell Members that we are already doing that. The reality is that Labour has no plan. It has no idea, and, frankly, it is not on the side of the British people, because all it wants is open borders.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): South Caernarfon Creameries is Wales's oldest and largest dairy co-operative. It is investing in Project Dragon, an ambitious expansion programme that involves investing £8 million in a factory plant from Turkish technology leaders, Gemak. Contractual deadlines are at risk as a result of delays at the British consulate in issuing visas for key staff who are essential to installing and handing over the equipment. Will someone from the Secretary of State's Department meet me at their earliest convenience to resolve this situation?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to look into the matter for the right hon. Lady. I would say, however, that the visa service is now working within its service standards in all respects.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many Albanians last year claimed to be modern-day slaves, and what are we doing to encourage the processing of their claims back in their country of origin?

Robert Jenrick: The published figures to September last year show that 3,400 Albanians claimed to be modern slaves. Of course, some within this number will prove to be so, but many will not, which is why it is right that we tackle abuse of the system. We have already taken substantial action by increasing the reasonable grounds threshold and reducing the minimum recovery period. If we need to take further action, we will.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Around 40,000 people seeking asylum are stuck in hotels. However, Home Office policy allows decisions on refugee status to be communicated only to those who have been dispersed. Surely that is absurd and counterproductive. When will the policy change?

Robert Jenrick: We are considering this issue. The policy was put in place some time ago, for good reason: so that those local authorities that were bearing a disproportionate number of the individuals in hotels and temporary accommodation did not take a corresponding number of people were they to be granted asylum. We are looking into that at the moment.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): The skilled worker visa system simply is not working for many businesses in Milton Keynes North. Despite having a licence, small businesses find that it takes ages to get a decision, and then either the visa is denied, or they pay extortionate fees for a service that does not materialise. Can we get on this immediately, because our businesses are crying out for skills? Will my right hon. Friend commit to resolving these issues?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to look into any specific cases, but overall, the skilled worker system is operating well. We have more than 48,000 registered sponsors, mostly small and medium-sized businesses. In the year to September last year, almost a quarter of a million work-related visas were granted, and the standard processing time is three weeks for those applications.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The graduate visa route enables international students to work in the UK for up to two years after their study. Curtailing or removing this route would deter international students from studying in the UK, but their net contribution to the UK economy is more than £25 billion per year. Does the Minister recognise that international student fees cross-subsidise teaching fees for British students?

Suella Braverman: We very much welcome the best and the brightest students from all over the world to our world-leading universities. Our points-based system was designed to enable graduates and undergraduates to come and study at UK universities. We are always looking at our visa routes to make sure the right balance is struck between the resources we can provide for people coming here and the numbers coming here. That is the same across the board, whichever visa route we look at.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I welcome the extra funding from the safer streets fund and the shared prosperity fund, but does the Home Secretary agree that we also need a zero-tolerance approach to tackling antisocial behaviour? Many of my constituents—long-term residents—are

concerned about going into our town centre because they do not feel safe. Does she agree that it is time for a hands-on, and not a hands-off, approach, so that where there are groups of men in the town centre blighting the experience of most of my residents, we clear them out?

Chris Philp: Yes, we agree entirely. That is why my hon. Friend's county and his town have had safer streets funding, and why they are getting extra police officers. The Government completely agree that zero tolerance to ASB is exactly what we need.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The biggest criminal in Europe, with the most blood on his hands, is Vladimir Putin. We have frozen his Russian state assets in the UK; will the Home Secretary support my Bill tomorrow to allow us to seize those assets and give them to the Ukrainian people, so that they can rebuild their country?

Tom Tugendhat: Going from freezing to seizing, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is a slightly difficult procedure under our laws, due to the rights that people have. We have looked at that matter with partners, particularly in common law jurisdictions, and I hope to have further conversations on the subject with the United States when I go there tomorrow.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): My constituents remain concerned about the victims of people-smuggling gangs. Can my right hon. Friend advise how many people smugglers have been caught and arrested under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and confirm that the Government will continue to act with vigour against people smuggling and illegal immigration?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We are implementing the Nationality and Borders Act as swiftly as possible, and it is already having a real impact, with more than 190 people having been arrested since it became law.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Aviation is hugely important to the UK economy, but the Government have neglected to recognise the worker shortage in the sector. Does the Home Secretary plan to include aviation in the skilled worker visa shortage occupations list?

Robert Jenrick: We work with the Migration Advisory Committee to keep the skilled worker list under review. We work closely with the Department for Transport on issues such as wet licensing, which was raised recently. It is important to make sure that we have the correct workforce, but we also have to crack down on abuse where we see it.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): Is it not obvious from today's exchanges that many of those who oppose the UK-Rwanda migration and economic development partnership have no idea about Rwanda, have probably never been there, and are wholly wrong to condescend to and disparage Rwanda? Above all, they have not the ghost of an idea how to solve the problem of cross-channel gangs putting people at risk at sea. The difference between the Government side and the Opposition is that we have a plan and they do not.

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend puts it very well. Let me put on record my thanks and appreciation to him for all that he has done to try to fix this incredibly difficult problem. He is absolutely right: the Labour party complains and sits on the sidelines, criticising, opposing and voting against every measure that we put forward. I urge Labour to back our Bill, back control over our borders, and back the British people.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): East Devon's farmers rely on a skilled domestic and foreign workforce to put their fantastic produce on our tables all year round. What reassurances can my right hon. Friend give that he will work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that the seasonal agricultural worker scheme will be extended beyond 2024?

Robert Jenrick: We review the seasonal agricultural worker scheme every year, working closely with DEFRA. We have extended it for this year, as my hon. Friend knows, and increased the numbers permitted under that scheme. That is quite right, but it is important to balance that against the need to ensure that British workers find their way into the workplace and are trained, and the need to invest in British farming, so that we do not need to reach in the first instance for foreign labour.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): It is quite right that police forces are under significant scrutiny at the moment, but I commend Humberside police force, which has recently been assessed as “outstanding”, and, in particular, its Grimsby-born chief constable, Lee Freeman, who was recently awarded the King's Police Medal. Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps that excellent police forces such as Humberside can take to share good practice so that every police force across the UK can become outstanding?

Suella Braverman: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Chief Constable Lee Freeman for his rightly deserved award for excellence and leadership in policing. Humberside police force is a great example of how standards in policing are improving and strong leaders are turning things around. That force's recent inspectorate report is testament to its excellent work. Humberside police has been pioneering best practice when it comes to police treatment of and resolution for victims and people with mental health issues. Its pioneering programme of “right care, right person” is being rolled out throughout the country and is sought after by other forces. It is an example of excellence.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Bristow. Is there anybody else?

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): It was worth waiting for, Mr Speaker.

I have recently written to the Minister about the Great Northern hotel in my constituency, which is being stood up to accommodate migrants who have crossed the channel on small boats. I asked him if he would give a timeframe for when the hotel will be stood down. I do not expect him to give me that timeframe from the Dispatch Box today, but can he at least guarantee that when he responds in writing, there will be a timeframe so that we can give certainty to the police, support services and the people of Peterborough?

Robert Jenrick: The Great Northern hotel in Peterborough is ingrained in my mind as a result of my hon. Friend's assiduous lobbying. That is quite right, because we share his frustration; we want to see such hotels returned to use by the local community and for the benefit of the economy. I will write back to him to set out our plans—as far as I can at this stage. I know that he will support us in all our efforts to stop the boats.

NHS Strikes

3.47 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the NHS strikes.

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question, which I am taking on behalf of the Department as the Secretary of State is attending a COBRA meeting focused on minimising the disruption experienced by patients because of today's walkouts.

In preparation for today's industrial action, we have again drawn on extra support from a range of places, including military service personnel, volunteers and the private sector. People should continue to use NHS 111 if they need medical help and to dial 999 in the event of an emergency. Yet even such strong contingencies, including more people trained to drive ambulances and doctors redeployed to other parts of the system, are no replacement for having the right people doing the right jobs.

Any strike inevitably means that some patients will have their treatment delayed, and I know that people are being contacted if their appointments need to be changed. About 88,000 procedures or outpatient appointments have been postponed as a result of industrial action over the last eight weeks, so I am disappointed and concerned that patients are facing disruption once again, especially because strikes by Royal College of Nursing members have now come together with action by GMB and Unite members in eight ambulance trusts.

I recognise that there have been efforts on behalf of unions to ensure that derogations are in place to keep people safe, and I acknowledge that some aspects of that can indeed be challenging, but it is essential that all unions adhere to a set of derogations at a national level so that we can plan and act with certainty. I have also been heartened to hear that on previous strike days, some devoted ambulance workers and nurses who received calls while on the picket line returned to work where derogations were not going to be met. That is a real tribute to the care and dedication we see on the frontline day in, day out.

Ultimately, both staff and the public should no longer be in this situation, because we all know that industrial action is in nobody's best interests, especially given the collective challenges we face to help the NHS recover from the pandemic. Despite what the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) might imply, there is much common ground, not least our shared desire to improve the NHS and deliver better care. Last week we announced our plan to recover urgent and emergency care—the second of three plans to cut waiting times in the NHS, including our elective recovery plan and our primary care recovery plan, which will be published in the next few weeks. With such important missions ahead of us, and fewer than two months left of this financial year, it is time to move forward, to look ahead and to come together in the interests of the patients we all serve.

Wes Streeting: This week will see the biggest strike in the history of the NHS, with nurses, ambulance workers and physiotherapists all driven to walk out. Some 88,000 appointments, including 10,000 operations, have already

been cancelled, with much more disruption to patients expected this week, yet Government Ministers still speak as if they are mere observers or commentators, not leaders key to solving this dispute. This is the cost of the Prime Minister's failure to sit down and negotiate with nurses, paramedics and other NHS staff.

Let us be clear about this fact: there has not been a single minute of negotiation on pay. NHS leaders are asking the Government to negotiate. Chief nurses are desperate for the Government to negotiate. The unions have offered to call off the strikes if the Government are willing to negotiate. The public cannot understand why, even now, they will not get around the table to sort this out. What on earth are they playing at?

Developments in Wales show that there is a deal to be done. The general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing has written to the Prime Minister, but she has not heard anything from the Government for weeks. It looks to the country like the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary are the ones on strike. Where is the Prime Minister? Where is the Health Secretary? In the week of the biggest strikes in the history of the NHS, during the biggest crisis the NHS has ever faced, the Health Secretary was not available for interviews this morning and he is not available to MPs today. Are we meant to believe that at 4 o'clock in the afternoon he is talking about how to avert disruption that has been taking place all day? Don't make me laugh. Perhaps the Health Secretary is busy briefing against the Chancellor, just as the Chancellor is busy briefing against him. All the while, the Prime Minister is too weak to do anything about it.

The power to stop these strikes is in the Government's hands. Patients have suffered enough disruption as it is. Is it not time for the Prime Minister to swallow his pride, sit down with NHS staff and negotiate an end to these strikes by paying NHS staff fairly?

Will Quince: I am not going to engage in the playing of party politics on this. The hon. Gentleman already knows that the Secretary of State is due to attend a Cobra meeting, which he and I rotate, and the hon. Gentleman may have missed it, but this morning the Secretary of State did do a media clip, and Members will have seen that across multiple outlets.

Where I do agree with the hon. Gentleman is that he is right to talk about the amazing job that our NHS colleagues do on the frontline. I know he does that, and I thank him for that, but that is even more reason why we must find a fair resolution, and NHS colleagues certainly will not get one from those on the Opposition Benches. The Opposition say that they back the independent pay review process, while disagreeing with the body's decision when it does not suit them. They say they would not increase public spending, while failing to set out any plans for how they might pay for unaffordable pay increases. They say they believe in public safety, too, while criticising the common-sense steps we are taking to ensure safe minimum staffing levels, just as they do in many other European countries. We have got a plan—they do not.

More than 1 million NHS staff have been given at least a £1,400 increase in their pay, representing a 9.3% rise for those on the lowest salaries. NHS staff also received a 3% pay rise last year—even when pay was frozen across the rest of the public sector. We have done

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this because we know how hard NHS colleagues work and we recognise that there are cost of living pressures on NHS staff.

Our goal has always been a resolution that is fair for colleagues and for the country: to find a way forward that ensures we are spending money where it is needed most, and helping the NHS to recover from the pandemic, but not on pay hikes that would stoke inflation and ultimately make us all poorer. I met GMB members last week, and—together with my ministerial colleagues—I remain fully committed to working together with the unions, the NHS and others to find a responsible and fair way forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The NHS Pay Review Body was in front of my Select Committee last week, but it will not produce its report for 2023-24 until the end of April. Surely the longer this process goes on, the slower the resolution will be for those on Agenda for Change. Does the Minister agree that a much earlier remit letter would have been helpful, and when does he expect the Department to produce its evidence to this year's pay review body round?

Will Quince: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. He is right that we are committed to the independent PRB process, which is the right way to set public sector pay and has operated successfully for over four decades. We are not changing that process, but we decided to take the step to engage with the unions on our respective evidence so that it can be as informed as possible, and we very much thank the trade unions for working with us in that spirit. We need to wait for discussions with unions to finish across Government, so I hope I can use the word “shortly”; I am mindful that we want to get this done as quickly as possible.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What does the Minister think when he looks across the border to Scotland and sees that Unison, Unite and other unions representing the majority of NHS Agenda for Change staff have accepted the 7.5% pay rise offer? There are no planned strikes in Scotland while pay deals are being considered, which clearly illustrates that negotiating with the unions is a better way of ending strikes than picking fights with them. The UK Government are unique among the four Governments of the UK in that they are the only ones who have full financial powers, and therefore the only Government who are not acting with a hand tied behind their back in offering pay uplifts to their NHS staff. Why is it, then, that the UK Government are facing the greatest number of strikes and have failed to settle any pay disputes?

Will Quince: I remember another Scottish National party Member making a similar comment in a previous urgent question, crowing about how Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, was directly negotiating with the unions and that they had paused their industrial action, but only a handful of weeks later that industrial action was renewed. Pay is of course a devolved matter for Scotland and for Wales.

I will not make unfunded promises or pledges from this Dispatch Box. I want to have an honest and open dialogue with the unions about what is affordable for the NHS, where we recognise and reward NHS staff—who do the most incredible job day in, day out—with one eye to recruitment and retention, but it also has to be fair to taxpayers; and that is the spirit in which I approach this matter.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can senior managers of NHS England and its various trusts make more use of pay gradings, job evaluations, promotions and increments, using pay flexibilities so that staff who are doing a good job feel valued and can be paid more?

Will Quince: That certainly is an option. My right hon. Friend talks about NHS managers. Understandably, the Opposition focus on nurses and paramedics, but let us not forget exactly who we are talking about: the entire Agenda for Change workforce, which is 1.245 million people. That is exactly why every 1% equates to £700 million. My right hon. Friend is right that pay is a factor, but it is not the only factor, which is why we also focus on working conditions and environment.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Taxpayers want NHS staff to be there when they need them, but as more and more staff leave the service, flipping over to work for agencies because they simply cannot afford to work for the service on their salaries, their money is being spent in the wrong way. On Friday, when I met NHS staff who came in on their day off, they said that the thing that is breaking them is the Government's contempt for them. They simply want the Government to negotiate—so why will they not?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but she could not be more wrong. I was in Darent Valley hospital today and I was in Watford hospital last week, and I have the utmost respect for all those who work in our NHS. Everybody in this Chamber wants those who work in our NHS—in fact, all public sector workers—to be paid more, but the independent pay review process is a tried and tested process that has been used for more than 40 years, and it is important that the unions engage with it so that we get this right from April.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Due to the covid pandemic, the NHS has a large care backlog, which my constituents in Kettering are keen to see addressed. Will the Health Minister confirm that spending on the NHS is at record levels and that the Government have a plan to reduce NHS backlogs, which the strikes are disrupting? For every day of NHS strike action, how many NHS operations and procedures are lost?

Will Quince: I will gladly write to my hon. Friend on the specifics, but he is right to point out that NHS spending in England this year is about 11.4% higher in real terms than it was in 2019-20. He is right to point to his constituents on the waiting lists, and I want to get the numbers down as quickly as possible, particularly for those who have been waiting the longest. On top of a £2 billion recovery fund, we have invested £8 billion over three years; we have already opened 92 community diagnostic centres, and we will open 160 by March 2025;

and we have opened 89 surgical hubs, with an aim to open 140. Our aim is 9 million more treatments and diagnostic appointments by 2024, so that constituents of my hon. Friend who have been waiting too long get that service.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Ministers are hiding behind the independent pay review process. The Minister knows that recommendations have been ignored when it suited the Government in the past. NHS employers want negotiations, the unions want negotiations and the public want negotiations. The Minister says it is time to come together in the interests of patients. He is right, so why do the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister not come together with the unions and sort it out?

Will Quince: I have met employers, and I believe in open and honest dialogue. What the hon. Gentleman has not accepted—and I appreciate that being in opposition is the easiest job in the world—is that, as I have pointed out, every 1% is £700 million. I have a budget this year of £153 billion and, yes, that is rising, but I have some huge challenges. We have huge challenges to tackle within our NHS. The hon. Gentleman the shadow Secretary of State just says, “Negotiate, negotiate” —

Wes Streeting: Yes, yes!

Will Quince: Yes, yes—but where exactly is the funding coming from? The hon. Gentleman rightly pushes me on the elective backlog and he rightly pushes me on urgent and emergency care, but every 1% is £700 million that I would have to find from our NHS budget. That is exactly why we have to ensure that the pay review body makes the recommendation from April that is affordable to the NHS and recognises and rewards NHS staff, taking account of recruitment and retention and some of the challenges that we face, but that is fair to taxpayers too. That is why I would encourage the unions to get involved and take part in that pay review body process, so we can get it right.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Minister says that opposition is the easiest job. Well, we are hoping he is soon performing it. When he opened his response this afternoon, he said that the Secretary of State was at a Cobra meeting, but would it not be more worthwhile if he negotiated and met the unions themselves? In advance of the next meeting for discussions of wages, maybe he could visit a picket line, because if Conservative Members visit the picket lines, they will find groups of staff—nurses and ambulance workers—who are extremely distressed. I have met many of them who were in tears—tears because they are worried about the patients whom they want to support, but also tears because many of them cannot survive doing the service they want to provide due to their low wages. Unless negotiations are started soon, the Government could do irreparable damage to the national health service, so the Secretary of State needs urgently to leave the Cobra meeting, sit down with the unions and start negotiating.

Will Quince: The right hon. Gentleman says that many who work in the NHS are worried about patients: I spend every single day worrying about patients; I spend every single day ensuring the NHS has the resources it needs to provide the level of care and service our

constituents rightly expect. I have a budget, and that budget has already taken into consideration a 4.75% on average pay award, with more than 9% for some of the lowest earners. There is an independent pay review body process for a reason; it is only two months away, in April, and I encourage the unions to take part in it. Of course I meet with unions, and of course I do and will meet with nurses and those who work in our NHS. I believe some of the points the right hon. Gentleman makes are correct, and I know those who work in the NHS genuinely want to ensure we are attracting and retaining the very best; that is all the more reason for us to get it right, and the way to get it right is the independent pay review body process.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): There were no strikes in the NHS over 13 years of the last Labour Government, and the cavalry is coming to rescue our health service with the next Labour Government. The Minister just asked where the funding is coming from to pay for NHS staff: we will train a new generation of NHS staff paid for by abolishing non-dom tax status so that the NHS has the workforce it desperately needs. Why will the Government not do as the Chancellor has suggested and adopt this policy now?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady says the cavalry is coming; how many more unfunded pledges—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members say they are fully funded: absolute tosh. I have heard the Opposition spend that non-dom money more times—

Wes Streeting: Once.

Will Quince: Once? The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), has spent it twice over already. And that is if indeed it would raise any money; I know I look very young, Mr Speaker, but I am old enough to remember a former Chancellor, one Ed Balls, say he did not believe taxing non-doms would raise any money whatsoever.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I declare my interest, Mr Speaker.

We have spent a lot of time talking about pay, but making working conditions for frontline staff much better is key, so what are the Government doing to focus on improving the simple things in a clinician’s life such as joining up testing, improving prescribing, and making sure that 10% to 15% of a GP’s workload is not spent chasing admin? These are simple things that would make a huge difference and improve outcomes for both patients and staff.

Will Quince: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Ensuring that we support the mental health and wellbeing of NHS staff and that working conditions and working environments are the best they can possibly be is how we can attract and retain the best. Measures such as wellbeing champions, training for line managers, occupational health services and flexible working are very important, but the key to this is having conversations with the unions, because they are the representatives, ambassadors and advocates. That is why I very much hope they will engage in the pay review body process and continue to have those conversations with me, not

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just about pay, but about how we can improve working conditions and working environments and reduce the bureaucracy that makes the job so difficult.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is now clearly established that the workforce crisis in the NHS is mirrored by vacancies in adult social care. There are more than 165,000 vacancies in social care, up by 52% in a year. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a carers' minimum wage of £12.42 per hour from April; will the Minister support a £2 per hour uplift in that minimum wage for care workers by doubling the tax on the profits of online gambling companies?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman got a plug in for his policy there, but I am not entirely sure how relevant it is to this statement. On NHS staffing, we have 10,500 more nurses and 4,800 more doctors than last year. But I know adult social care represents one of the biggest challenges for our NHS, and it puts pressure on the rest of the system. That is why in the autumn statement the Chancellor put in place £7.5 billion, the largest ever investment in adult social care.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The Minister will know about the ministerial code and about keeping the House updated, so will he tell us when the Secretary of State for Health met Pat Cullen of the RCN? If cannot tell us now, will he write to us and put that letter in the library, please?

Will Quince: Of course I am happy to do that, and I think these things are put on the public record in any event. I do not know when the Secretary of State met specifically with the RCN, but I can tell the House that I have met the unions, I believe, on 9, 12, 25 and 31 January.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I have just come from the nurses' picket outside St Thomas's Hospital, on the other side of Westminster bridge, where nurses made the point that they were not striking against the NHS but to save the NHS. They have been underpaid and overworked for too long; their pay is down 20% on what it was when the Tories came into power, and now there are a record 50,000 nursing vacancies in England. That is not just unfair but incredibly unsafe. As one nurse said, "Patients aren't dying because nurses are striking. Nurses are striking because patients are dying." Will the Minister finally listen to NHS staff, get around the table to talk about pay and give them the pay rise they deserve?

Will Quince: Despite what the hon. Lady says, there are 47,100 more nurses this year than there were in 2010 and 10,500 more than last year, and we have 72,000 nurses in training. The Government hugely value the work not just of nurses—I remind the hon. Lady that she is also talking about the 1.245 million people who work on the Agenda for Change contract. She is right that we have to get pay and other matters right, and that is why we have an independent pay review body process where we look at affordability, reward and recognition, and pay, alongside recruitment and retention and achieving a package that is fair to taxpayers. That independent pay review body will make a recommendation, and it is then for the Government to look at it and accept it or reject it.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I stand in solidarity with nurses and other NHS workers who are taking action in their fight for fair pay and improved patient safety. Miriam Deakin, the director of policy and strategy at NHS Providers, has said that its key ask is that

"the Government does sit down around the table with the unions for formal negotiations on pay, and for that to be applied to pay this year."

She has described the absence of formal negotiations as "very worrying". Does the Minister accept that responsibility for the continuation of strike action by NHS staff lies firmly with the Government? Does he agree with Pat Cullen, the general secretary of the RCN, that

"this government has chosen to punish the nurses of England instead of getting round a table and talking...about pay"?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but nothing could be further from the truth. We accepted the independent pay review body's recommendation of an average of 4.75% in full. That is over and above a 3% pay award last year, when the rest of the public sector saw a freeze. The hon. Lady, like me, will have lots of other public sector workers, and indeed private sector workers, in her constituency who will also earn between £30,000 and £50,000 a year. They will also have seen pay awards this year of between 4% and 6%, but they will not have 20% pension contributions or up to 33 days of annual leave a year. We have to keep these things in context, and any award also has to be fair to taxpayers more broadly, which is why we have an independent pay review body process. I want to address many of the issues that the hon. Lady has raised. We have that process; it is important that we use it, and I hope that the unions and others, including providers, will engage with it.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Our NHS staff—all of them—saw us through the pandemic, many without proper protective equipment. They have now seen us through the catch-up exercise, and they are working hard, but they are at the end of their tether. Meanwhile, the Minister says there is no money, but the Government wasted £15 billion on personal protective equipment—money that could have given everyone a 20% pay rise. Is it not time that the Government understood the issues in this strike, got around the table and talked about pay to the nursing unions?

Will Quince: First, let me correct what the hon. Lady said about PPE. I was not a Health Minister at the time, but let us not forget that 97% of all PPE was usable. Despite being a Minister in another Department, I remember that those on the Opposition Front Bench rightly agitated on this issue, saying, "Do anything, strain every sinew and take a risk, but make sure you get PPE as quickly as possible." It was the most desired global commodity, and Governments around the world were fighting for it.

Nevertheless, the hon. Lady raised a good point, and of course NHS staff got us through the pandemic. That is exactly why we accepted the independent pay review body recommendation in full. It is exactly why we accepted the recommendation last year of a 3% award when the wider public sector was frozen. Of course we value all those who work in our NHS, and that is exactly

why have to get this right for the next independent pay review body. That is why we have to ensure that not just the Government but the unions, providers and others give evidence to that body.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Just over two hours ago, I joined Lorraine and other colleagues from the Royal College of Nursing over the bridge at St Thomas's Hospital. They do not want to be on strike and they do not want to be on a picket line, but they want a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. A key message from them to the Minister is to get round the negotiating table and give them a fair deal.

Will Quince: Opposition Members keep saying, "Get round the table and negotiate." I encourage the next one who says that to tell me exactly where each block of 1%, each £700 million, will come from out of our NHS budget. *[Interruption.]* They point at me, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that we accepted the independent pay review body's recommendations in full. We stand ready to look at the independent pay review body's recommendations for next year, which of course is only two months away, because it starts in April. It is really important that we all engage with that process, so we can get it right and address many of the issues the hon. Gentleman and others raise.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What is the Minister's estimate of the number of people in England who have had their appointments or operations cancelled today, compared with Wales and Scotland where there are no strikes? Why are the Conservative Government so indifferent to the suffering of patients in England that they refuse to do what the Governments in Scotland and Wales have done, which is to get round and negotiate a settlement?

Will Quince: We do not, as yet, have the details of today's and tomorrow's industrial action, but we will certainly be able to publish that information in due course. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman, as I mentioned in my opening response to the urgent question, that over 88,000 appointments have been rescheduled so far and over 58,000 shifts have been missed. Of course I deeply regret that and wish that there was no strike action. *[Interruption.]* Of course I do.

If we had not accepted in full the independent pay review body's recommendations, the right hon. Gentleman and others would have an argument to make to say that we had not, but we did accept them in full. We accepted them in full last year, too, despite them being over and above the evidence submitted by the Government in respect of affordability. That is why I look forward to the next independent pay review body process, and why it is so important that the unions and others engage with that process so that we get it right.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I have more than enough cause to thank my local NHS for the lifesaving treatment it has given me, but so has every single family in this country. Why do the Government not get it, as the public clearly do, that our health workers, like all public sector workers, are at the end of their tether? Get round the table to resolve these disputes and give them the proper wage rise they so desperately need and deserve.

Will Quince: First, let me agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman said about NHS staff and how we all owe them a debt of gratitude for the service they have given, not just to us but to all our families. Again, he may have missed it when I asked that if any Opposition Member was going to raise the same question, they might also stand up and say exactly where each block of £700 million would come from, out of my £150 billion budget. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) says, "Show us the books." She knows exactly where the NHS funding goes. I want to ensure that we have an open and honest dialogue. I have been having those conversations with the unions and I have set out exactly the challenges we face. Any pay has to be affordable not just to the NHS but to the wider budget. It has to recognise and reward those who work in the NHS. Of course I want to retain and attract the very best, but it also has to be fair to taxpayers, and that is the point I think the hon. Gentleman and others are missing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. For nurses and many others in the NHS, striking is not what they want to do: all they want is dialogue and to try to move forward with an agreed wage structure. They have been left vulnerable by understaffing on the wards, and the pressure that adds is repugnant to them. The Government must move from their entrenched position to find a workable solution. Will the Minister commit to reopening dialogue and looking at the situation, not from the angle of enshrined principle but from a safety angle, which concerns us all?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We accepted in full the independent pay review body's recommendation this year of 4.75%, which was over and above last year's figure of 3% when the rest of the wider public sector was frozen. He asks about dialogue. Of course I am happy to have dialogue with the unions; my door has always been open and it will continue to be so. What I am not going to do is reopen this year's pay review. We have the independent pay review body process and we accepted that recommendation in full. What I am willing and happy to do is to have that dialogue about next year's independent pay review body recommendation. Let us not forget that it is in only two months' time that the new financial year starts, and we have to get that right. I hope that he will encourage unions and others to take part in that process so that we can get it right, because we all want to ensure that NHS staff get the right pay rise that recognises the huge service they give.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Half of the successful revised offer by the Welsh Government is in the format of a one-off payment. Will the British Government confirm that that element of the pay settlement will be recognised as cost of living support and not as income, and treat it as such for tax and benefit purposes?

Will Quince: Pay is a devolved matter and I understand that the full details of the Welsh offer are yet to be finalised. They will include a number of non-pay commitments, and I understand that the cost of those measures could be substantial. I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman says. In any event, it would not be a matter for me as a Health Minister but for the Treasury.

Prepayment Meters: Ofgem Decision

4.21 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on Ofgem's decision to suspend the forced installation of prepayment meters.

The Minister for Energy and Climate (Graham Stuart): As I have set out to the House previously, it is critical that our most vulnerable energy users are protected, which is why we have already put in place a generous package of support to help people with their energy bills this winter. I was appalled, however, to see reports that vulnerable customers struggling with their energy bills have had their homes invaded and prepayment meters installed when there is a clear duty on suppliers to provide them with support. Since those reports came to light, we have acted swiftly and we will not hesitate to go further to protect consumers.

The Secretary of State has called for more robust Ofgem enforcement on those issues, as well as, more importantly, action from suppliers. It is right that Ofgem has now taken the steps it has, including asking suppliers to pause forcible installation and to conduct a thorough review of processes, and I welcome steps from those suppliers who have already announced that they will do so. I welcome the move by Lord Justice Edis today, ordering magistrates courts in England and Wales to stop authorising warrants for energy firms to forcibly install prepayment meters with immediate effect.

The Government expect strong and immediate action where suppliers fall short of their obligations. I discussed these matters with the chief executive officer of Ofgem this morning, and I met the CEO of British Gas on 1 February to tell him of the strength of the Government's concerns at the distress that his company has caused to customers. The Secretary of State has asked suppliers to set out by the end of the day tomorrow how they will make redress to customers who have inappropriately had a prepayment meter fitted, including the possibility of compensation, and I look forward to seeing the responses from suppliers.

I thank the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) for raising this issue. I remind the House that I have committed to meeting the all-party parliamentary group on prepayment meters, where I can keep Members updated on the issue as we move forward after today.

Edward Miliband: I thank the Minister for his reply, but it is simply not good enough. The story of this scandal is of a Government sitting on their hands and being far too slow to act. Ofgem did reviews in September and November and highlighted the problem—where were the Government? In early January, Citizens Advice reported that 3 million people have been disconnected by the back door. Even after that, he came to the House and refused an outright ban. Now we know the result of his inaction: 30,000 people have had warrants issued for the forced installation of prepayment meters in the past month alone, and 6,000 in the past week since he said no to a ban—thousands of people who are victims of Government negligence.

Let me ask the Minister some questions. First, how long will this pause, which has finally been put in place, last? Will he pledge that it will not be lifted until this discredited, rotten system is properly reformed? Secondly, he mentioned compensation as a result of remedial action for those adversely affected. Will he tell us how this compensation scheme will work? Thirdly, will he look at the case for energy companies having to supply a minimum amount of power to all customers, as in France, so that nobody is cut off—just like we do not cut off people's water supply in this country? Fourthly, this crisis is happening against a backdrop of energy bills being due to rise 40% in just eight weeks' time because the Government say there is nothing more they can do. This is the next looming scandal. Will he finally end the loopholes in the windfall tax, including billions being siphoned to fossil fuel companies, to stop bills rising?

Energy companies forcing their way into people's homes, millions getting disconnected by the back door, no proper windfall tax on fossil fuel profits—this is Britain under the Tories. There is no one else to blame; it is long past time they got a grip.

Graham Stuart: The right hon. Gentleman asks how long the pause will last. That is up to Ofgem, as the regulator. It looked at this process before, as he rightly said, and it had assurances that have not proven to be accurate. Ofgem needs to ensure that the processes are properly observed, because it should be an absolute last resort that a prepayment meter is forcibly installed. He asks how compensation will be worked out. That is a matter for Ofgem. As is proper for the regulator, it stands between the Government, consumers and the suppliers in delivering that.

I have asked officials to look at providing a minimum amount of power, like France does. There are a lot of technical and other challenges to such a system. One of the benefits of having a prepayment meter is that it allows someone who is not engaging with their supplier and is running up debt to none the less have a supply continuing in their home. Having people cut off completely if they fail to manage that is not something we would want to see.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the position from April. I am proud that the energy price guarantee will continue after April, providing support for households right the way into 2024, and we have committed to consult on a new system to look after vulnerable consumers after that date.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the windfall tax and loopholes. We are investing in our energy security. While we are importers of oil and gas, as we will be under net zero all the way to 2050, the absurd position set out by the Leader of the Opposition is that Labour will oppose any new oil and gas licences, meaning that we pay billions to other countries to import it. There is no magic bullet to stop us using fossil fuels immediately. This Government have accelerated the move to renewables as fast as possible and will continue to do so, but it is absurd to have a policy under which we pay billions to countries abroad to produce oil and gas that we could produce at home to ever higher carbon standards.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): An Englishman's home is his castle, so it is disgusting that British Gas is forcing its way into people's homes. What is especially galling is that, five years ago, Ofcom sent a

missive to British Gas warning it not to do this, and British Gas is clearly ignoring Ofcom—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ofgem.”] Ofgem. What further powers can the Government give the regulator to ensure that British Gas and other such companies cannot do this again and to protect the sanctity of people’s homes?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should all be grateful to *The Times* and its journalists for going undercover and revealing such behaviour—the processes were not followed. Ultimately, as a final resort, we need a forcible installation of prepayment meters in order to ensure that someone is not cut off entirely; that is necessary, but every effort must be made to support people, offer them payment plans, provide them with emergency credit and the like. We are ensuring that we have a system that does that. Ofgem has therefore since announced that it will conduct a further assessment of supplier prepayment meter practices, and we will back Ofgem to have all the powers it needs to hold suppliers to account.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): It should never have got this far. We should never have ended up in a situation in which we are now talking about compensating people for something that should never have been allowed to happen to them in the first place. Nor would it have happened if the Government had listened to the many voices who have been telling them this for months. Since I first wrote to the Secretary of State in September—I am still waiting for a reply, incidentally—prepayment meters have been mentioned 450 times in this place and the other place, so the Secretary of State feigning surprise at the weekend is just not acceptable. Nor is stopping at this one aspect of forced switching, and nor is compensation alone—these meters need to be taken away.

Why are we so appalled? It is because prepayment meters are unfair, full stop. Whether they are forced on vulnerable people or whether people choose to have them, they are unfair because someone who is on one will pay more per unit of energy than those who pay in arrears, which is most of us; they will pay more in daily standing charges; and they will be automatically disconnected the second they run out of money. That is why these abhorrent practices, which have been going on for a very long time, are so unfair: prepayment meter customers are treated unfairly, full stop. Will the Minister ask the Secretary of State to look at all aspects of prepayment meters with a view to radically overhauling the entire unfair system? Does he believe that energy should be a human right?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady says that prepayment meters are unfair, full stop. That is clearly not true: they have a great use. What they should do—

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): They are more expensive!

Graham Stuart: Where the charges are higher, it is because the system, which I think was last changed when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was Secretary of State, has meant that Ofgem

is under an obligation to ensure that suppliers match charges to the actual cost of serving a customer. That was the principle established under the last Labour Government, and it subsists today, but I tend to agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) that we need to look at this again. That is why we are looking at a reformed system for the treatment of vulnerable customers from April 2024.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): It is welcome news that forced prepayment meters have finally been stopped, but that is only half the story. The premium paid by those who are on prepayment meters is also a scandal. The least able to pay are paying the highest tariff because they cannot afford the cheapest tariff—you couldn’t make it up. Will the Minister update the House on what Ofgem is doing to radically and quickly look at the matter so that this injustice is finally put to bed?

Graham Stuart: As I said, the system for a long time has been that charges should be cost-reflective, and it is more expensive to service prepayment meters. We need to look hard to ensure that the increase in prices, which has come as energy prices have gone up, is commensurate with that before we look at the position of PPMs overall, which we will do as part of our overall reform of the treatment of vulnerable people. It is worth pointing out that the last time a survey was done, only 30% of those who are in fuel poverty had a prepayment meter, while 70% did not. Ensuring that we have a system that is fair to all is really important; that is why it is quite a complex job to make sure that we have a better system than the one we inherited from the Labour party.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am very disappointed in the Minister’s reply to the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) asked about a minimum level of supply. It is utter nonsense to hide behind the idea that it is complicated. I am sure that energy companies could find a way of doing it. When will the Minister make them?

Graham Stuart: It is worth pointing out that emergency credit should be supplied to customers and support should be put in place for those who get into arrears. It is a failure of the existing processes and duties that has been highlighted and has caused us to come before the House today. We must make sure that companies do that which they are obliged to do.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can we be clear about the fact that, inexplicably, what has been happening has been completely legal? Nothing has changed since the gas and electricity Acts of the 1980s, and, indeed, the Rights of Entry (Gas and Electricity Boards) Act dates from 1954. Can the Minister explain whose decision it was that the courts should start issuing warrants for the forcible fitting of prepayment meters online, with no judicial oversight or scrutiny? Applications have been submitted in their thousands, and granted in their thousands, without even a magistrate looking at each case. Whose decision was that?

Graham Stuart: Of course I welcome the move by Lord Justice Edis to order magistrates courts to stop the authorisation of warrants for energy firms, and I will write to my hon. Friend if I can identify the root cause of the original decision.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On 7 December, I presented a private Member's Bill to ban the installation of prepayment meters this winter, but the Government chose to ignore me, and since then nearly 60,000 people have been put through the misery of prepayment meter warrants being issued against them. Will the Government now apologise to all the households who had prepayment meters wrongfully installed, will he force the energy companies to remove the prepayment meters, and will he personally commit himself to ensuring that the companies pay back the poverty premium that so many vulnerable people have been forced to pay this winter?

Graham Stuart: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. That is exactly the sort of development we want to emerge from what has happened. We want to ensure that prepayment meters are removed when they should not have been installed, that people's rights are respected, and that if the processes that should have been followed have not been followed, compensation is provided as well.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is clear from the evidence received by the Justice Committee only last week and, now, from the statement made by the senior presiding judge, Lord Justice Edis, that—leaving aside the merits or otherwise of prepayment meters—the agreement by the judiciary to deal with warrants in bulk resulted from their reliance on assurances given by the energy providers that they had complied with Ofgem's requirements and that the representatives of the energy providers, giving evidence in relation to each bulk application, would swear on oath that the requirements had been met. It is clear that in many cases they cannot have been met. That must surely indicate, first, that the process itself is flawed and should not be continued and, secondly, that there must be an inquiry into not just the process itself, but the suitability of some of those who are representing the energy suppliers and Ofgem in court. Either they gave misleading information by inadvertence or, potentially, they did so deliberately, which, on oath, amounts to perjury. That is a very serious matter which brings the court process into disrepute, and it needs to be investigated too.

Graham Stuart: I thank my learned hon. Friend for his typically erudite question, and I agree with him. That is why, two weeks ago, we said that we would work with the Ministry of Justice to look into this and ensure that the processes were suitably robust. It is clear—not only, potentially, from court proceedings but from evidence given to the regulator—that some suppliers did not provide evidence on which we could rely.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that prepayment customers, many of whom are the least well off in society, are charged a higher rate for their energy; that has been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House. Does he recognise the injustice of thousands more families being forced on to prepayment meters, on his watch, and on to higher rates at a time when so many are facing severe cost of living pressures? Does he not accept that it is time for him to step up and act further and faster, because this country needs that?

Graham Stuart: As I have said, that situation has obtained since the Labour Government introduced the current regime, and it is that cost-reflective principle

which leads to prepayment meter customers being charged more. That was the position when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North was Secretary of State, and it still exists today. However, I agree with the hon. Lady, which is why, within the existing system, I have asked Ofgem to seek to ensure that not a penny extra goes beyond what is necessary to reflect cost. We are undertaking to look again at the whole system to ensure that it is fair to all, and most of all to the most vulnerable.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): There are concerns that some of the poor practices around prepayment meters may have been going on for some time. How far back will the investigation look into these matters? Will it look at some of the historical issues, particularly abuse of those vulnerable people?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government will support the regulator to look into this matter thoroughly because any injustice done to any consumer must be identified and redressed.

Alison Thewliss: My constituent Mr Valmassoi has to move out of his home at the end of the month because Utilita has taken so long to investigate a potential fault with his prepayment meter that saw his bills soar by over 400% in 14 days, despite no increase in usage. What can the Minister do? Mr Valmassoi says that a refund nine months later will not replace losing the flat that he has made his home for the past few years. What can he and others like him, who have been ignored and let down by providers such as Utilita, expect from the Minister?

Graham Stuart: It is precisely for people who have been ill-treated such as the hon. Lady's constituent that we need to reform the system and ensure that suppliers meet their licence obligations. It is the job of the independent regulator to work with suppliers and ensure that we minimise that. We would encourage anyone to pursue the system of redress to make up for that as best they can. But no one can make up for the fact that someone lost their flat and home. They should not have done so if the supplier had acted as it was under a duty to.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Figures from the Ministry of Justice show that, between July 2021 and December 2022, magistrates granted 536,139 warrants and refused 75—0.014%. It is inconceivable that none of those people and families had vulnerabilities. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that the meters will have to be removed and that compensation should be paid, but many of these poor and vulnerable people are suffering now because they do not have heat and electricity. What will he do to ensure that those people get immediate redress?

Graham Stuart: That is exactly the purpose of the further work undertaken by the regulator: to ensure that we have a system that is fair to all and that, if there has been a failure of due process by suppliers, it is rectified.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On "Sophy Ridge on Sunday", the Secretary of State said that Ofgem had had "the wool pulled over their eyes"

and had been taking companies “at face value”. Who was pulling the wool, and what penalty should they face? Is the regulator that allows the wool to be pulled over its eyes and takes companies at face value—and the Secretary of State who failed to deal with that in time—fit for purpose?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question. I would not want to encourage focus on anything other than the failure of suppliers to fulfil their obligations. He is right that we also need to ensure that we have a regulatory regime and a system that does its job. As ever, we will keep that under review.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is interesting that the Minister is now blaming suppliers; he was blaming Ofgem at the beginning. In the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee last week, we had the retailers’ body Energy UK blaming Ofgem for not enforcing on its members strictly enough. We cannot keep going around this, with Ofgem blaming people who could pay their bills for not paying their bills. The reality is that this is brutal. The Minister may not have noticed, but he is actually in Government. He has to get a grip of this to ensure that people are not in their homes freezing to death. The cost to our NHS will be off the scale. When is he going to take up his responsibilities, stop blaming other people, put an end to this nightmare and make sure that people are not having forced installations?

Graham Stuart: Of course, the Government have stepped up. That is precisely what we have done with the energy price guarantee, providing £900 of support this winter, plus the energy bill support scheme with an additional £400, plus support through the benefit system for those on benefits. The Government have stepped up to help people and we need others to make sure that they step up and meet their obligations. That includes the energy suppliers.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I hope I can be coherent, because I am so angry. People with disabilities and their families face a monthly cost in excess of £600 a month for a single person and over £1,000 for a family with a disabled member in it. Right throughout this cost of living and energy crisis, they have suffered more than double the amount that normal households have. The Minister says he wants to focus on suppliers who are not doing things correctly, but I want you to focus on people who are—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Marion Fellows: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker; I did say that I would try to be coherent.

I want the Minister and the Department to focus on those who are affected by this abhorrent practice and to stop it—not pause it, but stop it immediately. When will he do that?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I have said, the legal decision today that no more warrants will be implemented is, I think, the right one and should give her some confidence that between the regulator, the suppliers, the justice system and others, we will ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose and has the interests of people including the disabled people she has highlighted as its top priority.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): According to information from the Ministry of Justice, on 1 February *The Times* published a story revealing that British Gas routinely sends debt collectors to break into customers’ homes and forcibly fit pay-as-you-go meters, even when those customers are known to have extreme vulnerabilities. Is this not just another example of the Government’s failure to regulate our broken energy market?

Graham Stuart: I would say no, because there are clear duties on the suppliers, in this case British Gas, which is why I spoke to its chief executive last week to tell him how disgusted the Government and indeed the whole House were with that behaviour, that it was unacceptable, that the proper processes had to be followed and that we had to ensure that people were treated fairly.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am not sure that the Minister answered the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on this, so I will try again. Does he think that access to energy and electricity should be a fundamental human right?

Graham Stuart: As the hon. Gentleman will know, my job as the Energy Minister is to ensure that we have a strong, robust energy system that is fair to everyone and most of all to the most vulnerable, and that is what I will focus on. I will leave it to others to decide what is or is not a human right.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government’s job is to govern, but for months and months the Minister has been sitting on the sidelines watching this car crash happen, and it is the people of our country who are paying for that. Why does he not bring forward legislation right now to ensure that people on prepayment meters do not pay a different tariff from everyone else and that the other corrections can be put in place?

Graham Stuart: As I have said, the situation was created under the last Labour Government in which suppliers have been obliged to charge rates that reflect the actual costs to them of delivering a service to someone. That, at face value, is the correct system. We need to look at whether we need to change that system to be fair to vulnerable consumers, remembering that most vulnerable consumers are not on a prepayment meter. We have to have a system that is fair for all.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Almost one in five households in Scotland are off the gas grid. Fuel poverty and the use of prepayment meters are greatest in those areas because those households are reliant on unregulated fuels and on electric heating systems, which have always been more expensive. Will the Minister recognise that additional burden, regulate those additional fuels and provide sufficient support in those areas for insulation and alternative heating systems, as well as financial support? The crisis there is even greater due to the double whammy of people being off the grid and in fuel poverty.

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and he is quite right to speak up for people in rural areas who find themselves in exactly the position he describes. I am pleased to say that as of today, credits

[Graham Stuart]

to electricity bills will be being paid to of people who are on the electricity grid but off the gas grid—they will be appearing from now on. We are determined to help those people, which is why we announced in the autumn statement a doubling of the alternative fuel payment from £100 to £200. That money will be going to help those people, and the portal will also open before the end of the month for those who are not on either the gas grid or the electricity grid, so that they too can apply and get that £200 support.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It should not take a journalist going undercover for the Minister to finally decide to wake up. I have been campaigning on prepayment meters since 2015, and the Government are still relying on energy companies to do the right thing. They are not going to do the right thing, so the Government need to force them. We have seen how quickly the Government can put legislation through.

Can I ask the Minister to confirm three things? First, in addition to providing compensation, will he remove prepayment meters from vulnerable households? Secondly, will he make prepayment meters cheaper per unit of energy? That is when the energy companies will start changing how they act. Thirdly, the cost has been significantly reduced due to smart meters, so the energy companies cannot use that as an excuse, but the scandal of smart meters is that energy companies can switch people remotely. Will the Government ensure that that can no longer happen and is outlawed?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I am happy to confirm the compensation. If prepayment meters were made cheaper, we would have everybody seeking a prepayment meter and there would be nobody left to subsidise the vulnerable, and most of the poorest people do not have a prepayment meter. That question is entirely aligned with typical economic policy from the Labour party, but I do not think it contributes usefully to the debate.

However, the hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of smart meters, and we want to see an acceleration of that programme. Smart meters provide a much better service and are cheaper to run, and I hope that as part of our plans for April 2024 onwards, when the Government support ends, we will have a system that encourages the installation of more smart meters and is much fairer to vulnerable users.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Analysis by Citizens Advice Cymru indicates that around a third of prepayment users in Wales have been disconnected at some stage during the past year. Furthermore, there has been a threefold increase in the number of consumers being switched to prepayment meters. Do those stats alone not indicate that there is a real issue with the way in which energy companies use prepayment meters?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The cost of energy has gone up, and despite extraordinary interventions by the Government, families are none the less finding it harder as a function of the Ukraine war and of global energy prices. That is why

this Government have gone so fast in moving ourselves to cheaper renewable energy and away from the—what was it?—just 7% of energy that came from renewables when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North left office. Now that figure is well over 40%. We are going to move to a cleaner, greener and cheaper system that will be better for consumers in Wales.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent had fallen into arrears with ScottishPower, but he was complying with his repayment plan when ScottishPower demanded the full settlement of his debt in December. When he could not do that, he was forced on to a prepayment meter, which of course compounded the problem.

I have two questions. First, the Minister has mentioned that only 30% of the most vulnerable are on prepayment meters. I would like to know when that data is from, because it would be useful to have a more up-to-date figure than that; I struggle to believe that is still the case. Secondly, if energy companies are forcing the installation of these prepayment meters, can the Minister give the House an assurance that it will not be the vulnerable customers who end up footing the bill—that those costs will be absorbed by the massive profits that the energy companies will make—and that prepayment rates will be on par with other energy rates?

Graham Stuart: I will write to the hon. Lady with the exact date—I believe it may have been 2020 or so—when 30% of those deemed in fuel poverty were on prepayment meters and 70% were not. It is highly unlikely that that would have materially changed in the period since so that the ratios are reversed. I can give her the assurance that there is no way that people who have been subject to the wrongful installation of prepayment meters will be picking up the tab. However, a complexity worth highlighting in the House is that although energy generators may be making record profits, energy suppliers have not been making profits in recent years, and we need a system that is fair to consumers and ensures stability in the energy supply market.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): We have heard that the people who are struggling most to pay their energy bills are often the most vulnerable in our society, and they are being forced on to a higher tariff. We have also heard that the appeals system is cumbersome and people may even lose their house. The Minister has blamed the utilities companies and Ofgem, neither of which have covered themselves in glory. He has even blamed the previous Labour Government, of 13 years ago. Does he not think that perhaps now is the time that this Government should take their responsibility?

Graham Stuart: Under this Government, not only are we seeing the transformation of our system to being greener, but we have seen the contracts for difference, which are of course reducing the costs to consumers, as those generators pay hundreds of millions of pounds into the pot to help lower bills for everybody. This Government have taken forward the greening of our energy system and at the same time we are working towards a sustainable future that will be fair to everyone, most of all the most vulnerable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he not agree that this treatment of customers—of the disabled, pregnant women and single parents with young children, some of whom were in hospital when they were moved to prepayment meters—if not already illegal, should be? What further steps will he take to prevent the big companies from being able to trample all over the little man and the little woman, not simply in this one aspect, but in the overall treatment of the ill and the vulnerable?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman may always come at the end of the questions, but his are rarely the weakest ones. He is absolutely right on this. If we need to do more to strengthen the regulator, we will do so, to make sure that, as he says, the people who feel themselves to be at the bottom of the pile are not ill-treated—we cannot have a system that does that. We have to have one that puts their interests at the top of our list of priorities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting—

(1) Notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

- (a) the motions in the name of Guy Opperman relating to (a) Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023 and (b) Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, and in the name of Laura Trott relating to (c) Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023 not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order; and
- (b) the motion in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer relating to the Charter for Budget Responsibility not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for that Order;

proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Grant Shapps relating to Energy.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Social Security and Pensions

4.57 pm

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we shall discuss the following motions:

That the draft Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

Guy Opperman: This set of orders will increase state pensions and benefits and statutory payments by 10.1%, and the draft benefit cap regulations will increase each of the four benefit cap levels by the same 10.1% in April 2023. Lastly, the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order sets out the yearly amount by which the GMP, part of an individual's contracted-out occupational private pension earned by 1988 and 1997, must be increased.

We continue to protect the poorest pensioners through the pension credit standard minimum guarantee. There is also the basic state pension in place, which will increase to £156.20 for a single person, and the full rate of the new state pension will increase to £203.85. The pension credit standard minimum guarantee will increase by 10.1%. The Government understand the pressures people are facing with the cost of living, which is why, in addition to the £37 billion of support last year, we have provided support given the cost of living pressures in 2023 and are now acting to ensure that support continues between 2023 and 2024.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Is it not the case that the Government introduced the order to target the most vulnerable—those on fixed incomes, who really need the support at this time?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is right: these are difficult times for everyone, but the Government have decided to provide the maximum amount of support to the most vulnerable. That is why we are uprating the benefits on an ongoing basis. We also provided a £37 billion cost of living support package last spring and an energy price support package last September, and in 2023-24 we will provide a package that includes uprated support for the most vulnerable and a further winter fuel payment.

The order increases the personal and standard allowance of universal credit by 10.1%. The monthly universal credit work allowance—the amount that a person can earn before their universal credit payment is affected—will also increase in April by 10.1% to £379 for those also receiving support for housing costs, and to £631 per month for those not receiving support for housing costs. The order also increases by 10.1% statutory adoption pay, statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay, statutory shared parental pay, statutory shared parental bereavement pay, and statutory sick pay. In addition, in April, the carer's allowance will increase by 10.1% to £76.75 per week. Unpaid carers also have access to support through universal credit, pension credit and housing benefit, all of which include amounts for carers.

[Guy Opperman]

For a single person, the carer's element in universal credit will increase to £185.86 a month from April, and the carer's premium in pension credit and other income-related benefits will increase to £42.75 a week.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister explain to the House—not right now, but perhaps a little later—the interaction between the changes in carer's allowance and the number of hours that carers can work, particularly in the light of the very welcome increases in the national living wage? What has been the Government's thinking on that in recent times?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend asks a legitimate question: how can we improve the situation for carers who wish to work more hours, long term? It would be wrong to give full disclosure of all discussions, but I will work out what I can say about that in my closing remarks, and I am happy to engage with him privately on the subject as well.

Under the benefit cap regulations, there will be an increase to the benefit cap of 10.1%. That will ensure that all households see an increase in their benefit following uprating. The national benefit cap will be £22,020 a year for couples and lone parents, and £14,753 for single people. For households living in Greater London, it will be £25,323 a year for couples and lone parents, and £16,967 for single people.

Under the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, there will be an increase of 3% paid by occupational pension schemes, which means that that part of the GMP will increase by 3% from April 2023. The 3% cap strikes a balance, I suggest, between providing members with some protection against inflation and not increasing scheme costs beyond what can be afforded. I commend the regulations to the House.

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

5.3 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In a few weeks' time, we will have the latest figures on households below average income. They are likely to confirm what we already know: that poverty will soar as the measures taken during the covid pandemic fall out of the adjustment. The figures will confirm what we see every day, and what the Trussell Trust and others see at their food banks, which is that the cost of living crisis is hurting millions. For those with the least, soaring inflation means hunger, cold, and the fearful wait for the bailiffs, for debt recovery, or for the forced imposition of a prepayment meter. It has meant families being unable to put a school uniform on their child's back.

There are 4 million children already in poverty; 700,000 more children were in poverty than in 2010 even before the pandemic, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report of a few weeks ago estimated that one in seven families was going without essentials. One fifth of pensioners are in poverty, with older and disabled pensioners being most seriously affected—and there, too, the figures are going up.

In a report published last week, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

“Although it never sounds the most exciting part of benefits policy, the default indexation of benefits—what happens to their

value each year if the government takes no deliberate action—is a first-order issue over the long term, and even over the short term when inflation is high.”

The IFS is right to make the important point that indexation and uprating are assumed to happen if the Government take no deliberate action. The annual uprating of working-age benefits with prices has long been the default in this country. When Governments fail to uprate benefits, that is a deliberate action, although they like to pretend otherwise.

Over the last couple of years, a new ritual seems to have been established in the run-up to the autumn statement: rumours circulate that the Government have not decided what to do, or whether they will uprate; think-tanks work out the implications of a freeze on rates of poverty and living standards; and charities and civil rights organisations urge the Government not to allow the real-terms value of benefits to fall. Uprating becomes a hot topic in the media speculation that attends any fiscal event. Then, at the last moment, we learn that the Government have decided to uprate after all. The Government expect praise for doing the right thing, and nobody considers for a moment what an extraordinary state of affairs this has become. However, it is an extraordinary state of affairs.

How can a social security system carry out its most basic functions if the value of basic entitlements is being eroded by inflation? Previous Governments did not need to spend weeks deciding whether to uprate; uprating was just what happened if they took no deliberate action. The sorry truth is that since 2010, Governments have increasingly treated the annual uprating of working-age benefits as a policy choice rather than a norm—a policy choice driven by short-term considerations, but with permanent effects that they prefer to ignore.

Dr Luke Evans: The hon. Lady is missing the key point that the universal credit taper was changed from 63p to 55p. That is new, and it makes a huge difference; those who are earning have more money in their pocket.

Ms Buck: The hon. Gentleman should go back to the original plans for universal credit, and to what the taper rate was intended to be at the very beginning, before a former Chancellor got his hands on it.

Guy Opperman: There is criticism that this Government are different, but the process has not changed since 1987. It has been exactly the same under 13 years of a Labour Government, under the coalition Government since 2010, and under this Government.

Ms Buck: I am slightly baffled by that. Although we have heard confirmation of the uprating this year, the point is that it comes on the back of years and years of that annual uprating simply not happening. The failure—[*Interruption.*] It is not a question of process; what matters is the outcome of the process. Over a number of years, the freeze on benefits and the failure to uprate has left us with a rise in poverty, as I have said.

Guy Opperman: I do not want to get too much into a tit for tat, but will the hon. Lady accept that there are 400,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty, that absolute poverty has declined by 1.2 million people, and that the living wage is going up?

Ms Buck: The Government have decided to refer to the absolute poverty figures only, which we would expect to go down as the years go by. However, under the standard measure of poverty, the relative measure, there is an increase in poverty. Indeed, if we want to get into the details, the Government's preferred measure also shows an increase in poverty among families, including families with more children. This year's uprating will at best serve to maintain the value of benefits, which has been severely reduced over the last decades. The resulting inadequacy of the safety net has played out exactly as one might expect; it contributes to increased numbers of children in poverty, to deepening poverty, and to increased need for food banks.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the last Labour Government took 1 million children out of poverty, and that we could do with having a Labour Government immediately to take further action?

Ms Buck: I could not agree more. The Labour Government demonstrated what could be done with will, policy and investment; they brought about a dramatic reduction in pensioner poverty and child poverty. A future Labour Government will do exactly the same. Of course we will support the motion, but the Government deserve no praise—

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Buck: I have given away enough for the moment. The Government deserve no praise for refraining from a deliberate action that they should never have contemplated taking in the first place.

It is important to recognise the limitations to the uprating order. Although the nominal value of most working-age benefits will increase by 10.1%, there will be no change to the eligible cost limits of two crucial benefits: the childcare element of universal credit and tax credits, and the local housing allowance. Do the Government think that childcare and housing costs are immune to inflation? How does allowing the erosion of the value of childcare support fit with their stated aims of encouraging work progression and helping working parents to increase their hours of work?

Yesterday, the deputy political editor of *The Sunday Times* reported that:

“Sunak and Hunt want a new benefits crackdown, including” increasing the “threshold under which people must attend regular job centre interviews/meet work coaches to be raised to 18 hours”.

If the Government are serious about helping parents to progress, they should ensure that parents are better off working more hours, rather than using the crude and unproven instruments of conditionality. As the IFS has shown, parents in the lower thirds of the earning distribution already stand to lose 58% of their additional earnings when moving from 20 to 40 hours of work a week.

Incentives to progress are already weak, so allowing inflation to erode the value of childcare support makes absolutely no sense. As evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee stated recently,

“The childcare support provided with UC is only sufficient to cover part-time hours, because the cap it is subject to has been frozen for six years”,

and

“A fixed cap amid rising childcare costs means fewer hours are eligible for reimbursement under UC today compared to Working Tax Credit in 2005—potentially restricting parents' employment options.”

While I am on the subject, we hardly need reminding that the requirement for parents who claim childcare support to pay up front heaps the burden on to low-income parents, and contributes to the nightmare of overpayments and deductions, which contribute to the debt and destitution crisis.

The local housing allowance remains frozen for the third year in a row—at least, that is how everybody apart from the Secretary of State sees it. He said in his written statement of 17 November:

“I can also confirm that the local housing allowance rates for 2023-24 will be maintained in cash terms at the elevated rates agreed for 2020-21.”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 24WS.]

Perhaps the Minister can explain how those rates, which are based simply on the 30th percentile of local rents in 2019—since when rents have risen by 8% overall according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and vastly more in some parts of the country—can seriously be described as elevated.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—she is being very generous. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, freezing local housing allowance, as opposed to uprating it to match local rents, will reduce support for nearly 1.1 million households by an average of £50 per month. Does she agree that that is an utterly impossible situation for people to face, and that we need action from the Government on it?

Ms Buck: It is absolutely impossible. Rents are such a major component of people's expenditure. For that shortfall to first be fixed, and then to grow, is inexplicable. It absolutely eats into people's residual income.

Nearly 1.5 million universal credit households receive the housing allowance. Of those, 844,000, or 58%, have rents above the maximum that local housing allowance will support. On average, they face a shortfall of £100 a month, which has to come out of their residual income.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, with whom I served on the Work and Pensions Committee a long time ago, for giving way. Have this Government not increased benefits by more than inflation, which is something that Labour never did in the 13 years it was in power? Secondly, will those on universal credit not be £1,000 better off as a result of the further reduction of the taper in the universal credit system, which she and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) continue to insist should be scrapped completely? Where does she think the social justice is in her party's proposals?

Ms Buck: The fact of the matter is that poverty is rising—pensioner poverty is rising, child poverty is rising, and the local housing allowance and the childcare element are not keeping up with costs. That is simply a fact.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): If I may, I will just take my hon. Friend back to the point she was making about rent levels, which have gone up extraordinarily in the past six months. London now has the highest

[Jeremy Corbyn]

rents of any city in Europe, and many people on benefits living in the private rented sector are paying well over £100 a month out of their remaining benefit. Does she not think that there is also a case for looking at local housing allowance levels?

Ms Buck: This freeze in local housing allowance, which is such a critical element of people's income, is causing such hardship for hundreds of thousands of families. That is not only undermining living standards in the middle of a cost of living crisis, but leading to utterly perverse disparities between areas due to differences in rent inflation. The 30th percentile of rents in Bristol is £100 more than in Newbury, but the amount of housing support that those who live in Bristol can receive is £12.50 less than those who live in Newbury. To quote the Institute of Fiscal Studies again:

"the current approach makes little sense. It permanently bakes in historic information about differences in rents across the country, while entirely ignoring current information about those differences."

We can see the real-world consequences playing out on our streets as rough sleeping soars and council homelessness units are stretched to breaking point.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I simply want to respond briefly to the intervention of the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who mentioned me in passing—inaccurately, I must say. He was wrong to say that benefits have been uprated in line with inflation. At the moment, the headline rate of benefits is the lowest in real terms for 40 years, following the repeated freezes we have had. Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Gloucester ought to check the record?

Ms Buck: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend, who speaks with expertise on this issue.

The fact is that we have seen the implications of freezes in benefits. We are seeing it in soaring poverty, and we are seeing support for housing and childcare costs failing. Those things need to be based on real-world prices, not those obtained in the past. Universal credit and legacy benefits need to be uprated with general inflation—not just once in a while, but every year—if their value is not to be permanently eroded. It would be welcome if the Minister could commit to those basic principles at least.

5.17 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and it is a bit of a pleasure that we are in a better position than we were a year ago, when we were looking at a welfare increase of 3% as we saw inflation forecast to hit 7% by April. We have—perhaps more by chance than judgment—a rise of 10% while inflation is actually 10%, so we at least have an uprating that looks to be the right number. However, the fact is that that is still a bit by chance, because we are still having to use information that will be six months out of date by the time we get there. It shows how strange the system we have is. When the Minister winds up, can they say whether any progress at all has been made in trying to get the systems in a position where we can use a more recent number, so that we do not end up with a repeat of last year, using an out-of-date number that is way below the level of inflation by the time we get into the year?

A 10% rise in benefits and the state pension is extremely welcome, and we should pay tribute to the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for getting that amount of money out of the Treasury, but I suspect that when the Chancellor sat down to do his emergency Budget, or several Budgets back in the autumn, he probably was not overly excited by having to find this amount of money. It was, however, clearly the right thing to do. The idea of putting up the incomes of people on fixed incomes or earning the lowest levels in the country by less than inflation would have been completely ridiculous. I think we have got to the right answer, and I welcome it. The timing of the changes has an unfortunate impact; by the time we get to April we will have had increases of just over 13% for the last two years, while inflation will have risen by about 17%, so people will still be 4% down on where they were before the crisis.

And it is worse than that. The basket of goods and services bought by most people on these benefits tends not to relate well to the consumer prices index. For example, food price inflation is much higher—more like 19%. There is no doubt that the Government have been extraordinarily generous with energy support, but if we factor in the changes to energy price support, what do we see for the coming year? The inflation figure that has been used is from September—before the move to the energy price cap, which started in October—and the price cap that drove that figure was an annual bill of £1,971. We are currently at £2,500, and the Government's cap will mean that that number will rise to £3,000 from April, so the average household may well be £1,000 worse off on their energy bills. The rise in the state pension of about 10% is a little under that, so will only cover the rise in energy bills from the current financial year to the next.

The support will drop off quite considerably. If we add up the cost of living support, the £400 from the energy company and the £150 via council tax, the average household on the lowest incomes has had £1,200 of support this year. That will go down to £900, and the pensioner support will go down from £850 to £300. Although there will be a rise in the main benefits and pensions income, a cut to the other support and a rise in energy bills will mean that that is all gone, and most households will actually be worse off as we go into the next financial year. I am not sure that is what the Government intend.

The idea that we have to taper off the extra support for households that are earning money is right in principle, but the Government may need to keep a watching brief throughout the year on whether people living on a fixed income in retirement, on out-of-work benefits or on the very lowest incomes, can really absorb a change that could mean—by the time all the extra bills and the reduction in support have been factored in—that they are £1,000 worse off next year than they are this year. Is that what we really intend? Are we in danger of unravelling the incredibly generous support we have given in this financial year by taking it away next year, perhaps a bit too soon?

We all hope that inflation will fall considerably, and we see encouraging signs from the energy markets that prices are coming down. Perhaps by the time we get to April, the energy price forecasts for households for the next year will be a long way below the £3,000 or even below the current £2,500 cap, and this problem will go away.

Perhaps the Government will be proven right in taking a more cautious approach to support for next year. Having gone to the effort to create a brand-new benefit for cost of living support, which I think is unprecedented, I hope the Minister can confirm that the Government will keep reviewing that rate to see whether we are giving households enough to get through the next financial year.

I wholeheartedly welcome today's increases, which are clearly the right thing to do, but there are two things that the Government need to do on top of monitoring the situation. The first is to try to get this decision made on more recent, more relevant data. I accept that the systems are so old and steam-driven that we have to start doing the work in October based on the September number, and that if we do not start that early we cannot get the rises through, but it is a bit bizarre to bring to the House in February an order that we had to start programming the computer to do in November or October, and that we cannot change. If the House voted for something different tonight, it would be too late; this is plumbed into the system. We should either have this debate in November, when we can actually change it, or we should try to move the rise to a more relevant date. Given that we managed to get the £20 universal credit uplift through in a matter of weeks, I really cannot see why we could not be using more modern data. Now that we know that more of the legacy benefits will be continued on late into this decade, surely it is time to try to get a system that means we can do an uprating that reflects the real cost of living at the time that income comes in.

There is a second thing the Government should do, which the Select Committee recommended previously. We have had a slightly haphazard journey of welfare increases in the last 13 years, so it would be quite unlikely to have ended up in the right position, whereby the amount we are giving people in various household scenarios is equivalent to what they need in order to buy the goods and services that we think they ought to be able to buy. It is time to have a rebasing exercise: to go away and do the work, and work out whether we are giving the households of a single person, a couple, a couple with one child or two children, and so on, the amount of money we expect they need to live on—to be able to pay for all the essentials they ought to have. In some cases, perhaps we are. In some cases, we are probably not. But if we are, it is by fluke rather than any sort of planning, and if we are not, we are putting people in a really difficult position.

I hope Ministers can accept that there really needs to be a rebasing at the end of this crisis. If we have been through 17% or more inflation in the space of two years, that must suggest that the cost of living is in a very different position from where it was. Let us do the work. I will be very happy to find out that the benefits are in the right place and there is no need for any further increases. If they are too high—well, that is very generous, although I think it is very unlikely that they are too high. If they are too low, we need a plan to fix that. That would be the right thing to do. Let us do the work and find the evidence, and I hope we will then all be able to take an informed view when it comes to the uprating next year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

5.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who is always incredibly thoughtful on these issues, and it is certainly a pleasure to serve alongside him on the Work and Pensions Committee.

As we debate today's annual uprating orders, we do so against a grim economic backdrop and at a time when some of the most vulnerable people in our communities are battling literally to survive this cost of living crisis and make it through the winter. However, I think it is important to recognise that the cost of living crisis is not a new thing. Yes, the war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the global economy, and I do not think anybody in this House would deny that; and nor is anyone denying that the coronavirus pandemic has left serious scarring on the economy. But the inescapable fact is that poverty in all its forms was in a dire situation pre-pandemic. Let us take child poverty as just one example. Figures from the Child Poverty Action Group show that, pre-covid, there were 700,000 more children in poverty than at the start of 2010. Rising child poverty coupled with a cost of living crisis demands radical action from a British Government who must do more—so much more—to end the scourge of child poverty.

Today's uprating orders are certainly a step in the right direction. The orders for the financial year 2023-24 are welcome, and we certainly will not oppose them. However, Ministers should be under no illusion that these will make up for four very long years of benefit freeze prior to the pandemic. Data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's cost of living tracker in October paints a horrendous picture that should shame every single one of us. About six in 10 low-income households are not able to afford an unexpected expense, over half are in arrears and about a quarter use credit to pay essential bills, resulting in over seven in 10 families going without essentials. That, I am afraid, is the stark reality of Tory Britain in 2023, and no alternative facts in the Minister's red folder can seek to deny that.

I thought it might be a good idea to have a look a bit closer to home—indeed, in the Minister's own constituency—and see what Tory Britain really looks like in Hexham, so I had a look at the latest available annual report for the West Northumberland food bank, based in the Minister's own constituency. Page 3 of its latest published annual report—again, I am quoting from the Minister's own local food bank—states:

“Listening to people's concerns on the helpline we became increasingly aware of rising child poverty, the two-child policy has plunged hundreds of thousands of children into poverty across the UK, since 6 April 2017. Parents having a third or subsequent child are no longer eligible for support for that child through benefits worth up to £2,830 per child per year”.

It goes on, remarkably, to cite statistics from the Minister's own Department—this is his own food bank—saying that

“DWP...statistics show that in 2019-20 24% of children in the Hexham constituency were growing up in poverty, that's almost 3,000 children and it's increased by 6% since 2015, that's 738 more children born into poverty in just 4 years.”

They are not my words, but the words of the Minister's own local food bank's annual report.

The red folder that the Minister walks about with may contain all sorts of distorted statistics and soundbites, but the problem is that statistics and soundbites do not

[David Linden]

put food on the tables of people in Hexham, or indeed anywhere on these islands. For example, instead of increasing the benefit cap, which has been frozen since 2016, the British Government should, in my view, just abolish it entirely, because it is pushing more and more people into poverty, and those of us who have surgeries on a Friday morning can see that clear as day.

If history teaches us anything, it is that trying to govern simply to appease headline writers in comics such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Express* does nothing other than further cement inequality and poverty, which is rife in Britain today. The reality is that too many households have now been left behind and will not benefit adequately from uprating because the Tories keep refusing to fix known policy failures. For example, the continued refusal of Ministers to fix the extensive known problems with universal credit is unacceptable and is subjecting vulnerable people to additional unnecessary hardship.

Instead of keeping additional pressures on low-income families, Ministers need to urgently address the fundamental issues with universal credit. A recent report by the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe found that the level of support provided under UC was

“a key contributing factor to child poverty.”

The report stated that policies like

“the two-child limit and the benefit cap restrict the amount of benefits that households can receive, regardless of their specific needs, and thereby continue to exacerbate child poverty.”

Therefore, my party stands by its calls to the British Government to reinstate the uplift to UC, and indeed to increase it by £25 a week, and to extend it to means-tested legacy benefits, as well as to extend the benefit cap.

Dr Luke Evans: Has the hon. Gentleman or his party calculated how much that would actually cost the taxpayer?

David Linden: Given the ability of the Government to crash the economy in the mini-Budget by the now elusive right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members have managed to wake up just in time to debate economics. They had nothing to say on food banks or child poverty, but when it comes to money, they are excited. The hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), who is a parliamentary private secretary, must do better with his interventions if he wants to get into the Government.

Last April, Ministers in Edinburgh called on the British Government to reverse those policy changes. That would have put £780 million into the pockets of Scottish households and it would lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty in 2023-24.

In its recent submission to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Human Rights Watch also gave a damning review of the British Government’s restrictive social security policies, such as the two-child limit and the failure to reduce the cut to universal credit. It set out the negative impacts on the right to an adequate standard of living, to food, and to housing for families with children. It is a depressing state of affairs that thousands of families with children will be pushed into poverty simply because the British

Government refuse to scrap the two-child limit on child tax credits and universal credit. In April 2022, 1.3 million children here in these islands were affected by the two-child limit—that is 8.7%, or one in 12 children—and that number will, sadly, continue to rise as nearly all low-income families with three or more children eventually become subject to the limit.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that Conservative Members may jeer from a sedentary position, but they have the poverty of people right across Scotland on their hands?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that political ideology will separate us, but in the five years that I have been a Member of this House I have struggled to get my head around the fact that, while the hon. Gentlemen who do their surgeries on a Friday morning see the same people as we do in our surgeries, who come and say that the social security system is inadequate and has left them in dire straits, there is no conviction to come into this Chamber and say to the Government, perhaps as the hon. Member for Amber Valley has done, that this is wrong.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con) *rose*—

David Linden: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is about to tell us what the Government could do better.

Justin Tomlinson: In the same spirit of trying to help those most in need, why do the Scottish Government not mirror our proposed changes to the terminal illness rules within disability benefits?

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is missing what is happening, given the limited social security powers that the Scottish Government have. Bearing in mind that 85% of welfare spending is reserved to this place, he will see that we are doing an awful lot to try to help people with social security, but if the Minister wants to back up my calls to devolve all social security to the Scottish Government, that will certainly be welcome.

Research from the Child Poverty Action Group shows that the majority, some 59%, of those affected by the two-child limit are working families. Perversely, some of those families work for the Minister’s own Department, which administers said benefits; that would be funny if it wasn’t so tragic. The fact that a few weeks ago the Lords Minister, Viscount Younger, could not justify to the Work and Pensions Committee how the two-child limit is compatible with the Government’s own family test is a damning indictment of a Minister who is not over his brief and whose policies do not even comply with the family test for which he is responsible.

I turn now to universal credit, which should be topical, given Labour’s significant change in stance. That change provides an opportunity to seek cross-party agreement on reform of universal credit, because all three main parties in this Chamber now agree with the broad principles and the aims of universal credit. The challenge for us now is to make it work and to iron out the creases, which are by no means insurmountable. We know, for example, that the five-week wait for a first payment is needlessly pushing people into hardship. That could be relatively easily fixed by implementing proposals to turn advance payment loans into non-repayable grants after a claimant has been deemed eligible.

On sanctions and conditionality, far too many households face destitution, largely because DWP rules are pushing them into debt through sanctions and deductions. Recent changes to the universal credit administrative earnings threshold mean that even more people will risk having their vital universal credit payments sanctioned. These 600,000 people are already working, and there is clear evidence that sanctions do not work in getting people into work or to increase their hours or earnings. To that end, I have tabled early-day motion 715 to annul the relevant regulations, which I hope the Government will grant us time to debate and vote on, and I certainly hope we can count on Labour support in that.

However, there are other problems with sanctions and conditionality. For example, individuals who have had a sanction applied have also been denied the vital cost of living payments the Minister was rightly trumpeting earlier. That demonstrates a fundamental issue with the DWP's attitude to those on low incomes, because preventing vulnerable families from receiving the social security they are entitled to when they need it most strikes me as somewhat back to front.

I will turn now to the UC childcare offer. If the Tories actually cared about working people, they would want to improve childcare support for UC claimants by supporting them with childcare costs up front and in full. The SNP continues to call on the Government to increase payments for those aged under 25 in line with increases for older claimants. We also continue to call for local housing allowance to cover the average cost of rents and for the shared accommodation rate for those under 35 to be suspended—that age range has always struck me as somewhat arbitrary.

The SNP has called for the British Government to fix these fundamental flaws in social security and to deliver a system that actively tackles poverty and empowers people. However, it is an inescapable and undeniable fact that the Scottish Government cannot change these policies while 85% of welfare expenditure and income-related benefits remain reserved to this institution here in London, and that includes universal credit, which is of course a reserved benefit. The only way to ensure that Scotland has a decent social security system is for us to take all legislative and fiscal responsibility for these issues by way of independence and to no longer hope that the full-fat Tories, or the diet Tories on the Labour Benches, will one day reform the social security system, which is clearly broken beyond repair.

I turn now to the order on pensions, and I start by genuinely welcoming the Pensions Minister to her place. I respect her enormously, and although we will doubtless disagree on aspects of policy, I have no doubt as to her motivations. Where we have common cause and we can agree—for example, on pension credit—she can be assured of SNP support. However, I am afraid that that is probably where the warm words and cross-party consensus will come to a halt for this evening, because the British Government have a serious job of work to do if they are to rebuild credibility among pensioners. Time and again, we have seen the Tory Government short-change pensioners, who are getting a raw deal from a pension system that they have paid into their entire lives.

Pensioners on low incomes are among those hardest hit by the cost of living crisis, and the British Government must do much more to ensure that they are properly supported, so let us start with the state pension. Westminster

already provides a lower state pension relative to average earnings than most other advanced economies. Last year's breaking of the triple lock will cost each pensioner £520 on average during the course of living crisis. The Government's own Red Book shows that that will take £30 billion in total from pensioners by the 2026-27 financial year. Retaining the triple lock is the bare minimum I would expect, but I rather fear that that policy pledge will not survive the rigours of manifesto writing when it comes to both main parties in this House. However, I would like to be assured on that issue in the winding-up speeches.

A recent report from the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association found that the annual income required to maintain a basic standard of living in retirement has massively outstripped the rise in the state pension. For a single person, the minimum income now sits at £12,800, while the state pension will rise to only £10,600 in April for those on the full flat rate. Indisputably, the state pension remains an important source of income for pensioners living in, or at risk of moving into, poverty because of the very low take-up of pension credit, which I accept is the Minister's biggest priority and one I am certainly willing her on to succeed with. However, Independent Age highlights that 5% of pensioner couples and 19% of single pensioners have no source of income other than the state pension and benefits.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2023" report revealed that 1.7 million pensioners were living in poverty in the UK in 2020-21, the poverty rate for single pensioners is almost double that of couple pensioners, and almost one in seven pensioners overall are living in poverty—something I can see in its rawest form in communities such as Sandyhills, Carmyle and Baillieston in my constituency. We know that pension credit is a vital support for many older people, but only around seven in 10 of those who are entitled to it actually claim it, and up to £1.7 billion of available pension credit is, I am afraid, going unclaimed. In crude terms, that amounts to £1,900 a year for each family in the east end of Glasgow entitled to receive pension credit.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is obviously on overtime tonight.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is that not a point that all of us in this House can take away? Pension credit is going unclaimed and all 650 of us could go back to our constituents and encourage them to make sure they check the website and use the phone to get, potentially, that gateway option to £3,000.

David Linden: Yes, I think we are going to have a political "Lady and the Tramp" moment where we actually agree on this. There will be spaghetti across the House. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We need to be in a situation where we encourage all our constituents to take up pension credit. Having met the Minister fairly recently—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

David Linden: I will give way to my very honourable Friend.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. In my constituency, my staff and I encourage all the pensioners we meet every week to look at pension credit. Some will qualify and some will not. Today, Citizens Advice came to me to say it is going to start a project in Newtownards in my constituency and I look forward to that unfolding. Does he feel that the Government should focus attention specifically on pension credit, because there are many people out there who would apply if they knew more about it?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I think I am unique in that I am one of the few people who serve as a Member of this House who has been in his constituency office and spoken to his constituency staff—some of us go on holiday to places like Newtownards. He is absolutely right. I ask the Government to put just as much effort into advertising things like pension credit take-up as they do into propaganda-like billboards in our constituencies about levelling up. If that amount of resource were put into advertising pension credit, perhaps we would see it go further.

The British Government's assault on pensioners does not just extend to the pitiful state pension. Let us not forget that the Tories also scrapped free TV licences for over-75s, including in Broadland. People who watch on and see the Westminster incompetence of this place will know that pensioners across these islands have already been short-changed by £6,500 on average due to state pension underpayments. Peter Schofield, the permanent secretary at the DWP, recently told our Select Committee that—

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I am happy to give way.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Gentleman mentions Broadland and says that pensioners are being short-changed by the Government. How can he reconcile that statement with the triple lock on pensions, which raises pensions year on year by 2.5%, the rate of inflation or average earnings—a ratchet effect increasing the value of pensions when compared with the economy at large?

David Linden: The triple lock the hon. Gentleman refers to is the one that he and his party broke a manifesto commitment on recently, resulting in many pensioners being diddled.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the huge problem of pensioner poverty, particularly for those who are unable, or do not understand how to access the minimum income guarantee. Does he accept there is also a huge problem for women of a certain age, the WASPI women, who are living in great poverty and great stress through no fault of their own, due to a change they were unaware of?

David Linden: The right hon. Gentleman is spot on. Several of us are looking with great interest at the ombudsman process, which has just finished stage two and will now move to stage three. I hope that the Government will change their tune on their approach to the issue of 1950s born women, because thus far many of those women in my constituency and, I am sure, in

Islington North would suggest that the Government are not doing enough on that issue. He is right to put that on the record.

Before the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) intervened, I was making the point that the DWP has identified a further 100,000 potential underpayments during its ongoing correction exercise, which will now take an extra year to complete. I would argue that that demonstrates that the British Government are unable to effectively run a state pension system, and makes the case for pensions being administered in an independent Scotland, and not by Tory Ministers who are increasingly using pensioners to penny-pinch.

It would be remiss of me not to touch on retirement age, which has been the subject of huge media speculation recently. It appears to be the worst kept secret in Whitehall that Ministers are expected to announce that the retirement age will be increased to 68 at some point in the 2030s, not in 2046 as previously expected. To be crystal clear, my party opposes any further increase in the state pension retirement age. Indeed, the Scottish Government, when they responded to the British Government's review of the state pension age restated their opposition to any changes to the current timelines for increasing the state pension age. This might seem like an abstract debate, but these things have real-life effects. Recent analysis by Age UK shows that 1.5 million pre-state pension age households have no savings at all. We must therefore avoid the situation faced by the WASPI women, mentioned by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who faced having to work longer with little time to replan for retirement. On the subject of WASPI women, I again make clear my support for their cause.

It is incumbent on the British Government to look at other areas of pension injustice, such as frozen pensions for those living overseas, many of whom are veterans. It is my party's belief that that is not a sustainable situation and, though complex, it cannot be allowed to just go unchecked while pensioners languish in poverty overseas. That is certainly a unique take for global Britain.

The British Government's decision to decline a request from the Government of Canada for a reciprocal social security agreement was a peculiar one and I would appreciate the Minister saying more about that during his wind-up speech.

The reality is that tonight's orders will pass without a vote but this annual debate shines a spotlight on the major holes in our social security system. The UK is blessed with the sixth largest economy in the world, yet—remarkably—soup kitchens up and down these islands will throw open their doors tonight, in record number, to feed people who cannot afford to get by on state support. That poses a much bigger question which this Government have thus far been unable to answer. It is a question which many people in Scotland are concluding can only be answered with independence, because Westminster is not working and Scotland can do better—so much better—than this crumbling Union.

5.48 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and I pay tribute to his encyclopaedic survey of the landscape of the Department. It is fair to say that no stone was left unturned, and we are grateful

to him for that. It is also always a pleasure to come to the Chamber to support the Minister when he does the right thing—indeed, it is perhaps a pleasure to listen to him here when he does the wrong thing.

I speak today to express my satisfaction—indeed, my relief—at the Government's decision to uplift benefits by CPI. Over the summer, my most disadvantaged constituents faced real fear from the sudden increases in the cost of living and what was coming down the track towards them. They were perturbed, confused and daunted by the confusion in public messaging from both our leadership contest and the “interim” Government, as I should perhaps call it. They were very worried, so the news that we will update benefits by CPI was a great relief for them, not least because we know that inflation always hits the poorest in society worst, so protecting those in receipt of benefits from inflation is the most important duty of Government. Indeed, it was Milton Friedman no less who said inflation is a tax on the poorest in society. So the Government did the right thing. Inflation does matter. It is not an economic sideshow, and we should always remember that.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the shadow Minister. She may not be aware that a shadow Front-Bench reshuffle is due, but I can only assume that that was the reason for some of her comments—she may get a surprise in a few days—because she was praising the previous Labour Government. It was like an exercise in nostalgia. Her opposition to conditionality leapt out at me. My constituents remember the something-for-nothing welfare state that Labour created in that era, and by refusing to accept the role of conditionality in our welfare system, she is committing the Labour party to that agenda once more; I was very surprised to hear it.

I represent an area that sadly still has high levels of pensioner poverty, so I particularly welcome the Government's decision to extend CPI protection to those who rely on the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit. It will cost some £700 million above the statutory minimum requirement, so I welcome the Government's commitment to supporting the poorest pensioners at this time of high inflation. However, like any Back Bencher, I will urge them to do more. Despite the best efforts of many, my constituency still saw a slight dip in the number of pension credit claimants last year, so I urge the Pensions Minister, who has done so much to get people claiming pension credit, to continue those efforts; the battle is not yet won.

I also urge the Government to consider the need for flexibility in our pension system. My favourite statistic of the month is that the old age dependency ratio currently shows 28 people over 65 for every 100 of working age, some of whom are probably not in work. The ratio will rise to almost 50:100 by 2050, causing fundamental challenges for any Government. All those who flatly oppose raising the state pension age need to engage with that, not take cheap positions that involve no thought at all—however encyclopaedic their speeches might be. Raising the state pension age clearly makes sense on one level, but many of my poorest pensioners dropped out of the labour market well before the state pension age. Indeed, my constituency has the lowest healthy life expectancy in the country. Given that people can defer the receipt of state pension in return for higher payments, could those claiming early, whether

down to ill-health or physically intensive work, not have a slightly reduced payment? That would strike a fair balance.

The Government are doing an immense amount to support those facing sharp increases in energy bills. I welcome the extra £150 for personal independence payment claimants, and the uprated PIP being discussed today. However, will the Minister please take away from this debate the numerous emails I have had from those reliant on electronic beds, electronic wheelchairs, oxygen concentrators, sleep apnoea machines—all manner of electricity-reliant equipment—to keep them alive? They have seen their bills go up by £150 a month, not £150 a year, and they are deeply concerned at the energy price trajectory not coming down sharp enough.

Our benefits system remains generous, but it could go so much further. Too often it is being asked to bear the weight of other structural inadequacies in the system, where other Departments could or should be doing more, or where the private sector is allowed to shirk some of its moral responsibilities as players in what we ought to call responsible capitalism. The consequence is that people continually ask for more money to be spent by the welfare state, when the solution should be to make that money go further by ensuring that we have better value and a fairer system in which people can spend that money.

The cost of energy for those with complex medical equipment is just one example of the purple pound, where the disabled pay hidden costs over and above what PIP could ever meet, despite its being there to meet the extra costs of disability. The poverty premium is another area where the DWP and the wider state can ensure that the benefits system does not allow and reinforce poor practice elsewhere. For example, inflation is at its highest in the food and retail sector, but it is higher still in the smaller neighbourhood supermarket stores in the most deprived parts of my constituency. Residents relying upon a local One Stop, Tesco or whatever may not be able to afford to go to the large out-of-town supermarket for better-value food. The private sector is obliging the benefits system to take up the slack of the dysfunctional market in which my constituents are trapped.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. He highlights the fact that everyone has individual circumstances, which is why the Government brought forward the £2 billion local welfare assistance scheme. Has he had any success in his casework in getting that additional support for people with additional individual challenges?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He used the phrase “local welfare assistance scheme” which, sadly, could provoke me to speak for even longer than the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), because it is my specialist topic, but I ought not to go there—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Perhaps Members should wait for me and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) to finalise our report into emergency food aid, where they will be able to see exactly what I think.

To finish on perhaps a more fundamental point, one strength of our benefits system is that sufficient incentives are built into the structures of in-work benefits, along

[Paul Maynard]

with conditionality—I am sorry to say that to the shadow Minister—to ensure that, as far as possible, work is seen to pay. However, that has been distorted through the more complex pattern of financial support that has emerged during covid and the wider cost of living crisis. Those living just below a particular threshold that qualifies them for extra state support get large payouts, but those just above the threshold feel greatly aggrieved. They regard it as unfair because they are being punished for being seen to do the right thing. The bedrock of our benefits system is a belief in its fairness, not just to those who need support at any one time, but to those who have to fund the system and may one day, of course, require it. Although I strongly welcome the Government's decision to uprate benefits, we must bear in mind the needs of, and treat fairly and responsibly, not just those who are in receipt of benefits, but those who fund the system and are in work, day in, day out. They are two sides of the same coin.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

5.57 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I echo the relief expressed by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) about the uprating decision, and I am pleased to follow his speech. I will begin with some points about the way we uprate benefits and echo some of the important points made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), whose contribution to the Select Committee I appreciate.

We now know that legacy benefits will be claimed by some people until at least 2028. The Select Committee, in its report last July, called on the Department to improve its IT systems and increase the speed with which changes can be made to legacy benefit and state pension rates, and the lack of progress has been disappointing. Annual uprating based on the previous September's inflation is perfectly reasonable when inflation is stable, but it is not reasonable in the current volatile circumstances. The Committee called for a shorter gap—the hon. Gentleman echoed this—between the inflation reference period and the uprating date, preferably using inflation data from the previous quarter, or possibly more recent still.

In the past year, the lag has caused real hardship. Benefits were uprated last April by the inflation rate of the previous September: 3.1%. By the time the uprating took effect, inflation was nearly 10%. The result has been benefits at the lowest real-terms level for 40 years, and a big surge in food bank demand. Like the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, I applaud the fact that the Government are honouring their obligations this year, and that the uprating will be 10% in time for the new financial year. That should prevent things becoming substantially worse for many in the coming year.

But it is not going to make things much better. Trussell Trust food banks gave out 1.3 million food parcels from April to September last year—more than in any previous six-month period, and 50% more than before the pandemic. At the Liaison Committee in December, the Prime Minister said that he would

“work very hard to deliver”

lower food bank demand by the end of this Parliament. I warmly welcome his adoption of that goal, but it will be achieved only if social security support is increased in real terms. What is the right level for the social security safety net? The Work and Pensions Committee plans in the near future to launch an inquiry into the adequacy of benefit levels, a subject that the hon. Member for Amber Valley spoke about. It seems to me that the safety net is now so inadequate that it is damaging the economic recovery: it is too low to do its job properly.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Chair of the Select Committee cites some damning statistics from the Trussell Trust. For all that food bank use is increasing overall, the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks, which the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) mentioned, has demonstrated that it went down when the £20 universal credit uplift was in place. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should look at that?

Sir Stephen Timms: I absolutely agree. That was the one point at which food bank demand fell, and of course it went straight back up once the £20 uplift was removed.

The level of the safety net is now too low for it to do its job properly from the standpoint of economic efficiency. People are being forced to accept unsuitable jobs, with no prospect of training or advancement, simply in order to subsist. That is one reason why the UK's productivity record is so poor, and we will not deliver economic growth until we tackle that productivity failing. Interesting cross-party thinking on the matter is under way, for example in the work of the Poverty Strategy Commission set up and chaired by the noble Baroness, Lady Stroud. Our Committee's inquiry will be able to draw on that and other work.

It is clear that the immediately preceding Administration—the interim Government, as the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys described it—would not have honoured those obligations. The right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) told us yesterday that her Administration was brought down by a left-wing conspiracy in the financial markets. It is not clear whether she regards my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) as having been responsible for organising that.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I knew I'd get the blame somehow.

Sir Stephen Timms: Actually, of course, it was brought down by economic reality. But I do not think that that Administration would have delivered an inflation uprating, so it is to the credit of the current Administration that they have done so.

I also welcome the increase in the benefit cap. The cap was introduced in 2013 and then reduced in 2016; it has never been increased at all. At the beginning of April it finally will be, thank goodness, but only by the overall rate of benefit uprating, which means that in effect it is a standstill increase. The impact of the benefit cap will not get worse in the coming year, but that will not affect the worsening impact of the cap's falling in real terms every year since it was introduced.

David Linden: Will the right hon. Gentleman go one step further and join those of us who want the benefit cap not merely raised, but scrapped in its entirety because it is having such a detrimental impact on families across these islands?

Sir Stephen Timms: There is a strong case for that. At the time when the benefit cap was introduced, we were told that it was to prevent people from receiving more in benefits than they would if they were working, but any relationship with wage levels has long since disappeared.

In its briefing for this debate, the Child Poverty Action Group makes the point that the increase does not undo the damage of the cap having been frozen since 2016, but

“pushes families who would be in poverty anyway into even deeper poverty.”

It points out that 123,000 households are currently affected by the cap, including 107,000 households with children. That is one reason why, before the pandemic, when the data was most recently updated, 700,000 more children were in poverty than in 2010. The case for the cap needs to be reconsidered.

I want to pick up a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) made about the absence of an uprating to the local housing allowance, which is a very big problem. The LHA will be frozen for the coming year at the level at which it was set in 2020, even though rents are rising fast. When I raised the matter with the Prime Minister at the Liaison Committee in December, he replied that the uprating in 2020 represented “a very significant cash uplift at the time, which it is appropriate to have maintained”,

echoing the wording of the ministerial statement from which my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North quoted.

Jeremy Corbyn: I agree with the Chair of the Select Committee about the rapid increase in rents, particularly in the private sector—it is huge in the big cities. Does he think that the Government should at least reflect on the need for a freeze on private sector rents, and for some serious legislation to protect the now huge proportion of our country’s population who live in the private rented sector?

Sir Stephen Timms: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful argument that the rate at which rents are now rising is devastating household finances in many parts of the country. All the 2020 increase—the much-vaunted “generous uplift”—did was raise the local housing allowance back to the level at which it had been set at the beginning of the decade: at the 30th percentile of local rents. In other words, it was raised to a level at which it covered three in 10 of the homes of that size in each local area, so even in 2020 it was not enough to cover the rent for seven out of 10 of the homes available. Since then, it has been frozen; by the end of the coming financial year it will have been frozen for four full years.

The consequences are becoming clear. Last week, the Combined Homelessness and Information Network reported that up to 3,570 people were sleeping rough in London from October to December 2022—a 21% rise on the same period in the previous year, with a 29% increase in the number of new rough sleepers. The chief executive of Crisis said:

“It is simply disgraceful that the numbers of people forced to sleep on the capital’s streets is very nearly back to the record levels we were seeing before the pandemic.”

Zoopla data shows large shortfalls for the cheapest properties by the end of last year: the shortfall for a one-bedroom home in Southwark had almost doubled in five months to £2,630 a year, while the shortfall for a three-bedroom home in Bromley had increased by more than £1,000 in five months to £3,555. At the start of 2022, some 1.7 million people—more than one in three renters in the private rented sector—were dependent on housing support to help them with their rent. Fewer than one in 12 private homes listed last year were affordable within the local housing allowance level; that figure reduced by a third in just five months last year.

The level of support is now being frozen in cash terms for a further year. Crisis said last week that it was “particularly concerned that the lack of social housing and the growing gap between overheating rents and the frozen Local Housing Allowance is pushing people towards homelessness.”

That is the reality of the impact of the policy, which should urgently be reconsidered. Ministers say that they are committed to ending rough sleeping, but the policy is driving an increase in rough sleeping.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North for drawing attention to the Select Committee’s recommendation about the cap on the level of childcare support in universal credit. It is regrettable that there is nothing in the present measures that will address that, but I hope we might see something in the Budget on that front, given the cross-party concern about the inadequacy of childcare support at a time when we want to encourage people back into work.

It is a relief that a catch-up uprating is being delivered to the main rates of benefit, but we are a very long way from providing an adequate social security safety net. A large-scale repair job will be needed in the near future. There is growing evidence that disabled people are facing an especially tough time in the current cost of living crisis. Their situation, to which the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Clevellys was right to draw attention, has to be addressed.

Most immediately, however, I urge the Minister to take another look at the local housing allowance level. Ministers say that they are committed to eradicating rough sleeping, but it does not look as though they mean it. Keeping the local housing allowance frozen for a fourth year will drive a further surge in the number of rough sleepers, as well as very serious problems for hundreds of thousands of others.

6.10 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). I was proud to serve under his chairmanship for a whole three weeks or so on the Committee, and then to reappear as a Minister some weeks later. He has a formidable knowledge of a broad spectrum of issues, and always chairs the Committee’s meetings in the right spirit to tease out what needs to be done to help some of the most vulnerable people in society.

I warmly welcome the various increases being announced by the Minister this evening, in what must be his 20th of these debates: they seem to come round more quickly every year. Having been a Minister for disabled people, I am pleased that we are delivering record amounts in disability benefits to some of the most vulnerable, and that we are getting better at providing support for those

[Justin Tomlinson]

most in need. For example, those with mental health conditions who are receiving personal independence payments are six times more likely to receive the highest level of support than they were under the old legacy benefits.

However, welcome though the additional funds have been, we should also—with one eye on the forthcoming White Paper—think about the wraparound support that is provided. For the purpose of disability benefits, people are assessed before being awarded, for a fixed period, a level of financial support, but we do nothing to signpost the additional help that is available. We are all committed to providing additional support for people with mental health conditions, and the Government receive cross-party backing for that, but it is often difficult to target the support provided by either the NHS or associated organisations because we cannot identify the people who need it. However, having now identified them through the personal independence payment system, we should be signposting claimants to the wide range of support—support from charities or the Government, whether formal or informal—so that they know what is available in their postcode areas. My office hosts monthly Parkinson's coffee mornings, mainly for carers so that they can share their experiences and discuss where they are able to find support, and they are of huge benefit to those people, but we could be using the data we have to share that best practice.

Let me now say something about the support for those who are receiving unemployment benefit, predominantly through universal credit. I welcome the Government's moves this year to increase that support, but—again, with one eye on the White Paper—we must not lose sight of the need wherever possible to localise and target the support that is available. We spend billions of pounds on work support programmes, but they involve national contracts covering various regions, which means that only generic offerings are available. We need to set aside some of that money to empower the work coaches in jobcentres to commission support in localities where smaller organisations can unlock people's undoubted potential to put them on the first step of their careers.

We should also bear in mind that we lose about 300,000 people a year from the workplace as a result of changing health conditions. Our Government have a fantastic record of delivering disability employment, having exceeded the target of 1 million more disabled people in work—the figure is about 1.4 million now—but there are misconceptions surrounding it. For instance, the vast majority of people who have either a disability or a long-term health condition will develop it while they are of working age, and we must get better at providing earlier intervention to keep those people out of the benefits system.

There is nothing worse than a deteriorating health condition, with the added pressure and challenges that it causes, for those whose confidence is then shattered because they have crashed out of work and must suddenly present themselves at a jobcentre. A big business should be investing in access to additional support and healthcare. I had the pleasure of visiting some that paid attention to the welfare of their staff, and that was not just because of corporate responsibility. Recruiting and retaining employees, particularly when there are skill shortages, is

a win-win situation. Many small and medium-sized enterprises would not necessarily be able to do that, but again, the Government need to get better at signposting advice and support.

Let me give the example of the Health and Safety Executive. We are world leaders when it comes to safety—the HSE is respected across the board, and commands huge fees from international companies to provide best practice from the United Kingdom—but we need to get the health side right as well, so that fewer people have to rely on annual upratings and counting the pennies because being in work will give them the best chance of improving their lot.

Finally, let me pick up a point made by the shadow Minister about pensioner poverty. Twenty-three years ago, at the beginning of my political journey, I was proud to be elected as a councillor in Swindon, and here I am now as the Member of Parliament for North Swindon. My first election was on the back of a 75p rise in pensions, which is a light year away from the triple lock that has delivered some £2,400 more, in cash terms, for pensioners on fixed incomes.

6.15 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). Let me begin by saying that 1.7 million people in Scotland are turning down or turning off their heating as their bills rise. More than 70% of the poorest 20% of families are going without essentials, more than 300,000 Scots are cutting back on toiletries and sanitary products, and 42% of adults in Scotland are showering or bathing less. That is only a snapshot of a very bleak situation. Why is it happening? Because of 13 years of Tory rule. Tories are more interested in inciting a culture war than food on tables in Scotland. Scottish National party Members welcome an inflation-related increase in benefits, but why the delay? Why do our constituents need to wait until April? This should have happened immediately, because energy bills, food prices and mortgages have already risen.

Then there is the benefit cap, a grossly unkind policy that is illustrative of this Government—a Government who have removed the cap on bankers' bonuses but will not scrap the cap on benefits, which has been frozen since 2016 and which dictates the amount of social security that our constituents can claim: meagre, tiny amounts in comparison with the billions that the Government are playing with. They continue to inflict even more hardship on the most vulnerable of families, 70% of whom are single-parent families. Even a glance at the welfare system over which this Government preside shows that people must bargain to access welfare, and they are bargaining with their dignity.

Let us contrast that with the social security system established by the Scottish Government. They introduced the Scottish child payment, which, despite being a brand-new benefit, has already been increased by 25%. That has brought the payments to £25 a week, a rise of 150% in less than eight months.

David Linden: May I point out that the Scottish child payment is not dependent on a family's having two children, but is per child? Unlike the UK Government and the People's Republic of China, we care about all children, not just the first two.

Amy Callaghan: My very good friend has made an excellent point. There is no limit on the Scottish child payment, whereas this Government have imposed an abhorrent two-child cap.

Pensioners have been abandoned continually by successive Tory Governments who have broken the triple lock, abandoned the WASPI women, provided a lower state pension relative to average earnings than most other advanced economies, and ended the free television licence. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's recent UK Poverty 2023 report, 1.7 million pensioners in the UK were living in poverty in 2020-21.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): How does my hon. Friend think her constituents who are in that position—people who are struggling on social security payments—must feel when they see all the blatant tax evasion that is going on, depriving Government coffers of money that could go towards providing them with a decent standard of living?

Amy Callaghan: I thank my hon. Friend for making that excellent point. On Friday, in my constituency, I met representatives of Pensioners for Independence, who cannot not understand why the UK Government are contributing such measly sums to our state pensions and our welfare system, and who see independence as a shining light and a way out of this despicable system. The people who have paid into the pension system their whole life are being completely short-changed by this UK Government.

We welcome an inflationary increase to benefits, which is entirely necessary given that inflation rates have soared due to economic mismanagement by this Government and the four preceding ones. But the welfare system in this place is fundamentally broken, potentially beyond repair. Worse yet, this Government are unwilling even to try to fix it. It would be remiss of me not to mention the light at the end of the tunnel for the people of Scotland: an independent Scotland, delivering fairness, equality and a complete social security system that is entirely fit for purpose.

6.20 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am pleased that we are having this debate and that, for once, it is fully subscribed to, which is very welcome. We are dealing with issues of terrible poverty in this country, brought about by a combination of low wages, insufficiency of benefits, very high rents, and inflation driven largely by the greed of the energy companies, which are making so much money. This House needs to reflect seriously on how the fifth-richest country in the world can have more and more people sleeping rough, begging on our streets and trying to eke out an existence.

Guy Opperman: I am listening very closely to the right hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he attribute any blame for the fiscal difficulties that the country faces to what Mr Putin has done in Ukraine—yes or no?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have not mentioned anything to do with Ukraine.

Guy Opperman: That's the point!

Jeremy Corbyn: Could the Minister hold in his excitement for one moment? He is the Minister responsible for the inadequacy of benefits; perhaps he should reflect on that.

Yes, the war in Ukraine has had an effect on global energy prices, although the effect has been bigger in some countries than others. Countries such as France deal with that by taking energy companies into public ownership to protect their citizens from the grotesque energy price increases that his Government are quite happy to mete out to the people of this country.

Jerome Mayhew *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn: No, I will carry on with my speech. The 10% benefit rise is obviously better than no rise at all. During the Budget statement, the previous Chancellor would not even answer the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), on whether there would be any increase whatsoever to benefits. A 10% increase is obviously an improvement on what was provided by the last Chancellor, but it does not even meet inflation. It comes nowhere near to meeting the rate of food inflation, which is running at around 15% to 16% per year. Families or individuals who rely on benefits spend a wholly disproportionate amount of their income on food and energy; better-off people spend a much lower proportion on those things. The rate of inflation for the poorest 10% of our country is far greater than the 10% or 11% figure that the Bank of England puts forward.

Many issues could be raised, and I will raise a few very quickly so that all Members who wish to speak can do so. Some years ago, a two-child benefit cap policy was introduced, which many of us were, and remain, concerned about. Those of us who represent constituencies with a considerable number of large families know that they suffer very badly. The two-child benefit cap obviously has a disproportionate effect on the largest and poorest families in our society. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us where the morality is in saying that the third, fourth or fifth child of a family is less important than the first or second. It is a simple moral question. If we want to look after all the people in our society—I like to think that we all do—that should include all children, irrespective of the size of the family. The third, fourth, fifth or sixth child is completely unaware of where they lie in the pecking order when they are born. They find out later that their presence and that of subsequent siblings reduces income for their family. It does not seem morally right that we should pursue that policy.

The question of the benefit cap and its effect on people in our society is massive, as the Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and others. The disproportionate effect on people living in the private rented sector is huge. My constituency is inner-city and has a fairly large number of council and housing association properties in it. Their rents are obviously within the local housing allowance, but the vast majority of private rents are nowhere near within the local housing allowance. I was talking to someone in a hostel who was trying to find a private rented flat to move into. They tried every agency they could find; they walked the streets and scoured the newspapers and goodness knows how many websites to try to find a flat within the local housing allowance in inner London, near their school and support network, but they could not get anywhere near it.

Unless we raise or abolish the benefit cap, we have to intervene in the housing market and freeze private sector rents, so that living in the private rented sector is

[Jeremy Corbyn]

at least sustainable, and those living there do not have to pay part of their rent out of the benefit that they receive. What is going on is simply unfair. I would hope that the Minister would understand the issue with the cap, and the poverty that it brings for so many people in our society. In my constituency, probably more than a third of the community live in the private rented sector—there are probably more in other constituencies—and they are suffering as a result of this issue.

Another issue that I would like to raise is that of people with no recourse to public funds, and the difficulties that they face in our society. It is a bold, dramatic and strong statement when a Government announce that someone is allowed to enter the country but is not allowed any recourse to public funds whatsoever. This issue was raised two weeks ago at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in the context of our adherence to the Istanbul convention on the protection of women, of which the Minister will be aware. The report that we received raised concerns that in some member countries in which there is no recourse to public funds—the problem is not exclusive to the UK—women in an abusive relationship might not have settled status when their partner does. Those women are unable to gain independent security and safety, and often are unaware of the domestic violence provisions that they might be able to call on. Will the Minister look seriously at the very well thought-out report from the Council of Europe about our adherence to the Istanbul convention, which I am sure he supports? Will he recognise that no recourse to public funds affects not only the individual concerned but the wider family, if there is one?

If hon. Members talk to people who are sleeping rough on our streets, turning up at food banks in our communities or begging on tubes and elsewhere, they should ask them what their situation is. Many have been unsuccessful in their initial asylum application, but may ultimately win on appeal, and they have no access to any benefits whatsoever. They live in the most desperate poverty, are prey to crime and abuse, and can be abused and exploited by those with criminal intent in our society. Through this policy, we are creating an incomeless underclass in the major cities of this country. I know the Minister would not want that to be the case, but unfortunately the implementation of this policy leads to that.

The last point I want to raise is to follow on from what the hon. Member for Glasgow East and others have been saying about the pension level in our society, and the numbers of pensioners who are entitled to support beyond the level of the state pension but are simply unaware of it, do not know how to apply for it and do not get it. I also want to mention the women who were duped by the way in which the state pension retirement age was raised and are now living in desperate poverty—colloquially known as the WASPI women. I think they deserve justice. They were very badly treated and my friend, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), certainly took their case up when he was shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Pensioner households, like everyone else, are facing terrible stress at the moment from food and energy price rises. I heard from the media yesterday that the Government have no intention of continuing the energy price limitation after April, but if I am wrong on that I am happy to be

corrected. The protection that exists now is only a protection relating to the 100% increase in energy prices that we have already had. If you go down any street in any poorer part of this country in the evening, you see darkness; you do not see people with their lights on. You see people going to bed early because they cannot afford to heat their home. This is real. Children in the poorest households are underfed and they are cold because their homes cannot be properly heated. Many elderly people are huddling in libraries during the day just to try and keep warm. Is this really a sensible or fair way of going on? Other Governments, including the French Government, have intervened to try to control the energy market and ensure that energy price rises do not get to the levels they are in this country. Our Government are not prepared to do that.

This benefit uprating will no doubt go through this evening, but all it does is meet the headline of inflation that the consumer prices index set last year. What we need is something much more bold, with much more intervention, that recognises energy price rises, food price rises and the enormous rent rises in the private rented sector. Those are the biggest drivers of poverty in our society.

6.32 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). He refused to give way to me during his speech when he made reference to France being a particularly good example of a country that had reacted well to energy inflation. He forgot to mention that 80% of all French energy is generated by nuclear power and is therefore not affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I look forward to his support for the roll-out of nuclear power stations across the United Kingdom.

Turning to the main body of the debate, I welcome the Government's draft benefits uprating order, but I stand here to represent an argument that I do not think has yet been made in this debate but that has been raised many times by my constituents and those of other Members, certainly on the Conservative side of the House: is it fair, during a period of full employment, that we should increase benefits at the rate of inflation when those in employment are seeing their wages rise by about half as much? This has been raised multiple times, and forcefully, by constituents of mine. They say that it is simply not fair that people who are just about managing, who are working to support their own families and who are paying tax but also being self-reliant, should have wage rises of about 5% when benefits are being raised by double that.

David Linden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jerome Mayhew: I will give way in a moment, because what I am about to say might answer the hon. Gentleman's question.

I think the answer is: yes, it is fair. That is because it is morally right to protect the purchasing power of those very poorest families at an absolute level, even when other people in employment are suffering as well. I think it is right, because personal inflation is at its highest in the poorest families and food inflation is responsible for a higher percentage of their spending. It was mentioned earlier that food inflation might be running at about 19%,

but I think it is about 17.1%. It is morally right for the Government to represent and look after the very poorest in society while at the same time, crucially, always making sure that work pays.

In my constituency we have 2% unemployment. We have a huge demand for staff. I have a very odd situation in a town that I represent called Fakenham. I visited a food bank there that is run by the Samaritans, and it is only a few yards away from a jobcentre where they told me that anyone who had two arms and two legs could get a job. There are lots of jobs available, and I have had meetings with frustrated employers in Fakenham who cannot get enough staff, at every level of the employment sector, including those with no specialist skills other than their natural talent. That jobcentre is 200 yards away from a food bank.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman and I could probably have a long drawn-out debate about why there are so many vacancies in the jobs market and how the UK Government's immigration policy impacts on that. I would ask him to reflect on the misconception that food banks are used solely by people who are out of work. We are increasingly seeing people who are in work and suffering from in-work poverty using them. Has his local food bank told him how many of the people using it are experiencing in-work poverty?

Jerome Mayhew: That is an interesting question, and I have asked exactly the same of our food bank. I have asked it to give me the data on how many of the people are on benefits and whether they are in work or unemployed, because it is a mystery to me. It refused to give me that data, which I think is really surprising, because that is important to us as policymakers. We need to know whether people need to use food banks because benefits on their own are the cause or whether it is about in-work benefits and the low level of pay.

Amy Callaghan: Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), it would be interesting to know how many people working in that jobcentre are having to access that nearby food bank. It would be really useful if the hon. Gentleman could inquire about those figures.

Jerome Mayhew: That certainly has not been raised with me. That is not information that I can supply, because I simply do not know the answer, but I would be amazed if they were using it. The people working in the jobcentre are very optimistic about the local economy and the opportunities that are available in Fakenham and more widely.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) raised in passing the role of immigration in low pay. In my submission, this is one of the areas where the Government have been right to limit immigration, particular low-skilled immigration, because that gives increased bargaining power to the lowest paid. Anecdotally, I have seen hourly rates across my constituency going up in industries that are seeking to attract harder-to-find staff. The hourly rate is going up to £9, £10, £11 and even £12 an hour for unskilled work in order to attract new staff where they are harder to find. That is a key benefit and a good economic case for taking control of immigration in a way that the SNP would not like to see.

David Linden: I am certainly very much in favour of people in Scotland having control of their own immigration system, because our problem has never been immigration; frankly, our problem has been emigration. The hon. Member talks about how successful the UK Government's immigration policy has been. Can he explain why there are fields all across these islands where fruit is rotting because we do not have workers coming here to pick it?

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Member should know that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme allowed, from memory, 40,000 seasonal workers to enter the country last year, and that its application was not fully taken up by the agricultural sector, so that is not the reason why fruit was left rotting in the fields.

Returning to my main point, the Government are right to protect the buying power of the poorest. At the same time, they are also right to ensure that work always pays. The reduction in the taper rate from 63% to 55% is crucial in raising the income of those in work so that they do not need to rely on food banks, as is increasing the work allowance by £500. Perhaps the difference between Government and Opposition Members on this is that we on the Government Benches think that the best solution to poverty is always work—allowing people to get back into work; encouraging them to grow their skills and employability, and the value of their employability, as they progress through their career. I think the Government have got the balance right, supporting the poorest families while ensuring that work continues to pay.

6.39 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who made a thoughtful contribution, although obviously there are differences of opinion on some of the things he said.

I am pleased to contribute to this year's debate. The Minister's initial contribution was pretty factual and to the point, but these debates are always an opportunity for Members to comment generally on social security and uprating. I am pleased that this year's debate is slightly less controversial than last year's. Indeed, I think there has been relief on both sides of the House that the uprating will be in line with inflation. That means we have not seen the triple lock abandoned and benefits will be uprated in line with inflation. However, those conventions have been broken previously, so the challenge is that people are already behind as a result of previous commitments having been reneged on. But I am pleased to welcome this uprating.

In recent years it has become increasingly clear how important the social security safety net is as a public service. As I have said previously, covid has meant that some people who never expected to be supported by the state have had to access that support. That is the reality: we never know when we might need support. We might become injured or ill; the company that we work for might go under, maybe because it cannot get enough staff and cannot open its full hours, and therefore does not have the productivity it needs to keep going; or indeed, we might need to care for loved ones. Social security is, and should be, there to make sure that no one is left behind.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks. I co-chair that APPG, and have been very pleased to have the hon. Gentleman as part of our inquiry team. The final evidence session of our “Cash or Food?” inquiry is tomorrow, and I would be delighted if the Minister could attend our report launch on 22 March—I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), for her written response to our inquiry. We are looking at that issue because, as I said in my intervention on the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), the only time during the covid pandemic when we saw a decrease in food bank use was when universal credit had its £20 uplift. That suggests to me that people were using those additional moneys for the purpose of putting food on the table.

As I said, this debate is quite factual, but it gives us an opportunity to comment on Government policy and practice. I want to touch on something that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned, which is universal credit for the under-25s. It may have been uprated by 10%, but it remains lower than for the over-25s, and I would argue that there is simply no good reason for that. Indeed, about 18 months ago I wrote to the Department for Work and Pensions on this topic in support of a campaign by One Parent Families Scotland. I was told, in terms that, frankly, I found quite patronising, that the reason for the policy is that the DWP believes young people are more likely to live at home—that was assumed even if they themselves are parents—and generally have lower earnings expectations.

That response totally ignores the experience of the majority of under-25s who claim universal credit. Of course, as parents we would hope to support our children as they take their first steps in the world, and to provide a safe haven to which they could return if necessary. However, that does not help the young people who need to leave home because they are looking for work and there are no jobs in their area; the young people who do not come from stable homes and need to support themselves; or the young parents who cannot stay in their family homes with their own children. I hardly want to deign to give a response to the statement about having lower earnings expectations, but I will say that no one who is out of work and receiving universal credit, or who, as has been pointed out, is in work and receiving universal credit, even at the full amount, is sitting idly by, wondering what to do with that excess income.

As many Members have said today, we are in a cost of living crisis. Universal credit is a safety net, and this Government policy assumes that young people deserve less safety than older people. That is the wrong message. Given the ministerial churn within the DWP and, indeed, elsewhere, I hope that we can review that misguided position. At the very least, I ask the Minister to review one aspect in his closing remarks: reinstating the higher rate for young parents, as it was under legacy benefits. Young parents are most likely to be struggling, and surely they and their children deserve the same support as a family where the parents are just a year or two older.

I will highlight a few other issues, starting with PIP. All of us in this place will have a caseworker who spends a lot of time providing support for PIP appeals, the vast majority of which are successful. It is a long, stressful application process, and we have assessors who simply do not understand the process or what applicants are experiencing, resulting in widespread mistakes that we as MPs end up dealing with. It costs the taxpayer more money to reverse those decisions than to get them right in the first place. The stress makes people who are already struggling even more ill, and as we know, very sadly, some people give up as a result. The system does not work. This issue is so important when the Government are currently looking at measures to deal with the economically inactive—I look forward to hearing their proposals. They want to get people back into work. Now is the time to bring those specialist assessors and the assessment process for PIP back in-house, and to stop lining the pockets of private providers with taxpayer money when they simply do not get the job right.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady raises a very important point about getting the job right. Thankfully, the vast majority of the millions of claims are right first time round, and for those where it sadly goes wrong, on the vast majority of occasions, that is because of missing additional supportive evidence. As such, will the hon. Lady join me in welcoming the Government’s move to a system where, at the mandatory reconsideration stage, rather than waiting for claimants, the assessors have now started proactively contacting them to identify the missing evidence and help them find it? That has seen the number of those able to be sorted quickly more than double.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am happy to support any improvements to the process, but what the hon. Member has done is to point out just how complex these processes are and how difficult they can be for people to navigate. It is only when there is a proactive approach that we start to get things right.

John McDonnell: Part of the problem is the run-down in recent years of advice centres and other agencies that can assist people to get the paperwork right, and to ensure representation at the appropriate stage.

Wendy Chamberlain: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Scotland is not immune from that: with more and more ringfenced spending for Scottish Government priorities, local authorities have less and less discretionary spend to put into areas such as advice and support.

I want to touch on carer’s allowance. It will not surprise Members that I want to talk about carers; I am pleased to say that my private Member’s Bill, the Carer’s Leave Bill, passed its remaining stages in the Commons on Friday and is off to the other place. According to the Government, carer’s allowance aims to help carers keep a link with the workplace, but one challenge I had with my Bill was finding constituents who would benefit from carer’s leave, because so many of them had been forced to leave the workplace due to their caring responsibilities. Simply put, carer’s allowance does not work. Carers need to be allowed to work more before they lose that allowance—that would not cost the Government more, but it would get more people back into work. I would be very interested to hear the Minister’s response to the

hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller): he is no longer in his place, but he raised that very point. At Prime Minister's questions in December, I asked the Prime Minister how the Government can believe that £132 per week in earnings is sufficient to live on such that people lose their carer's allowance, especially when the caring never stops.

The state pension was the subject of a general debate last week. I do not necessarily want to reiterate the points I made on that occasion, but we do know that pensioners face real challenges. In the past year, I have probably done about three letters—articles—to my local paper to encourage people to take up pension credit. As other Members have mentioned, I wish the Government would pledge to follow the ombudsman's recommendations on compensation for WASPI women, which, as we move into stage 3, would provide some degree of comfort to those campaigners. I refer Members to my early-day motion 814 on that.

When we talk about the pension increases, we need also to talk about errors that mean people do not necessarily get what they are entitled to. The LEAP—legal entitlements and administrative practices—exercise is looking at historical underpayments, and it seems to be forever increasing its remit and timescales. Perhaps one day it will finally look at underpayments to divorced women. Dividing pensions on divorce is incredibly complicated, and the Government have been deliberately blinded by not including that group. I know that the former Pensions Minister in the coalition, Steve Webb, has spoken out about this issue before. I urge the Government to listen to him, if not to me.

I raised this issue at business questions on Thursday: will the Government please tell the truth to the House about what is happening on universal credit national insurance credits? That is another issue where pensioners could go without because of internal DWP failures. Without honesty and openness, we cannot know the extent of the problem or how it will be fixed.

Every Member here knows—simply because of the number of constituents our caseworkers help every day—that there are fundamental problems with how the DWP functions. Sometimes it seems as though it has become a routine part of the process for DWP staff to send people to their MP, and that is simply not good enough. I welcome the uprating orders, but I hope that the Minister will give us some answers on everything else.

6.51 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I want to raise three issues briefly; some of this has been covered already but I want to reiterate some of it and go into more detail. The first is the benefit cap. The second is the triple lock. The third is the carer's allowance, where I follow on from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain).

This debate is primarily about the increase, but in the past these debates have been used to try to shape the debate on social security for the future. Much of what I say, therefore, may be aimed at the Government, but now that the Select Committee has announced its inquiry, part of it is aimed at the agenda for that inquiry.

Those of us who were in the House when the benefit cap was introduced will know that it was born in an era when the debate on poverty had descended into definitions

of “skivers” and “strivers”; it was almost a reversion to the language of the Poor Law. We knew what impact it would have and we knew the numbers affected would increase rapidly. Just over 70,000 were being impacted at the start but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) said, this rose to 120,000 and above. The cap hit some areas in particular, including London constituencies. I am a London MP and I know that 44% of those affected are in London. It hit the black, Asian and minority ethnic community in particular; it has hit eight out of 20 from the BAME community, yet they represent three out of 20 in the population overall, so this was discriminatory.

Jeremy Corbyn: My right hon. Friend is making a strong point. Does he agree that the cap has also been a major driver in forcing working-class communities out of inner-city areas, where there are now huge levels of private landlord speculations going on?

John McDonnell: I hope that Conservative Members and others who may not have had the experience of this recognise how it has affected our communities. I do not use the word lightly, but some of us have experienced what are almost forms of social “apartheid” within our communities, where certain sections of housing are no longer available to working-class people. In some instances, fenced communities have developed as a result. I highlight reports of what happened in my constituency as regards the Ballymore housing development.

I come back to the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham made, which is that the cap has had an impact on a large number of children, with the last calculation being 308,000; 70% of the people affected are single parents. As he said, this pushes people into deep poverty. I was looking at the figures and they show that the average capped household with two children is now £150 a week below the Government's own poverty line. Scrapping the cap would increase benefits to them by an average of £65 a week; the cost would be £500 million, which is 0.2% of the total spending on social security. A marginal increase in the efficiency of tackling tax avoidance, an increase in national insurance beyond getting rid of some of the limits at the higher levels—that would easily pay for this marginal improvement but would have a dramatic effect on the living standards of so many people.

I campaigned against the breaking of the link between pensions and earnings when Mrs Thatcher introduced it, so I wholeheartedly welcomed the triple lock when it was introduced by a Conservative Government and I made that point in this House. I regretted bitterly, however, that the Government broke their pledge last year, because once the link was broken, a debate was opened up among some Members about the triple lock being no longer necessary. I am hoping that the statement about social security and pensions today reaffirms the message across the House that the triple lock is here to stay.

When we look at the figures, we see that one in five pensioners is in poverty; 2.1 million older people are in poverty; they get £40 a week less than the Government's own poverty threshold; 1.3 million older people are now categorised as suffering forms of malnutrition; and we have always had a high level of excess deaths in winter among older people, with on average between 25,000 and 30,000 dying unnecessarily. I looked at the figures showing what has happened since the break with earnings.

[John McDonnell]

The proportion of those people living in severe poverty is five times higher than it was in 1986—we have had the largest increase in western European countries. So I make an appeal to Members from across the House. The triple lock was a major reform, and I thought we had built consensus on it. It should not be in any way undermined in the future.

I think the triple lock should apply to all benefits, and I hope the Select Committee will have that debate. I asked the House of Commons Library to give me the figures on what would have happened to carer's allowance if the link had been kept since the 1980s. It is now at £76.75 but it would have been £146.42. Invalidity benefit is now £130.20, but it would have been £233.55. If we look at unemployment, we see that jobseeker's allowance is now £84.80 but it would have been £185.49. There is a moral argument for maintaining the protection of benefits over time and trying to build consensus across the House on that, in the same way in which it was eventually built on the triple lock for pensions.

Finally, let me touch on carer's allowance. I have been chairing meetings of unpaid carers or informal carers, as they describe themselves, over the past 18 months, and I just want to get the stats on this out there. I pay tribute to what the hon. Member for North East Fife has done with her legislation and the campaign she has waged. Some 8% to 10% of the adult population are informal carers; two thirds of carers are in employment—that is the whole point here; six in 10 of those who are caring for 35 hours a week or more are workless, which is three times the rate of those caring for less than 20 hours a week; and about 25% of informal carers are living in poverty, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's latest figures. Another figure, which I believe she has quoted in the past, is that it is estimated that unpaid carers across the UK provide £135 billion-worth of caring in our society, and that largely falls upon the shoulders of women. It is now time to recognise the significance of the role that these carers play and the fact of the poverty they live in.

As for Northern Ireland, the Carer Poverty Commission was established last month and it is chaired by Helen Barnard of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Research from Carers Northern Ireland showed that nearly one in three unpaid carers in Northern Ireland were struggling to make ends meet, with one in four cutting back on essentials such as food or heating just to get by. I believe the situation is exactly the same across the UK for carers.

Let me make this suggestion: the unpaid carers I have met say that, like everybody else who works, they should be paid a living wage. They should at least get the minimum wage so that they can get by. At the very least, let us take the first step in that direction, which would be to recognise that maternity allowance is paid so that people can care for a child. Perhaps carer's allowance should at least go up to the level of maternity allowance. If we can increase carer's allowance in that way, it will enable at least some of those informal carers to be lifted out of poverty. I put that suggestion on the table for the Government to debate and for the Select Committee to look at as well.

As the WASPI women have been mentioned, I cannot help but do so too. This is an injustice that needs to be redressed, and it needs to be redressed soon, because

many of the women who were affected are now late in life. We have already lost some of them, and many may not live long enough to see the recompense that they deserve. However, I fear that those who are placing their hope in the ombudsman's assessment will be sorely disappointed by the levels that are recommended. If that is the case, I commit to returning to the matter on the Floor of this House to make sure that the campaign continues and succeeds.

7.1 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). When he was talking about the invalid care allowance, which was the predecessor to the carer's allowance, I recalled meeting people at that time—I was dealing with these matters professionally then—who were working 60, 70, 80, or 100 hours a week and were in absolutely no position to take on paid work to supplement the meagre level of their allowance.

On behalf of my own party, I welcome the decision to uprate most benefits in line with inflation. However, given the desperate situation facing millions of people on benefits, this is simply not enough. Reference has already been made a number of times to reports by the Child Poverty Action Group that costs for low-income families have risen by 21% in the past two years, which is more than the 14% rise in benefits. This gets to the heart of what I wish to say in my contribution, which is about the inadequacy of benefits.

Since 2010, austerity has caused huge increases in child poverty. The CPAG estimates that, pre-covid, 700,000 more children were in poverty than at the start of the 2010s. Wales currently has the highest level of child poverty, at a shocking 34% of all children. There needs to be urgent investment into the system, far above what is being proposed at present.

Looking at what life is really like for those claiming universal credit, it is plain that current benefit levels, even those matching inflation, will not be enough. A snapshot of poverty in Wales this winter produced by the independent and impartial Bevan Foundation revealed some shocking findings—I have a report here that I can recommend to anyone who is interested in the situation in Wales. In Wales, people on universal credit are five times more likely than the general population to report that, sometimes, often or always, they struggle to afford the basics. Furthermore, 52% of disabled people whose condition limits them severely have gone without heating in their home over the past three months.

It is no wonder that Public Health Wales recently said that the current cost of living crisis is not a short-term economic squeeze. It is having, and will continue to have, wide-ranging and long-term impacts on the health and well-being of the people of Wales. Those impacts have the potential at least to be on the same scale as those of the covid-19 pandemic, which has already exacerbated existing inequalities in Wales. The Government must meet this challenge, go beyond treading water and implement at least a substantial uplift to universal credit and legacy benefits.

Universal credit may not meet a claimant's needs in full due to the barriers and restrictions on entitlement built up over the years. This has been referred to already by a number of Members. The Government should scrap these restrictions, starting with the pernicious two-child

limit, which has also been mentioned today. The benefit cap is being uprated, but it should not exist in the first place. There is, quite obviously, a differential effect on communities that place a high value on having more children, perhaps because of their particular religious or cultural beliefs. Those people are being scapegoated, and they are the poorest in society.

As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington mentioned, removing the benefit cap would cost 0.2% of all social security spending. That is a flea bite, given the beneficial effect that it would have. It would be a price well worth paying to remove this vicious and unfair penalty on ordinary families. Sometimes I reflect on my own family's experience. I am one of six, brought up after the war when the benefits of the post-war settlement meant that we had so many advantages when it came to health, universal benefits, family allowance and education. Looking at the situation now, the deterioration since the post-war settlement is clear.

Deductions in benefits are also a huge problem facing claimants. It has been estimated that more than four in 10 households receiving universal credit had money automatically taken off their benefit entitlement. The average amount deducted was £61 a month, or £14 a week. As with many social and economic matters, there are no statistics published for Wales, but estimates suggest that 88,000 households in Wales do not receive their full universal credit entitlement because of automatic deductions.

Turning to the local housing allowance, which has already been mentioned, the autumn statement is clearly a driving factor in the growing gap between rents and housing benefit. In my own county of Gwynedd, 35% of households receiving housing benefit face a shortfall in rent. Clearly, although there is an urban element to this, as has been mentioned already, there is a particularly acute and real problem in rural areas of Wales. Estimates suggest that the shortfall is higher than in Wales's cities, where local housing allowance better reflects local rent levels and there is also a wider range of housing stock to meet people's bedroom requirements. I join the calls on the UK Government to unfreeze local housing allowance and uprate it annually, so that it keeps pace with rising rents.

There is far more that the Government could be doing to help those on social security. For example, will they commit to looking at the adequacy of benefits? The all-party group on poverty is currently running an inquiry into the adequacy of benefit levels, so will the Government engage with the findings at all? The Resolution Foundation has highlighted the lag in the uprating mechanism and has suggested ways in which it could be more responsive, such as multiple upratings per year or bringing forward the uprating month. Those are just two of the possibilities. There is also an inconsistency as to why certain benefits are enshrined in law to rise with prices and others are not. What is the Government's rationale behind that?

Finally, I ask the Government to bring forward the cost of living payments. Although they are, at best, a sticking plaster approach, as highlighted by the Work and Pensions Committee, they should none the less be brought forward so that poor claimants, particularly disabled people, are prevented from falling into debt and destitution, as many cannot wait until spring for more support.

7.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and add a Northern Ireland perspective, as I always try to do both here and in Westminster Hall. Right hon. and hon. Members have set out well the state of the country's finances for many people. I wish to put on record, and I think it is right that I do so, my thanks to the Government, and the Minister in particular, for coming forward with proposals that help.

I want to make four points in my contribution. A Presbyterian sermon is three points, and I will make four; I am not sure whether that makes my speech a sermon, but it is Presbyterian plus one.

John McDonnell: I think that makes you a Catholic, Jim!

Jim Shannon: You be careful, boy.

I am very pleased to add my contribution to the debate. Inflation and the cost of living are really hurting people in Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) set the scene when he referred to child poverty and adult poverty in Northern Ireland, and he was right. I have a staff member who deals with nothing else but benefits, five days a week, and other staff members fill in. That gives an idea of the poverty and disability issues in Northern Ireland and why it is important for me to sow into this debate.

While I thank the Government, and the Minister in particular, for what they have put forward, and it is good to have that, I must first make the point from a Northern Ireland perspective that—as has probably become accepted in this House after so many debates—the Northern Ireland protocol has increased our outgoings substantially more than those anywhere on the mainland UK. The haulage costs and the prices of covering payroll have lessened the numbers of suppliers who will ship to Northern Ireland. That being the case, it becomes much harder to source competitively priced items. While this debate is about how we can help people on social security and improve their standard of living, we must recognise that costs in Northern Ireland are higher than anywhere else.

I read an interesting report back in October in the *Belfast Telegraph* that stated:

“Average weekly grocery spend is the third highest in the UK for shoppers in Belfast and Derry, according to new research by financial hub Admirals Group.

Shoppers in Northern Ireland's two biggest cities are reportedly paying £77.70 on average for their weekly grocery shop in 2022, forecast to rise to £179.06 by 2030”—

well over twice the price. The report added:

“Only shoppers in London and Southampton are said to be paying more for their weekly shopping”.

That illustrates clearly that we in Northern Ireland are paying more. When it comes to social security and the benefit cap, we must register our concern that it is more costly to live in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The lowest prices were said to be in Leeds and Sheffield—so at least they will have some benefit—and the same report stated:

“In 2021 the average British household spent £69.20 on groceries each week...If inflation were to remain constant at 11%, by 2030, the average grocery shop for a UK household could cost £177.02 per week, £771.28 per month and £9,204.84 per year.”

[Jim Shannon]

Those on benefits in Northern Ireland face a real anomaly. It is dearer to live in Northern Ireland; it is dearer to warm our homes and it is dearer to buy our groceries. That means that someone on benefits in Northern Ireland cannot expect their money to go as far as someone in one of the other constituencies in the UK represented in this House today.

While it is right and proper that benefits are uplifted to enable people to buy the bare necessities, the protocol means that those are not even covered by this uplift. The girls in my office referred almost double the number of people to the food bank coming up to Christmas this year, an indication that for many people any additional pressure on finances, such as to buy a small gift or a special meal, just cannot be managed.

The first Trussell Trust food bank that ever came to Northern Ireland came to Newtownards in my Strangford constituency. It has found a place and it is doing excellent work, and I support it very much, as indeed does the community. I am one of the referral points, so when it comes to understanding why people are going to food banks I can categorically state that it is not just those on the minimum wage, but those in the middle class, who I refer to as the working poor. The extra referrals, and we have had somewhere in the region of 30% or 35% extra just this last Christmas, tell me not only that the work of the food bank is important, but that there are different people going there. Again, that comes down to the cost of living, especially for those on benefits in Northern Ireland.

I am thankful for the food bank and to the social supermarkets, which are also doing fantastic work in seeking to help people make their money stretch further by teaching budgeting and different ways of purchasing. However, money is not elastic—it can only stretch so far. It is clear that the Government must bridge the gap, and by the same token we must lower the threshold to allow more people to access the help they are entitled to.

Having posed my first question to the Minister on behalf of the citizens of Northern Ireland about how they are finding it harder to beat the inflation that makes foodstuffs and heating more expensive there, I have a second question for him. For example, someone who is £5 above the threshold for universal credit will have missed out on the cost of living payment and will need the same help to pay the same amount for groceries as someone who is just below that threshold. We often find people who fall between two stools, and clearly those people do, so I want to make the point, as others in have in this debate, that they need help. I know the Minister always tries to respond, so I look forward to his response.

My third point is that I will hopefully bring a ten-minute rule Bill to the Floor of this House at some stage in the near future to make meaningful change to the child benefit threshold. Those disingenuous thresholds, which bear no relation or relevance to the cost of living and life, must be reviewed, and the same consideration must be given to the benefits threshold. We had a debate in Westminster Hall last Thursday, led by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), in which he raised a clear issue: two people in one house can earn £49,000 each, or collectively £98,000, and their child benefit will not change. However, one person in another house who earns £52,000 and whose partner earns

£10,000, so that they earn £62,000 collectively, will see their child benefit change. There is clearly an anomaly in the threshold, and there needs to be a change of direction and some clarity to ensure that those who find themselves disadvantaged in that way are taken care of.

I make a special request, as others have done. Last week, we had a Westminster Hall debate on cystic fibrosis and living costs. Those with disabilities, such as those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or those who need oxygen 24/7, have higher costs. I quote some figures from that debate:

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2023; Vol. 727, c. 169WH.]

While this 10% increase is welcome, I ask the Minister very respectfully what can be done for those people with disabilities who are feeling the pain more than most.

In my opinion, and I believe others agree, a society is always marked by how it looks after those who are less well off. Our job in this House is to ensure that those who are finding these times particularly difficult—there are many of them across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—are looked after. That is my fourth request of the Minister.

While I welcome the increase, we are missing out those middle-of-the-road working people who are struggling and scraping by, week to week. I ask the Government to make their next priority the squeezed middle class, and those who need help and just cannot get to the level they would expect.

7.18 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate on uprating benefits. Today, Members have the chance to vote on Government spending on supporting the vulnerable, and this debate takes place at a time when families and pensioners across the country face an unprecedented cost of living crisis. We have an important opportunity to debate the Government's response. However, I am afraid that, based on the Government's actions and what we have heard today, that response has let down both families and pensioners. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, this year's uprating will at best maintain the severely reduced real-terms value of benefits, which has been eroded over the last decade.

The inadequate safety net provided by the Government has, as expected, contributed to an increased number of children living in poverty, to a deepening poverty, and to an increasing need for food banks. It has also led to pensioners having to wait months for the state pension to be increased in line with inflation, and to those approaching retirement being placed under unnecessary stress and uncertainty as the Government have floated the idea of bringing forward the increase in the state pension age to 68. That has been suggested in the media but without proper consultation, breaking the long-standing convention that pension policy is developed by consensus.

The Government's response to the cost of living crisis has been deeply disappointing. While I have the opportunity, I will ask the Minister a question about a particular

aspect of policy. When one member of a couple is on universal credit and the other receives the state pension, the pensioner is not allowed to claim pension credit, which may have a significant impact on the couple's income. Will the Minister explain that to me, and write to me about it? Will he also consider changing that harsh and unnecessary policy?

It was clear in contributions made by Members from across the House that there was a great deal of feeling about and interest in this matter. We have discussed the cost of living crisis, child and pensioner poverty, the prices of food and fuel rising faster than the uprating of benefits, and pensioners needing more support. Many speakers criticised the Government for disapplying the triple lock, and called on them to speed up the take-up of pension credit.

Let me be clear: we will, of course, support the motion, but the Government deserve no praise for their actions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North said. I urge the Minister to rethink the Government's approach both to the annual uprating and more generally. The Government have let down some of the most vulnerable people in the country, at a time of great financial pressure. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that when he responds.

7.21 pm

Guy Opperman: Notwithstanding Putin's invasion and the war in Ukraine, the impact of the covid pandemic and the great efforts made by the Government to support this country through it, and any fiscal difficulties caused by those efforts, this Government are supporting the most vulnerable and uprating benefits by in excess of 10%. That is on top of the cost of living support to the tune of £37 billion provided last May, and what will be provided in this coming year. I am proud to make the case for universal credit, unlike the Labour party. We support people who are out of work, and as they progress in work, through reforms brought forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), which I believe were the right way forward.

On pensioners, it is rich of the Labour party to criticise. I continue to defend Labour's actions during its 13 years in government in respect of the women's state pension, but I was reminded of the 75p increase, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) highlighted in his outstanding speech. Bear in mind that in 2009-10, the state pension was worth less than £100, and that as of April this year, it will be worth in excess of £200. That is a massive increase under the coalition and Conservative Governments.

On pension credit, I put on record my thanks for the work of my the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), and my thanks to Mr Len Goodman, who is not often cited in this House as a supporter of all matters to do with this Government, for his outstanding work in making the case for pension credit, which has, of course, seen a 177% increase in the take-up of claims—that is a fantastic success—[*Interruption.*] There are several sevens in there, as I am being reminded from behind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) made an outstanding speech—it was a pleasure to listen to. I will write to him on a couple of issues. He is right to continue making

the case for pension credit. The message is of course, "Don't be shy: please apply", and the freephone number is 0800 99 1234. We want people to continue applying.

It is right to make the case for the cost of living support—there is £37 billion of support in this financial year—including support for energy bills for all households and cost of living payments. We are now seeking to ensure support going forward. That will include up to £900 in cost of living payments, £300 in cost of living payments for pensioner households, an extra winter fuel payment on around 25 November of this year, and the £150 disability cost of living payment. We can also take funding and support from the household support fund, and there is also the flexible support fund and many other additional ways in which support can be provided.

We continue to provide support to all households with a domestic electricity connection through the energy price guarantee, which caps the price paid for each unit of energy. From April, the typical household will pay on average £3,000 a year, saving the average UK household £500 in 2023-24. From April 2023, the national living wage will increase by 9.7% to £10.42 an hour for workers aged 23 and over. Again, that is the largest ever cash increase for the living wage.

The Government believe that the best route out of poverty is through work. We are committed to a sustainable long-term approach to tackling child poverty and supporting people on lower incomes to progress in work. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon rightly made the case for the disability confident campaign, which has resulted in more than 1 million more people being in work in this country over the last few years, and he rightly made the case for additional medical and other support by private sector organisations for their staff.

I will briefly touch on the contributions from the Opposition parties. The Labour party had no answer for my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on whether it still supports universal credit. It is quite clear, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys highlighted, that Labour now opposes any conditionality whatsoever in benefits. That is a startling admission. I believe that Labour Members will live to strongly regret that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) made a number of points. I would merely say that all fiscal decisions are made by the Chancellor—to whom I obviously bow on all matters—and I cannot change his policies in any way at the Dispatch Box. If my hon. Friend can wait, he will know more on 15 March.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) accused this Government of policy failures. Given the failings of the Scottish First Minister, and her recent about-turns, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is any position to lecture us on any policy failings.

David Linden *rose*—

Guy Opperman: No. We listened with great humility to the hon. Gentleman's 24-minute diatribe about this country. He had no answer to the argument from my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) about funding; his inability to make any case or policy on pensions is well known; and his inability to answer any of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon also spoke volumes.

[Guy Opperman]

The reality of the situation is that the Government are doing a huge amount for the vulnerable, and are increasing support through the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023, the energy price guarantee and the draft Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. I commend the instruments to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

DRAFT BENEFIT CAP (ANNUAL LIMIT) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2023

Resolved,

That the draft Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

DRAFT GUARANTEED MINIMUM PENSIONS INCREASE ORDER 2023

Resolved,

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

Charter for Budget Responsibility

[*Relevant documents: Correspondence between the Treasury Committee and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, relating to Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts, dated 20 September 2022 and 22 September 2022; Written evidence to the Treasury Committee, on Autumn 2022 Fiscal Events, reported to the House on 29 September 2022, HC 740; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 12 October 2022 and 22 November 2022, on Autumn 2022 Fiscal Events, HC 740; and the Eleventh Report of the Treasury Committee, Fuel Duty: Fiscal forecast fiction, HC 783.*]

7.28 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move,

That the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2022 update, which was laid before this House on 26 January, be approved.

Before I start my remarks, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Robert Key, the former Member for Salisbury, who sadly died on Friday. Robert was a Member of Parliament for 27 years, a distinguished parliamentarian and former Minister, and a dedicated Anglican. I put on record my affection for him; my thoughts and prayers are with his wife Sue and the rest of his family.

The charter for budget responsibility is, at its heart, about how we chart a course for growth. It is a blueprint for managing the public purse responsibly. It is a path to cement stability in our economy and invest in public services. It is, in the current economic climate, about acknowledging that public finances remain vulnerable and knowing the risks that arise from debt being close to historic highs. This Government take these risks extremely seriously and believe that stable public finances are a key ingredient in the success of our economy, both today and in the future, in the south and the north, for the elderly and our youngest. This charter sets out this Government's approach to managing the nation's money so that everyone can see we are being prudent with the nation's finances.

We debate this charter today in the face of difficult economic times. Like many countries, the UK faces the twin challenges of a recession and high inflation, as global energy prices have been exacerbated by Putin's war in Ukraine. We have turned the corner in the fight against inflation that has plagued nations across Europe. Inflation has now started to fall, with inflation in the UK lower than many EU countries. A warmer winter has helped keep a lid on energy prices that jolted upwards following Putin's illegal war in Ukraine. There is, however, a challenging road ahead. The International Monetary Fund says that 90% of advanced economies are predicted to see a decline in growth this year, and that is why we are taking action to support the economy through these extremely challenging times.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister not think there is some difficulty in trying to steer the economy on the basis of a five-year forward debt forecast when the official forecasters have been more than £100 billion out in two of the last three years, and £75 billion out this year with a one-year forecast?

John Glen: I will address the provisions of the charter and my right hon. Friend's point directly in a few moments. As the Chancellor set out last week, we have a credible plan to generate economic growth by getting

people back into employment, reinvigorating a culture of enterprise and continuing to drive up standards in education, and ensuring that that happens everywhere. The Chancellor's plans to generate growth need to be underpinned by sustainable public finances, but the global economic shocks we have faced mean that borrowing remains high. We are expected to borrow £177 billion this year—double pre-pandemic levels. That is contributing to ever larger public debt.

Along with high debt in a time of rising inflation and interest rates comes the £120.4 billion we are projected to spend this year on debt interest alone. Let me remind the House why that is. For almost two years, in the face of a historic pandemic, we took unprecedented, bold, decisive action to support people, jobs and the economy. We rolled out vaccines at a world-leading pace, we paid 80% of people's wages, and we gave grants to businesses to help cover their bills. The costs of inaction in the face of covid-19 do not bear thinking about. I am proud to represent a Government who took the big decisions to keep the public and the economy healthy.

As inflation rose to figures we have not seen in more than 40 years, led primarily by increasing energy prices, we again took action to safeguard the nation by contributing to people's bills. Nobody in this Government would argue that that is not money well spent, but we are also cognisant of the facts. At nearly 100% of GDP, public debt is at its highest level since the early 1960s. It would not be sustainable to continue to borrow at current levels indefinitely. If debt interest spending were a Department, its departmental budget would be second only to the Department of Health and Social Care. Not only does that direct our resources away from vital public services, but for those of us who have paid attention to the economy, it is clearly unsustainable in the long run. It is unsustainable because increasing debt leaves us more vulnerable to changing interest rates and inflation. For every percentage point increase in interest rates, the annual spending on debt will increase by £18.2 billion. That is money we could be using to invest in schools or hospitals and in the transition to net zero.

Aside from investing in the services that we need and that so many rely upon, there is another important moral point to debt. Letting our debt increase is simply racking up debt on the nation's credit card and handing the bill to our children and grandchildren. We are not alone in our ambition to reduce debt as a share of GDP over the medium term—Germany, Canada and Australia have made similar commitments. It is not just numbers on a spreadsheet; it will have a material impact on the lives and living standards of those who have not yet been born.

Instead, we choose a responsible, fair approach. We are demonstrating fiscal discipline, which will support the Bank of England in bringing inflation down. That is carefully balanced against the need to support the most vulnerable and to protect vital public services. At the autumn statement we announced a series of difficult decisions worth around £55 billion to get debt down, while ensuring that the greatest burden falls on those with the broadest shoulders.

All Members will hope that, having faced the pandemic, war in Europe and a bout of rising prices, we will have seen the worst of this economic storm. The truth, however, is that we do not know exactly what lies ahead, and we need to create the room to respond comprehensively

in the future, should another shock occur. Last year my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) came to this place to approve rules to guide us on a path to strengthen the public finances after the worst of the pandemic had passed. By the third year of the forecast, in 2025-26, those rules require underlying debt—that is, public sector net debt excluding the impact of the Bank of England—as a percentage of GDP to be falling and everyday spending to be paid for through taxation by the same year.

Since then the context has changed yet again. To continue protecting the most vulnerable and investing in public services, the Chancellor updated the fiscal rules at the autumn statement, and we are updating the charter for budget responsibility. It will give everyone the confidence and certainty that we are going to repair our public finances. It will provide the foundation for long-term growth. In following them, we will be able to get debt down while protecting the public services upon which we all rely. The rules require that we reduce the deficit so that debt falls as a share of the economy in five years' time. Expenditure on welfare will continue to be contained within a predetermined cap and margin set by the Treasury unchanged from the level set in 2021. I am pleased to say that the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed in November that we are on track to meet all our rules, with debt falling and the deficit below 3% GDP in the target year of 2027-28.

Aside from the fiscal rules, the charter remains unchanged. We continue to be at the forefront of financial management through our monitoring and management of the broader public sector balance sheet. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility provides transparency and credibility via its economic and fiscal forecasts. Many colleagues have remarked on the important principle that our fiscal plans are transparent, fully costed and accompanied by an independent assessment of the economic and fiscal implications. The Government agree with this principle. There may of course be extraordinary circumstances where that cannot be the case, as we saw during the pandemic, and it was right not to delay announcing critical help for households and businesses, but in normal times major fiscal announcements should be made with one of the OBR's two forecasts. As is usual, the spring Budget on 15 March will be accompanied by a full OBR forecast.

This updated charter puts stability first. It sets a credible plan to deliver on the Prime Minister's key promises to get debt falling and to halve inflation, and it fosters the conditions for growth. It continues our historic support for households, as it allows us to increase the national living and minimum wage and pensions. It maintains gross investment at record levels in innovation, infrastructure and education. We have protected the most vulnerable and vital public services, and we are protecting the economy. After making the difficult decisions at the autumn statement, today we have a choice: we can sit idly by and let our economy slip into disrepair, or we can secure the foundations of our future by protecting the foundations of our economy. For those reasons, I commend this motion to the House.

7.38 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): May I begin by echoing the Chief Secretary's condolences to the family of Robert Key, his predecessor as MP for Salisbury?

[Mr Pat McFadden]

It does feel like this is the time of the year when we have the annual George Osborne tribute debate. This exercise began in his period as Chancellor, but little did we know—and, I suspect, little did he know—that when he started this exercise more than a decade ago, he would end up being denounced as part of the left-wing economic establishment. The purpose of the exercise has always been more political than economic. It was to show that no matter how much the Government had set everything on fire, they could turn up here and portray themselves as paragons of fiscal rectitude—a little bit like angelic choirboys smelling strongly of petrol. The trouble for Ministers is that since this exercise was first conceived over a decade ago, there is now a long economic record for everyone to see and, perhaps even more seriously, a bitter economic reality and present that people are living through.

The UK is the only G7 country not to recover its pre-covid economic position, under the stewardship of the Conservative party. Controlling debt was supposed to be a big part of this exercise. Debt used to be numbered in the billions. It now stands at £2.4 trillion. So successful has this exercise in controlling debt been that we need a whole new word to describe it; it is now counted in trillions. Of course covid added to this, as it did in all countries, but lest Government Members claim this is all about covid, let us remember that most of the increase was built up before the pandemic.

There really is a gulf—one the size of the Grand Canyon—between the statements of fiscal probity and sound financial management, and the reality of the economic performance. When we look to the future, we see that this Government have earned the very dubious distinction of the UK being downgraded by the International Monetary Fund in its growth forecast, while the rest of the world has been upgraded. It is one thing to move in line with others, but to move in the opposite, downward direction is an achievement we should not want.

John Redwood: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: I am happy to—I thought mention of the IMF might bring the right hon. Gentleman to his feet.

John Redwood: I would like to know the Labour position. The European Central Bank is not selling debt at a loss into the market because it does not want the losses. The Americans are selling debt into the market at big losses, but they do not send the bill to the taxpayer. Only the Bank of England insists on both making huge losses and sending the bill to the taxpayer for immediate payment. Who is right?

Mr McFadden: I suspect that the Bank of England will not be the only institution attacked by the right hon. Gentleman tonight, but I remind him that part of the purpose of the charter is to restore our faith in the economic institutions, after what happened less than six months ago.

The IMF has forecast that the UK will have the lowest growth among developed countries for the next two years: bottom of the league on the record and

bottom of the league on the forecast. And yet still the Government come along tonight and table a debate supposedly designed to enhance their economic credentials.

Well, what will the effect on those credentials be of the re-emergence of the former Prime Minister at the weekend? I have to give her 10 out of 10 for timing. What better time to write an article saying that her mini-Budget was right all along than the day before the Chief Secretary has to come here and stand up for the Government's fiscal stability record? What better moment for her to say to members of pension schemes that had to be put on life support as a result of her mini-Budget that it was not her fault? No contrition for trying to borrow from my constituents in Wolverhampton South East in order to pay for a tax cut for people earning over £150,000 a year; not a word of apology to the millions of mortgage holders left paying a Tory mortgage penalty because of the reckless irresponsibility of the Conservative party. Just when the Government were trying to bury the memory of that mini-Budget under 10 feet of concrete, up she pops—like one of those hands coming out of the swamp at the end of the film—to tell us it was all someone else's fault.

For me, the best bit in the article was when, in a long list of culprits, other than the Government that actually introduced the mini-Budget, the former Prime Minister blamed the Treasury civil servants for not warning her about the impact on pension schemes. I had to ask myself, were these the same Treasury civil servants that she had spent the whole summer scolding and disparaging? Were they the same Treasury civil servants whose boss was shown the door on the first day of her premiership? In what world are we expected to believe that the former Prime Minister, her Chancellor and the Government would have listened to a word those civil servants said, when all along she defined them as being part of the problem and not part of the solution?

The real problem for the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Treasury is that this is not going away. The last Prime Minister is not a lone voice, and the more that Conservative Members realise the Government have nothing left in their tank and are resigned to managing decline, the louder the drumbeat will become; and it will be cheered on by the same newspapers that gave such a warm welcome to that mini-Budget in the first place. The Prime Minister, demonstrating the sureness of touch with which we have come to associate him by now, has labelled those on the Government Benches calling for tax cuts “idiots”. That is his phrase, not mine—about those on his own side. And yet today, fearful of them, the Prime Minister now says he will listen. Which is it? Are they idiots or is he listening? This weekend's intervention, and those who cheer its argument, will have the Prime Minister and the Chancellor looking over their right shoulders every day between now and the election, when they should be focused on the needs of the country.

This debate is supposed to be about all of us swearing fealty to fiscal rules, but there is another problem: since this Government came to office, they have broken their fiscal rules 11 times. They have had even more sets of fiscal rules than they have had Chancellors and Prime Ministers over the past year. If you don't like one set, don't worry—there will be another one along in a while! The Chief Secretary himself outlined how these rules were different from the ones we debated this time last

year in the George Osborne tribute debate of 2022, and each time we are expected to treat the new rules as though they were the ten commandments.

The second part of this is about respecting the role of the Office for Budget Responsibility. The document before us is very clear about that. It talks in great detail about the importance of that role. Indeed, when it was first launched, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury of the time set out the benefits of the OBR, making clear the value of its

“strong, credible, independently conducted official forecasts”—[*Official Report*, 14 February 2011; Vol. 523, c. 747.]

She said that the establishment of the OBR and its independence from the Treasury meant that

“Governments will be reticent about introducing policies that seem to take them off course”—[*Official Report*, 14 February 2011; Vol. 523, c. 749.]

Well, there was not much sign of that reticence last year as the Government crashed the economy, caused a run on the pound, caused mortgage rates to rise and put pensions on life support. Indeed, we had a real-time lesson in the cost of disparaging our institutions—institutions that the Conservative party used to care about. But tonight, even after that experience with chapter 4 of the charter, we are back to a hymn of praise for the OBR.

The real problem here is not just inconsistency, but credibility. I am afraid that the many-year record since the idea of this charter was first conceived a decade or more ago has meant that the Conservative party has now forfeited the right to call itself the party of sound management; it has forfeited the right to call itself the party of growth, because the record on growth has been abysmal; it has forfeited the right to call itself the party of low debt, because debt has rocketed; it has forfeited the claim to careful stewardship of the public finances, with billions lost in bounce back loan fraud, personal protective equipment waste and tawdry stories of one dodgy contract after another; and it has forfeited the right to call itself the party of low tax, because the tax burden is at its highest for decades.

What, after all that, has this been for? We have record waiting lists, trains that people cannot rely on, and delays and backlogs everywhere. In fact, there is not a single public service that runs better now than it did 13 years ago, when the Tories took office. Low growth and high tax for a worse outcome—that is the record. When people are faced with the question, “Are you and your family better off?”, the answer is no.

Two weeks ago, we had the Chancellor’s speech on the way forward. He had four Es, and more than one person said that the biggest E was for empty, because the real problem for the Conservatives is that, when it comes to growth, the only policy they reach for is unfunded and untargeted tax cuts, and when they tried that in September, it blew up in their faces. Growth is the right question for the country, but it does not come from the discredited idea of trickle-down economics. It comes from the efforts of all of us—from every businessperson with a new idea and the drive to make it happen, and from making sure we use the UK’s strengths to make the most of the green transition that is coming, rather than standing back and allowing those investments to go elsewhere. It comes from every teacher equipping a pupil with new skills and knowledge, and from not having 7 million people on NHS waiting lists, keeping many of them out of the labour market. Talking of

former Prime Ministers, it does not come from saying “F*** business”, but from a modern partnership with business that brings in the long-term investment the country needs. Most of all, in a knowledge economy like today’s, growth has to come from everyone, not just from a tiny proportion of people at the top.

Fiscal stability is an essential foundation for what we have to do—I agree with the Chief Secretary on that—but it is not an end in itself. It has to be the foundation for meeting the challenges the country faces and for giving people a more prosperous future. After many years of this debate, we look less at the latest version of the rules and more at the gap between claim and reality, because after crashing the economy and leaving the British public to pay the bill, the Government have no credibility to come forward and claim to be the champions of fiscal stability.

The idea for this charter was born in another political time, as I said at the start, and if it did have a purpose, events since have rendered it an unconvincing exercise to say the least. It certainly has not kept the Government to their fiscal rules, which have been broken many times, and it is unlikely, particularly after recent months, to convince anyone outside this Chamber that the Government have got the economy back on track.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): If I may slightly abuse my position in this Chair, let me say that I only heard from the Minister on the Treasury Bench at the start of this debate of the death of Robert Key. He was a dear personal friend, an excellent and dedicated constituency Member of Parliament, and a first-rate Transport Minister. I know that those in the House who knew him will wish to share their thoughts with Sue and his family.

I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

7.52 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and may I associate myself with those passionately expressed words from the Chair?

I did think there might be a few more people here this evening to talk about the charter for Budget responsibility, after we have had so much debate across the country about the Office for Budget Responsibility and its forecasts over the last year or so. This was the year when the Office for Budget Responsibility made it into the headlines on numerous occasions, so I thought there might have been a bit more of a heated debate. I listened to the words of the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and I am not sure I understand at the end of his speech whether the Opposition are in favour of tonight’s motion and of the charter. I am not sure whether they are in favour of Budget responsibility. In fact, I did not hear any suggestions at all for solutions to the criticisms that he raised.

This evening, I reiterate, for those who were not here in early 2010, the rationale for the setting up of the Office for Budget Responsibility. It was because, in the Treasury of 2008, 2009 and early 2010, it was far too easy for the Government simply to make their own forecasts and to mark their own homework. I think there is merit in having someone external to the Treasury and oblivious to ministerial pressure come up with a set

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

of forecasts. We all acknowledge that none will be perfect, or have perfect foresight about the future, but that externality means there is a way of marking the Treasury work and the Treasury projections. A Chancellor can certainly make an argument about why they may take issue with some of the elements going into the forecast, and there is often a more dynamic quality to tax revenues than is perhaps put into some of the external forecasts referenced this evening. A Chancellor can certainly have a debate about the numbers, but we do need to remind ourselves of the importance of this process and its external nature.

The other point I want to raise is about the fiction, which the Treasury Committee highlighted in one of our recent reports, that clouds the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts for fuel duty. Again, this practice goes back many Chancellors and many Governments, and it is about putting into the projections for future tax revenue a ratchet up every year of fuel duty, yet for the last 12 or 13 years, every Chancellor coming to the Dispatch Box has decided not to implement it. It would be astonishing—I note that the Chief Secretary gave me a little cheeky smile—to see what is currently projected for fuel duty in the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast, which is for an extra 12p to go on to fuel after the Budget if the Chancellor does nothing. I think we can all agree that that is fiction. I cannot see the Chancellor coming to the Dispatch Box on 15 March and increasing fuel duty by 12p—I would be astonished—because the temporary one-year reduction of 5p will expire and there is the cumulative impact of the ratchet over the years.

I just wanted to highlight that there is some element of a work of fiction in the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast. It would be healthier for all concerned if a more realistic approach could be taken to the forecast for fuel duty not just in the short term, but in the medium term, because I think we all recognise that there will have to be a change, as more and more people are buying electric cars, in how we tax transport and drivers. I also wanted to publicise how our Committee has come together on a cross-party basis to make that point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

7.57 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I also offer my condolences to Robert Key's family at this terribly sad news?

I say to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), that I was a big supporter of the creation of the OBR, and I very much agree with her that an independent look at Government economic plans, when it is in full possession of all the information, remains a very sensible thing to do.

I start by thanking Richard Hughes, David Miles and Andy King at the OBR for their autumn 2022 "Economic and fiscal outlook". However, it is worth noting, as they did, that this particular forecast, with its seven forecast rounds, was under three Prime Ministers, three Chancellors and three official forecast dates. I suspect that at least part of the reason why the numbers and forecasts in the

report are so gloomy is the sclerotic and, one could argue, rather shambolic way in which the Government—the last set and the one before that; Prime Minister and Chancellor—have played fast and loose with the UK's economic health over the past year.

What does the OBR tell us about the health or otherwise of the UK economy as measured against the new fiscal rules? Before I say a little about that, I point out that there are many ways in which one can have fiscal rules: forward-looking ones against forecasts, like this one, will tell us something; backward-looking ones measured against outturns will tell us something else; measing over a fixed timescale, or in this case a five-year rolling timescale, also is useful, as of course is a measurement over an economic cycle. Unfortunately, however, that tends to be a moveable feast, as it is not always clear when the cycle actually starts and ends. I am sure those on the Labour Front Bench will remember many happy debates over that particular set of circumstances in the past.

The OBR tells us that inflation is set to peak at a 40-year high and that wages and living standards are set to be squeezed by 7%, wiping out all of the growth for the past eight years. So the combination of external shocks, inflation, poor economic management and a series of policy decisions—some good, like the energy price support that the Minister mentioned; some bad, like the medium-term fiscal loosening, almost all of which has been reversed; and some modest, like the medium-term fiscal tightening, most of which was necessary—have led to an increase in borrowing of over £100 billion this year and next, and an additional £420 billion in debt by '26-'27. The consequence for the economy is likely to be the central bank rate being higher than the March forecast, the exchange rate lower than the March forecast, and gilt yields, which are the real driver of the cost of borrowing, higher than the March forecast.

The good news from the OBR is that inflation is due to fall steadily until the end of 2024, but with mortgage rates on average still close to double where they were less than a year ago, constant vigilance from the central bank, the Financial Policy Committee and the Treasury is still required.

However, even with that it will be a long, hard road to recovery. The OBR reports that real household disposable income has seen the largest fall since ONS records began in 1956. As to what needs to be done to grow the economy, again the OBR tells us that it expects capital deepening to contribute only 0.3% to potential output growth over the next two or three years, lower than in the March forecast. It says that that reflects weaker business investment, which it expects to persist over the coming years.

So while, for example, the maintenance of the annual investment allowance at £1 million was welcome, there is still much more to do to attract big investment into the economy. This is one the most troubling things that the OBR reports. The output gap is not even expected to return to the March 2022 levels until 2027, towards the end of the forecast period. It is equally troubling that the trade current account balance is forecast to "widen sharply" from 2.2% of GDP in 2021 to 5.8% in 2022. That is the highest full-year deficit since ONS records began, and is mainly driven by a widening trade deficit.

Yet the Government appear to be in denial about the self-inflicted economic harm of Brexit, and it is against that backdrop that the Government have introduced the new fiscal charter: net debt falling as a share of GDP in 2027-28, the fifth year of the rolling programme, and public sector net borrowing not to exceed 3% of GDP in the same year. While the OBR reports that both of those are to be met, the truth is that both are only just met: public sector net debt by 0.3% of GDP; and public sector net borrowing by 0.6% of GDP—from memory, £9.5 billion and £18.6 billion. At the end of the forecast period GDP will be almost £3 trillion—that is 12 zeros.

There is no fiscal headroom; the margins are absolutely tiny. So one missed step, one missed calculation, one policy error—my goodness, we saw plenty of those two Prime Ministers and two Chancellors ago—or one external shock, and that either renders the targets unmet again or requires new targets to be put in place, or, frankly, means that the brutal cycle of cuts and austerity starts all over again simply in order for the Government, to meet a target irrespective of the consequences for the real economy.

I will end with this, which is said in sadness more than anger because I like the OBR and I like the idea of fiscal rules: we have no target for growth, for job numbers, for increased living standards, or for a boost in exports; rather, success will be measured by a Government avoiding a debt target by 0.3% of GDP. That is not, as the Minister said earlier, charting a path to growth; that simply demonstrates a crushing lack of ambition.

8.5 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I have seen many displays of nerve in this Chamber over the last seven years, but I congratulate the Labour Front-Bench shadow, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), on his sheer chutzpah this evening. He was part of a Government who exploded the deficit under Gordon Brown, having been bequeathed a golden financial legacy, and then drove us off an economic cliff with a crash the like of which this country had not seen since the second world war. I draw attention to my entry in the register, because I still own the business that almost went to the wall during that crash, and I determined then, as I do now, to make sure that the right hon. Gentleman and his party never have stewardship of the economy of this country for fear of what they may repeat.

Before the Minister panics, I will say that I am here this evening to support the motion and the charter. While others have mentioned the renewal and the evolution of the charter over the years, it is a useful instrument that George Osborne introduced, albeit that I think he probably did so in contemplation of uncertain victory in 2015, wanting to jam an otherwise profligate and untrustworthy Labour party into a little more discipline for the future. But it is useful in giving guidelines to the wider world, and indeed the markets, about the Government's intentions in the short and medium term. However, I have some questions for the Minister on this year's mandate.

The first is about the independence and role of the OBR. As the Minister knows, there has been a lot of concern in the media and elsewhere about the role the

OBR has played in the financial turbulence over the last few years, and in particular I want to talk about independence, accountability and its role in the formation of fiscal policy.

On independence, I must express to the Minister, an old friend and constituency neighbour, some concern about the evolution of the role of the OBR. The charter points out at paragraph 3.13:

“The government has adopted the OBR's fiscal and economic forecasts as the official forecasts for the Budget Report.”

That means the Treasury is not now making its own forecasts; it is relying entirely on the OBR's forecasts. In my view, that creates an element of conflict. I would hope that the Treasury would produce its own forecast driven by what the Chancellor wants to do, and the OBR would produce a parallel forecast, and then differences between the two could be highlighted and justified or argued about. Then those of us who rely on forecasts for policy making or investment decisions could decide where the fan chart of growth or of debt was likely to go. I am sure the Minister has the charter in front of him. It says in this paragraph that the Treasury still retains the analytical capability to produce those forecasts and reserves the right to disagree with the OBR, but in truth, because it is not producing a forecast, it does not and cannot.

At paragraph 4.11 the charter states that

“the OBR will provide independent scrutiny and certification of the government's policy costings.”

Certification is an interesting word in this context, because it means that the OBR is basically approving the Government's policy costings, which implies an element of negotiation and justification rather than assessment and opinion.

Paragraphs 4.20 and 4.21 on page 16 then say that there will basically be an iterative process between the OBR and the Treasury—and presumably the Chancellor—over the formation of the forecasts. That implies an element of negotiation—that the Chancellor will go to the OBR and say, “This is what we're planning to do. What do you think?” and the OBR will say, “Well, we're not sure this is going to produce quite the number you need.” So policy is formed in an iterative process.

I might have expected the Chancellor to ask his analysts in the Treasury what the impact of certain policies might be on forecasts. However, doing that directly with the OBR, which is supposedly independent, draws it into the policy formation process in a way that may not be helpful to its sense of independence or, indeed, to our sense of its assessment of the Treasury rules. Effectively, that imbues the OBR with an authority that should, in theory, bring with it an element of accountability.

Forecasts that should and could be produced by the Treasury would be produced under the name of the Chancellor, so if they are proven to be wildly wrong, there is direct accountability in this House through him or—hopefully in time—her. However, that is less the case with the OBR. It will appear periodically in front of the Treasury Committee, which is ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is here this evening and who has spoken. Other than that, however, the House will have no opportunity to properly scrutinise, test and understand why the OBR thinks the way it does.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If I might paraphrase, Treasury officials have Ministers by the short and curlies, which is perhaps not the best position for them to be in.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend puts it in a pithy way, as he often does. It is not so much that there is some kind of trap or problem here; it is that a situation has evolved—probably more by accident than by design—whereby the OBR has been drawn into the machinery of the Treasury and therefore acquired an authority and an effective veto, in a way that is perhaps not helpful.

The reason that is a problem is that economics is an inexact science—if we put three economists in a room, we will have five opinions. Economics is not delineated in the way chemistry is; it is as much an art as it is a science, and much of it is actually psychology. So if the OBR is to be so involved in policy making, it is important that we understand the economic basis of its assessments. For example, do the people who produce these now Treasury—but actually OBR—forecasts appreciate, understand and believe in the Laffer curve? Do they think that if we reduce taxation, income will rise? That sits at the heart of the argument the Conservative party has had over the last few months about corporation tax. If we cut it, will we collect more money? Seemingly, the forecasts say not. Those are the kinds of judgment that anybody forming economic and fiscal policy must make.

There are also more fundamental issues—about, say, the operation of capital. If the head of the OBR is going to be so involved in policy formation—if there is to be a negotiation between the Chancellor and the OBR on an iterative basis—will that person be operating on the same ideological basis in terms of capital versus labour? Are they a Keynesian? Are they a monetarist? What is the impact of those kinds of belief system? Drawing the OBR into the Treasury machine therefore creates some difficulty for an organisation that, as I know the Minister will agree, has value because of its independence and its alternative view of what the Treasury is trying to do.

The second issue I want to raise is about the mandate. The previous charter contained a point about balancing the budget within three years; that is omitted from this charter. As the Minister said, things have changed, so that has been dropped. When we are effectively chasing a ratio as measured against GDP, we are chasing a moving number, which may make our lives more difficult. For example, if we are chasing a debt-to-GDP ratio, and our GDP is falling, we have to work ever harder to hit our target. The things we have to do to hit that target may also, paradoxically, reduce GDP even further, so we end up chasing ourselves down a spiral against a moving target. That is why, in last year's charter, which has changed, the idea of balancing the budget within three years, and ensuring that our expenditure did not exceed our income, was quite helpful; it meant that there were two absolute numbers over which we had some control.

Fortunately, in its February forecast, the Bank of England says that if there is a recession, it will be shallower than we thought, which is good. That is not least because last year's Budget represented a mild fiscal loosening in its initial stages, although not so much later on, with the energy price cap and all the rest of it. That may have helped with aggregate demand, making

the recession less severe. However, if GDP does fall, the ratio that the Treasury is chasing will worsen, unless there are significant spending cuts or yet more tax rises, both of which may exacerbate the fall in GDP. That is why I am nervous about the mandate. The objective of reducing debt against GDP is absolutely right, but I ask the Minister to guard against the issue that I have raised.

Finally, I want to say something about the longer term. As politicians, we often focus naturally on a three to five-year horizon. We do that because, guess what, there are elections in a three to five-year horizon, and it is a horizon that is understandable and controllable. However, as the Minister will know, there are significant long-term issues for this country, which are driven by demographics and the nature of our economy. He will know that there are alarming reports that look way into the future, and if he has looked at the significant work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) before he was a Minister, he will know what I am talking about.

To take an example, the Government Actuary's quinquennial review of the national insurance fund basically says that it will run out of money in about 20 years' time. Indeed, the rise in the pension age that we have just put through may mean that that period will be shorter, unless there is significant Government intervention in the form of more money going into the fund, which will basically mean tax rises. In addition, the OBR's financial stability report from last year—it now does a long-term financial stability report—forecasts that, on the current trajectory, although our debts will start to fall in the short term, by the time we get to the middle of the century, they will be well above 200% of GDP and heading towards 270%, and we will be running at a deficit of 10% of GDP.

These long-term trends are driven fundamentally by demographic issues. As a country, we are growing older. We have fewer workers per pensioner, and we are not replacing ourselves from a birth rate point of view, and that will cause an enormous problem. Other countries are in a worse situation. In Japan, on current rates, the population will have halved by the end of this century, which will be economically catastrophic for the country. Unless we start chasing our tail—raising taxes to pay more in welfare and Government spending—we will be in big trouble, which may exacerbate our GDP issues. When we put together the whole cocktail of forecasts—short, medium and long term—they scream out at us to think about the model we are operating.

The wealth of this country was built on three great leaps forward in growth. We had the industrial revolution. That was followed at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century by mass industrialisation, and since the '70s we have had the IT revolution. In some of those periods, particularly the last, growth was quite turbulent, but throughout them, there was a very high average level of growth; 3%, 4%, 5% or 6% a year was not uncommon. We stand on the verge of another technological revolution—a great leap forward with automation, artificial intelligence, the way we do things and the green economy. We are on an ellipse of scientific discovery. Life sciences are a particular passion of mine, because there are a number of companies on the verge of curing cancer.

If we are to capture this upswing in human ingenuity, we have to think about the model of our economy and the operation of capital within it, and whether we have the right fiscal measures to encourage the kind of buccaneering capitalism that took advantage of those three previous upswings. We did less of that in the third period, the IT revolution. We went through a period of what I suppose we could call centre left or socialist Governments, and it was not de rigueur until the '80s to be an entrepreneur. We sat on the operation of capital and, as a result, we missed the swing. That is why we do not have an Apple, a Microsoft, a Facebook or a Google. We have some companies coming, and we had some nascent companies. Some Members will be old enough to remember Acorn. For a while it was going to be a great world-beating company, but it fell by the wayside.

The Minister thinks about these issues carefully, and is conscious of the need to energise capital in a way that will build the businesses, products and jobs of the future. I urge those on the Treasury Front Bench to reflect on the longer-term issues that I have raised, and to recognise the kind of straitjacket that we are putting ourselves in. That, and the debts we incurred during covid, may well mean that we miss the next upswing in the world economy, unless we are willing to take risks with the mandate. There has been much debate in this House, and certainly in the media, about going for growth, but if we miss this upswing in growth, we really will miss a huge opportunity for the next generation of our fellow countrymen.

8.22 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) makes some powerful points. He is right that if we cut certain tax rates, we collect more revenue, not less. The historical evidence is very clear on that, but OBR and Treasury models do not capture that. He is right that if we try to guide our economy by a debt-to-GDP ratio and we go into recession, the ratio gets worse. We are then advised to take exactly the wrong action, and intensify the downturn by trying to chase the ratio with tax rises that will push the economy lower; it is an extremely foolish thing to do.

My right hon. Friend is right that the Treasury needs its own independent forecasting, and needs to be able to say sometimes that the independent OBR forecast may be wrong. If it is genuinely independent, why should the Chancellor have to defend it? When it is as wrong as it has been at points in the last three years—for example, as wrong as it was on the deficit—it would be extremely helpful if the Chancellor was encouraged to disagree with it, because it is sending him exactly the wrong signals. For two years running, it grossly exaggerated the deficit and debt at a time when we could have done more to promote growth. This year, predictably—indeed, I did again predict it—it got it wrong; it understated what would happen, because it did not understand that its other policies would slow the economy so much. My right hon. Friend is right about the longer-term issues, but time does not permit me to go into that, as people apparently want to go home this evening.

On the control framework, I will be the one person who says that I do not think that this control framework is good. It clearly has not worked in the past, and it is fairly unlikely to work in the future. We have one

extremely important control, which is not mentioned in this document: the 2% inflation target. That should be even stronger and better enforced. It is very worrying that the Bank of England, which seems to have the main responsibility for it, allowed inflation to reach over 10% when it had a clear target of 2%. It would not listen to those of us who said that if it carries on printing too much money and buying too many bonds at ever higher prices, it is very likely to have inflation. I hope that it does not cause the reverse problem, and put everything into reverse, giving us a bigger recession than we need. We do not want any recession at all, but clearly a slowdown was needed to correct the extra inflation as the Bank tried to correct its past mistakes.

It would be good to complement the 2% inflation target, which should apply to the Government as well as to the Bank of England, with a 2% growth target. We would then have the balanced model that the Federal Reserve is wisely given by our American friends and colleagues. The Fed is told both that it must keep inflation to around 2% as a priority, and that it must maximise employment in doing so. A balanced mandate of 2% inflation—it would be nice if we could do 2% growth, but the current official forecasts are way below that—would provide the right kind of signals, and give us more chance of a sensible economic policy.

This is our one chance to remind ourselves of the big issue of how we manage this enormous debt, bearing in mind that about a third of state debt is owned in accounts by the Bank of England, which means that it is owned by the taxpayers and by the Government. When I last looked, the Bank of England was 100% owned by taxpayers and the Government. Every pound of that debt that was bought up, was bought up on the signature of Labour, coalition and Conservative Chancellors, with this House agreeing that we would indemnify the Bank against all losses. Indeed, the Bank of England understandably put on its website that the whole of the bond portfolio is held with it acting as an agent for the state. These are joint control decisions, and the Government are clearly the senior partner, because they have to pay the bills.

It is quite wrong that we should have this uniquely difficult treatment when it comes to handling the rundown and the losses, when the European Central Bank and the Fed made exactly the same mistake of buying too many expensive bonds. There is a lot to be said for the ECB idea that the rundown should take place as the bonds naturally repay. One does not go charging into the market to undermine one's own bond prices by selling even more of them at a loss. If we want to be ultra-tough on money, like the Fed—it probably has more of an inflation problem than we did—then if we sell the bonds into the market, why send the bill to the taxpayer? Why does the bill not rest with the central bank, which can actually stand that kind of thing? As the Fed constantly points out, the fact that it is sitting on a lot of losses does not matter, because it can always print dollars to pay its bills—it is not like a normal company. We should look again at this particularly hairshirt treatment, whereby the Bank of England expects taxpayers to send it money every time it sells a bond at a loss—and it wants to sell a lot of bonds at a loss, when there is probably no need to do so for the sake of the conduct of monetary policy.

[John Redwood]

I hope that the Government look again at those issues, because we have a very difficult nexus between decisions taken jointly, decisions taken by the Government, and decisions taken by the Bank of England. The treatment of this debt is having a big impact on the Budget judgments that the Chancellor comes to.

My final point is on the strange treatment of debt interest. As the Minister pointed out, the debt interest programme has shot through the roof to extremely high levels, but the bulk of that is, of course, the indexation provisions on the index debt, which in the UK is a rather high proportion of the total debt. None of that requires cash payments, so it is not a bill that we have to pay today. In practice, it will wash through by our simply rolling over the debt when the bonds fall due. We will re-borrow the real amount rather than the nominal amount, so we will not actually feel it. It is very odd that we put that as a cost against the accounts. The great news, however, is that as a result of that strange accounting treatment, we will have a great bonanza, apparently, because I think the forecasts are right, and that inflation will come down quite sharply over the next two years—indeed, the Bank of England thinks it will go well below 2%. The debt interest programme will absolutely disappear through the floor, given all this so-called debt interest throwing out the figures. I hope some of the proceeds will be used for a sensible policy to promote growth.

8.29 pm

John Glen: It is a privilege to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I thank those who contributed to the debate, including the distinguished Chair of the Select Committee, who highlighted some of the issues and presumptions of Government policy. I cannot comment on what will happen with fuel duty, as that will be the Chancellor's decision. I thank the right hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) for his contribution, in which he seemed to suggest more targets and a poverty of ambition on behalf of the Government, and I can assure him that that is not the case.

I would like to respond to my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who made a number of observations about the independence of the OBR; its certification and validation role; and the iterative process and whether that compromised the apparent independence of the Treasury. He described economics as not just an art or a science but even psychology. I can confirm that the OBR's remit is unchanged: it is the Government's official forecaster. But—as he notes and I am pleased to confirm—the Treasury maintains considerable analytical capability to support the policy advice to Ministers, and it does a very good job of it too. There is a clear separation between the OBR and policymaking, but it is a matter of securing credibility for those policies, and I think he would agree with me that that is a very important point.

Kit Malthouse: I guess the issue is: whose forecasts are they? If the OBR produces forecasts and Treasury officials say, "Well, Chancellor, we have looked over the forecasts and we think they are right," that is qualitatively different, in the public's mind, to the Treasury producing a forecast and the OBR saying to the public, "Well, we have looked over them and we think they are right."

While it does say that the Treasury reserves the right to disagree with the OBR, the nature of the iterative process presumably means that will never happen, because they agree before anything is published.

John Glen: What we can agree is that the budget responsibility committee has discretion over all judgments underpinning its forecasts. Of course, there is obviously a range of views—my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is always clear in his disagreements with what the OBR may or may not forecast—but what we are saying is that there is validity in and a need for an official forecast, and that is what we have.

With respect to the shadow Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), before he gets a little too complacent he should be wary of the £90 billion of uncosted net spending commitments that his party has made since the turn of the year. I think the OBR would be very interested in what we would find there.

The charter represents our bedrock to prosperity. It will get debt falling but invest in the future. It will rebuild our fiscal buffers, bolster our economic fundamentals and deliver for the whole country. A vote for this charter is a vote for sustainable public finances, and that is why I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2022 update, which was laid before this House on 26 January, be approved.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (8 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 8 February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Suella Braverman relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and

(2) the Motions in the name of Secretary Michael Gove relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion or six hours after the commencement of proceedings relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENERGY

That the Energy Bills Support Scheme and Alternative Fuel Payment Pass-through Requirement (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No.10), dated 10 January 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 to 8 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

POLICE

That the draft Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (Codes of Practice) (Revision of Code H) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 12 December 2022, be approved.

BUILDING AND BUILDINGS

That the draft Higher-Risk Buildings (Descriptions and Supplementary Provisions) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 19 December 2022, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Packaging Waste (Data Reporting) (England) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 9 January, be approved.—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 9 to 11 together.

Ordered,

HIGH SPEED RAIL (CREWE - MANCHESTER) BILL (SELECT COMMITTEE)

That Wayne David be discharged from the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill (Select Committee) and Tahir Ali be added.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

That Tony Lloyd be discharged from the International Trade Committee and Andrew Western be added.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Dean Russell be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Dr Caroline Johnson be added—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Probationary Police Officers: Cost of Living

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

8.34 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is a pleasure to introduce the Adjournment debate this evening, and I thank the Minister for being in his place at the outset. It is important to set the tone for this important issue, and that is that in Northern Ireland we have a police service that is in crisis. It is in crisis for several reasons, which need to be addressed if the problems with the recruitment of police probationers, and of new blood into the service, are to be thoroughly and properly addressed.

The crisis is such that it is not unusual to hear statements in the local media, from Police Federation chiefs and other senior police officers, about their concern that the growing levels of criminality in Northern Ireland are because the police have a budgeting crisis. That deepening budget crisis needs to be nipped in the bud before the policing crisis becomes so deep that we cannot deal with it.

Let me set the scene. The Police Service of Northern Ireland faces an unprecedented operating shortfall of some £226 million for the next three years. There will be a net loss of more than 300 officers in this financial year alone. But that tells only half the story. On average, 36 officers leave the PSNI every month. Many of those officers are probationary officers who joined the service wanting to make a difference, but who then realised that they cannot afford to do the job. Unlike any other service, they are being squeezed from both sides. The arrangements that we have in place say that there should be 7,500 police officers in Northern Ireland, and we are about 1,000 short. So officers are squeezed because they have to do more duties to try to keep up—they are running just to stand still and maintain where we are. On the other side, they face a budgetary crisis which means that they are not properly rewarded for the extra hard work that they are doing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend my hon. Friend for introducing the debate. This is a big issue, which is why we are all here to support him. We all hear of young PSNI officers leaving to work in car dealerships and even, in one case I heard of, in Tesco, because of what was described to me as “low morale”, but in fact it is clear that the stress of working for the PSNI is not compensated enough. Many realise that the negligible pay is not enough and we must urgently review that. In other words, we must provide better wages to retain the quality officers that we now have.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. In setting the scene, I will come on to some of the detail in a moment, but he has put his finger on what police officers are being forced to do in their private lives to try to make ends meet.

Northern Ireland now has the lowest number of officers since the formation of the PSNI. I remember being on the Police Board at the time when the PSNI came into existence, and we were promised that the number of police officers would keep pace with the developing needs of the community. We reduced the service from

[*Ian Paisley*]

between 12,000 and 13,000 officers right down to 7,500. Today we have between 6,700 and 6,800 officers, which frankly is not enough.

We should recognise not only that we are 800 below where *New Decade, New Approach* tells us that police levels should be, but that Northern Ireland's population has risen in recent years. In fact, it has risen by 300,000 people since the Patten report recommended that police numbers should be cut from that high point. If we were doing a fair calculation, a more realistic revised figure, against the backdrop of Northern Ireland becoming a peaceful society without terrorism, would be having 8,600 police officers, given the size of our population, but that is not the case. Police officers, including young officers and probationary officers, joined the service and realised that they are being squeezed because there is an insufficient number of colleagues to do the work and they are not being properly rewarded for doing the job.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate. He is right to outline the figure of 7,500 officers provided in *New Decade, New Approach*. Contained in *New Decade, New Approach* was also a commitment from the UK Government indicating that the PSNI would receive the appropriate and necessary levels of funding to continue its efforts in tackling paramilitarism and organised crime, and to continue the work of the paramilitary crime taskforce, yet the Government have been found wanting on that taskforce. Does he agree that that commitment needs to be delivered by the Government and that, while policing and justice have been devolved, there are commitments on terrorism and paramilitarism that the Government still need to be honoured?

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point; he makes it well. The fact of the matter is that policing in Northern Ireland cannot be done on the cheap, and that is essentially what has been asked for. Not only do we have to tackle the crimes that are prevalent across this part of the United Kingdom, but we have an added layer of serious and organised crime that derives from paramilitary activity. That puts even more pressure on the policing budget. My hon. Friend is quite right to outline that this additional pressure makes the PSNI like no other police service in the United Kingdom. With 42 other comparisons to look at, the issues that our officers have to tackle are completely unique. They operate in a unique environment and under unique circumstances. With a hangover of policing the past, as well as trying to cope with the present and laying sound foundations for the future, it is almost impossible for them to do it on a shoestring budget that needs to be agreed year on year.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I want to highlight the number of young officers who come into the force and are left having to do additional duties, which is driving down morale. They do not have a proper work-life balance; never mind just the pay issue, the work-life balance is a serious issue for young officers.

Ian Paisley: Of course, if there was not the opportunity for overtime, police officers in Northern Ireland would absolutely be on the breadline.

Again, in setting the scene, let me add a layer that is unheard of and rarely reported in this part of the United Kingdom. Last year there were 2,500 assaults on police officers in Northern Ireland. Of a force of 6,800 officers, 2,500 of them were seriously assaulted, with broken bones or having to be off duty. In fact, 900 of them are unable to serve at present because of injuries. That is a serious pressure on our police. There have been four attempted murders of police officers in the past 12 months. One of them from earlier this year we cannot talk about—it is subject to a court case—and there were other very serious ones, including a stabbing, a bomb under an officer's car and an attempt to fire a projectile at a station where an officer worked.

Our officers in Northern Ireland work under a unique set of circumstances where the threat against their lives and the targeting of them continues when they leave work and go home to be with their partner and family. That is a very different stress level from that of other officers. Not only do we have that aggressive targeting and attacks on police officers; we also have what I can only describe as a woke culture developing in Northern Ireland that says the police should not be allowed to use certain weapons to defend themselves from attacks. We all know of the benefits that Tasers give to police officers in the United Kingdom. If a police officer feels they are under attack, they can use a Taser to keep the assailant at a distance and under control. We have only 100 officers in Northern Ireland who are allowed to use a Taser, and the Taser has been deployed on only 21 occasions in the past year. Why has it been deployed so rarely, when we have so many attacks on police officers? Because there is an agenda to stop a Taser being rolled out to every single officer so that they can use it in a proportionate and balanced way when they face a threat.

Water cannon, which are not regularly used on the British mainland, are used for large crowd dispersals in Northern Ireland. CS spray is offered to our police officers; they also have baton rounds and are routinely armed with sidearms, but they do not like to use or deploy them because that would mean a fatality. In the past year, there were 400 withdrawals of a sidearm from a holster to point at a person, so severe was the threat to our police officers. Let me just put that into context: there have been 400 withdrawals of a gun from a holster, to point at a citizen of the United Kingdom, because there was a threat so serious that an officer felt his life was in danger. Thankfully, because of good, proportionate policing, there was only one discharge of a weapon.

We need something in between. Tasers may be one of those things; I certainly encourage the Chief Constable to apply for Tasers to be used and to make sure that they are widely issued. The Home Secretary offered £6.7 million to the other 42 United Kingdom police services to look into using Tasers as a proper mechanism for defending police officers. That offer was made to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but it has not yet been taken up. I encourage the PSNI to take it up, so that we can create an atmosphere in which young police officers feel confident, in which their morale is not under threat and in which they feel able to use everything in their quiver to properly defend themselves and their actions.

I turn to the key issue, which is how young probationary officers are being treated in such a way that the cost of living crisis is putting real pressure and a real squeeze

on them. It is important to put that into context. There is a benevolent fund in the police service that is run by the Police Federation. It was essentially set up to assist retired police officers and their families after they leave the service, but in the past year, more claims on and payments from the fund have been made for serving officers than for retired officers. That includes payments for home heating, for food for children and to assist with getting through the month. More currently serving officers than retired officers are having to rely on the police benevolent fund—that is an appalling picture for police officers.

I was chatting to an exceptional probationary police officer who lives in my constituency. He serves in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), but he was seconded to do some work in a market town in my constituency while he was operational out of another part of the country. He was, quite frankly, brilliant. His conduct was brilliant, and so was his ability to deal with the public, help to resolve crimes and get on with doing the ordinary job in which every police officer takes regular pride.

That police officer came to see me in my office one day and said, “I want to show you my bank account.” He had 17p left in it. He is not a drinker, he is not a smoker, he is not a gambler; he has two young kids, and he was trying to organise his kid’s birthday party the next week. He had to drive a 45-mile round trip every day to do duty. He said, “I’ve maxed out my credit cards. How am I to get to work, let alone care for my kids and do this job? As a probationary officer, I’m on less than £26,000. My buddy who lives a few houses away works in a supermarket and is paid £7,000 or £8,000 more a year. He doesn’t face the same problems and stresses that I face”—the picture that I have outlined of the conditions under which police officers are operating. That story, unfortunately, could be repeated over and over again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned officers taking second jobs. This month, in the news magazine of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland, there was an account of a police officer who had to get a second job as a delivery van driver. That might be okay here in Great Britain, but the one thing that I am told, our colleagues are told and police officers are told in Northern Ireland about our security is “Do not engage in any regular activity. Do not allow anyone to say, ‘On such-and-such a day, that person does such-and-such.’ Change your system: change the way you operate.” A regular van driver cannot change the way he operates, and is therefore an easy target for those who wish to target him; but this is what that officer had to do in order to make ends meet. What is more, according to the article, he referred eight colleagues to the same job, encouraging them to earn extra income in order to live. It is not appropriate, in this day and age, for police officers to need to do that. It sends a clear signal that they are not being properly rewarded.

Last month the chairman of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland, Liam Kelly, wrote to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee outlining what an ordinary constable would receive. I am pleased to report that at the weekend there was an uplift in policing budgets, although they are still behind where they need to be. A probationer who would normally be on about £25,000 a

year is now on about £26,500, a trainee officer who was on £21,500 is now on about £24,000, and an officer must reach year 5 after being a probationer to earn about £30,000.

It is a huge struggle for those people to remain in the job, survive and pay for the upkeep of their families and their homes, and they do so at a time when, as we all know, the cost of living crisis is upon us. Food prices are rising faster than they have for 45 years, inflation has reached 16.2%, and the pressures on everyone’s home budget is increasing. Apparently the average disposable income of a police officer in Northern Ireland who is in rented accommodation and paying for a car—officers have to live in certain areas and police other areas—is about £108 a month. We could not live on that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and we should not be asking our police officers to live and raise their families on that.

The Police Federation also kindly produced for the benefit of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee a series of alternative jobs—equivalent in terms of training and skill level—with which Northern Ireland police officers are competing. After year 3, a software engineer is making £43,500, a software developer about £33,500, a deputy principal—a middle manager in the Northern Ireland civil service—about £39,500, and a security guard about £28,500, and we are asking people who are genuine security experts to do their job for about £6,000 less. From day one, police officers in Northern Ireland face a terrorist threat and are under immense pressure. For the past five or six years, pay awards that should have been effective from 1 September have been delayed for months; often, when discussions on the following year’s pay award have begun, officers have not yet received the previous year’s award.

I appeal to the Minister not to stick to a brief that says, “If we had devolution, all this would be sorted out.” That will wash with no one, because this problem has been building up for six years, and we had devolution for half that period. This is a problem of how we manage policing resources and whether or not we have devolution, and we need it to be addressed with a much sharper answer than “Well, if you had an Executive in Northern Ireland, all these things could be sorted out.” I wish that the answer were as easy as that, but I fear that it is not, and I fear that giving such an excuse for an answer will only fail to answer the pertinent question of how, in this day and age, we can properly reward our police officers and find the resources that will enable us to do so, and what we can cut in other sections of governance to ensure that they are properly paid.

These are national, not local awards for police pay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) identified, we must make sure that the policing budget is strengthened in Northern Ireland, so that the issues that I have put on the agenda tonight can be properly addressed once and for all.

8.55 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for securing this evening’s debate and for setting out the issues with such care, thoughtfulness and compassion, clearly based on personal experience of talking to police officers in his constituency and in Northern Ireland more generally.

[Chris Philp]

As a Home Office Minister I have responsibility, primarily, for policing in England and Wales. I will make some remarks about policing more generally and about police officers' salaries, which broadly speaking are the same in Northern Ireland as in England and Wales. I will then touch on some issues more specific to Northern Ireland although, being a devolved matter, they fall more properly within the responsibilities of my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, one of whom, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), is with us in the Chamber.

Starting with policing more widely, in England and Wales we are well on track to recruit an extra 20,000 police officers by the end of March 2023. Once we have done that, we will have a record number of police officers. Never in the history of England and Wales will we have had more police officers than we will have by the end of March. That goes to show that the package offered has some attractions and merits.

In the most recent pay awards, police in England and Wales received a flat, consolidated increase for this financial year effective from 1 September of £1,900, as the hon. Member for North Antrim said. I believe that in the last day or two it has been confirmed that that will apply to police in Northern Ireland as well, and will be backdated, so officers such as the one he described should get all that money in their March pay packets. For officers with children to look after such as the one he mentioned, that will be a welcome payment.

That £1,900 equates to an average of 5%, but for officers on lower salaries it represents a lot more. For entry-level officers such as those the hon. Gentleman described, it equates to 8.8%, because it is a fixed proportion of a smaller number. The view was taken that it was important to try to direct the increase disproportionately towards officers on entry point wages, for all the reasons that he set out with great eloquence. That means that since 1 September last year, officers have had a basic starting salary of between roughly £23,500 and £26,500. That is typically an 8.8% increase.

A median police constable will receive £41,000. The hon. Gentleman mentioned comparisons with other occupations; the police salary review body stated that median full-time gross annual earnings—not officers starting out at the beginning of their career—are 33% higher than the whole economy, 26% higher than so-called associate professional and technical occupations, and about the same as professional occupations. I am speaking about median earnings across the whole police force, not entry-level salaries, which are lower.

In addition to the 8.8% annual pay increase for people on starting salaries, there is incremental annual pay progression as officers get more experience. Those increases are at least 2%, and can be between 4% and 6%, on top of the regular annual increase. As an officer—like the young officer he mentioned—stays in the force, they will get not just the regular increase but the progression as well, so they will not have to stick with it for too long before they start seeing some meaningful increases coming through. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can pass on that message to officers in their first couple of years.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Minister for setting that out. That is helpful, and the timing could not be better because of the award that was made at the weekend.

I also thank the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for being here. The fact that he is here says a lot, and officers will be grateful that he has turned up for this debate. He did not have to, and I know that he is very busy with other responsibilities.

On the point that the Minister has made, keeping pay parity with the rest of the UK should be a principle, and making the award to PSNI officers on 1 September each year is also critical. We are now at the beginning of February and the award has just been made in Northern Ireland. That has not really helped, and I hope that that lesson can be learned by the civil servants who help the Minister with this.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. Salaries are not exactly the same but they are pretty much the same in Northern Ireland as they are in England and Wales, and the settlement that has just been announced is exactly the same. That is an important principle in relation to Northern Ireland in particular.

I emphasise again that this is a matter for my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office. As the hon. Gentleman has said, policing is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, and it is not in my area of ministerial responsibility as the Policing Minister for England and Wales. A functioning Executive would give more flexibility and freedom to Northern Ireland to determine its own path and how it chooses to allocate money between different budgets. I understand that the Secretary of State, in setting the budget for Northern Ireland's Department of Justice this year, has given a 3.1% increase—a total allocation of about £1.2 billion—but as the hon. Member knows, the freedoms available to Northern Irish civil servants are limited in the absence of an Executive, so the sooner we can get an Executive up and running, the more flexibility and autonomy the people in Northern Ireland and the elected representatives of the people in Northern Ireland will have.

The hon. Member made some comments regarding security, and he is quite right to draw attention to that. The UK Government provide the PSNI with additional security funding to tackle the obvious threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland, and the amount of money being paid over for that purpose in the current financial year, 2022-23, is £32 million, which is the same as it was in the previous year. In addition to that, there is a security funding payment of £8 million a year towards the tackling paramilitaries programme, which is designed to match the funding that comes from the Northern Ireland Executive. That money designed specifically to tackle terrorism, which has a unique Northern Ireland element, is continuing.

Gavin Robinson: I hope that the Minister will be able to go back after this debate and ensure that the frequency of funding for the tackling paramilitarism and crime taskforce will remain, because as I understand it, the Northern Ireland Office is tapering that money off, which would have an impact on the delivery of service.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I am assured by my colleague, the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe, that he and his NIO colleagues will write to confirm the position on that in the very near future.

I think we are coming to the end of our allotted time, so I want to thank the hon. Member for North Antrim once again for raising this important issue. All of us obviously back our police forces and want to ensure that they have the funding, the salary and the resources to do their job. It is probably appropriate to close by extending, I hope on behalf of the whole House, our thanks to officers the length and breadth of the United

Kingdom, but in this evening's context, particularly in Northern Ireland, for the work they do in keeping us, our constituencies, our constituents and their families safe.

Question put and agreed to.

9.4 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 6 February 2023

[YVONNE FOVARGUE *in the Chair*]

Autism and ADHD Assessments

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Health and Social Care Committee of Session 2021-22, The treatment of autistic people and people with learning disabilities, HC 21, and the Government response, HC 631; Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on assessments for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, reported to the House on 31 January 2023, HC 73.]

4.30 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 589667 and 597840, relating to assessments for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. Let me begin by reading out the prayer of the petitions. Petition 589677 reads:

“The Government should create an emergency fund to deal with the massive waiting lists for autism & ADHD assessments for children AND adults. This would provide resources for local health services to deal with current waiting lists and new patients.” It received over 21,000 signatures, including 29 from my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. Petition 597840 reads:

“The Government should commission a review of how Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) assessments are managed by the NHS, including through Shared Care Agreements, and increase funding to reduce waiting times.”

The petition reached over 10,500 signatures, including eight from Carshalton and Wallington. I want to put it on record that although the petitions did not reach the usual 100,000-signature threshold for a debate, the Petitions Committee felt that the issue was important. We have been busy working our way through the 100,000-signature petitions and we have managed to catch up, so we thought that this was an important topic for us to discuss.

I thank the numerous campaigners and organisations that have met me and provided me and hon. and right hon. Members from across the House with briefings in preparation for the debate. They include the petition creators, Jessica and Lisa; TV and radio host and autism activist Melanie Sykes; Christine and Henry from ADHD UK; and Sarah and Tim from the National Autistic Society. I will go into more detail later about their experiences and recommendations. I also thank the Petitions Committee team, which has, as always, worked incredibly hard behind the scenes to make the debate happen and has also conducted an incredible survey to ask the petitioners to share more about their experiences and views of autism and ADHD assessments, which received over 7,000 responses. I will share some of the findings of that survey later.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry, Ms Fovargue, that I will be unable to stay to make a speech of my own. I thank my hon. Friend and all those he is working with for helping us in Parliament to put neurodiversity on the map, because it is not unusual. It is part of what is usual.

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am glad that he used the word neurodiversity because I think that that will be a common theme of many of our speeches, along with an understanding of diversity in autism and ADHD diagnoses, which is very important.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that the Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, is undertaking a major inquiry into the prevention of ill health. Given the rather shocking statistics about the harm that adults with ADHD can come to—attempting suicide, for example—does he agree that answering the petition positively is a key prevention issue in healthcare?

Elliot Colburn: The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee is absolutely right and I commend the work that the Committee has done in this area. I look forward to reading its report. Later in my speech, I will cover the wider health effects that waiting times can have on parents and adults waiting for assessments, so I am grateful to him for making us aware of that.

When I first agreed to open the debate, I initially took a personal view from my constituency. I have stood in this Chamber many times to talk about the poor experiences of parents in Carshalton and Wallington in attempting to secure education, health and care plans, or EHCPs, for their children due to the poor management of Sutton Council’s arm’s length organisation, Cognus, which was recently the subject of a BBC “Panorama” exposé. Barely a week goes by without a parent coming to talk to me at my surgeries about the poor experiences they have had when waiting for assessments or the inadequate assessments they have had—and this is the case not just for children, but for adults as well. Over recent weeks, in preparing for the debate, it became to me that assessment times are simply not fit for purpose.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I thank the West Yorkshire ADHD Support Group, a brilliant local organisation in my constituency that helps families through the diagnosis pathway. As the hon. Gentleman said, parents are finding waiting times for a diagnosis painfully long—it can be 18 months, two years and longer. Does he agree that that means many wasted years of education, leaving children in danger of falling behind their peers? We are setting them up to fail. Surely we need to think about diagnosis within weeks, not years.

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Many people have said that to me, and I am sure that many other right hon. and hon. Members will say the same. This is a complete waste of opportunity and talent. Indeed, when I met with the TV host Melanie Sykes, that was one of the central things she said to me. This is a wasted opportunity and wasted talent, and we are wasting the lives of young people with these waiting lists.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an absolutely excellent speech. The delay in diagnosis for autism and other neurodiverse conditions is having an impact on young people and families but, more than that, it is having an impact on UK plc. We are denying our businesses and public services the talent of neurodiverse individuals, which is of course having an effect on UK plc. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are some shocking statistics about the sheer lack of neurodiverse people in the UK workforce. That is nothing to do with people receiving a diagnosis; it has everything to do with the fact that we are wasting that opportunity.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): On that point, I welcome the fact that the special educational needs and disability review is imminent, as we heard from the Minister last week. Let us wait and see what it says. Of course, this is about autism and ADHD. Waiting times are causing havoc everywhere, but people cannot necessarily get medication or treatment for a particular condition until it has been diagnosed. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need early diagnosis as quickly as possible so that parents and others can be assisted with the provision of the appropriate medication?

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, and he is absolutely right. The delay in diagnosis also means a delay in treatment. We have debated this topic many times; just last week in this Chamber, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) led a powerful debate on waiting times. I thank colleagues who have shared their stories individually.

I want first to touch on ADHD as a neurodiverse condition, which is believed to impact over 3 million people in the UK. However, there is substantial evidence that it is vastly underdiagnosed.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I was fortunate enough to chair the debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). Does my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) agree that this is not just about delays and a lack of proper diagnosis? There is a real and crucial problem, which came out in last week's debate, about women and girls being less likely to be diagnosed than their male peers.

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her intervention; she has nicked a later part of my speech. I commend her for the amazing work she does chairing the Women and Equalities Committee, which has done amazing work looking at the impact on women and girls in the equalities space. She is absolutely right, of course.

There is a lack of understanding about what ADHD actually is, how it affects people and how it can be treated. The best example is the common stereotype that those with ADHD are all hyperactive. That is a common misconception; only about 15% of patients diagnosed with ADHD have hyperactive tendencies. GPs and teachers hold the responsibility, in essence, for being gatekeepers to assessments, but there are significant issues with training and awareness, which I will go into in more detail. The single biggest issue I have had feedback on from those who have briefed me is the complete lack of data on ADHD care.

When I met with ADHD UK last week, I asked about national data on assessment waiting times and the number of individuals diagnosed. The answer I got was, quite simply, "We don't know,"—or, at least, the NHS and the Government do not know. ADHD UK has done an extraordinary job conducting its own extensive

research and, as an independent charity, it can provide partial answers based on information it has gathered through freedom of information requests to integrated care boards. The Government, however, do not collect national data, and it is therefore hard to have true oversight of the state of waiting times for ADHD assessments in the UK. I know the Minister is very much aware of the problem, so I hope she will provide more information on the steps the Government are taking to gather and assess data on ADHD.

Based on the data available to us and the anecdotal evidence shared with us by those who have gone through the system, we know that ADHD waiting times are indeed in a poor state. The average adult assessment waiting times are believed to be around six months in Scotland, a year in England, nearly two years in Wales and four years in Northern Ireland.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned assessment waiting times. Does he not agree that that problem is compounded by the time it can take to get EHCPs from local councils, which can lead to further waiting times on top of that?

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that just about every Member present has received in their postbag requests for help from people who face delays in accessing EHCPs. That demonstrates the failure in the system, because when parents go through the complaints process, go to the ombudsman or go to a tribunal, the data is clear: between 90% and 100% of cases are found in the parents' favour. It is clearly a systematic failure.

Some 34% of respondents to the Petitions Committee survey agreed with the data I have just read out, stating that they had waited between one and three years for an assessment. The average child waiting times are believed to be approximately seven months in England and Scotland and 1.6 years in Wales, while there is absolutely no data for Northern Ireland.

I want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who could not be present as she is chairing the Foreign Affairs Committee at the moment. She informed me that the waiting time for a referral to a community paediatrician in her constituency is approximately two years. I am sure many other hon. and right hon. Members will have similar experiences. This echoes responses to the Petitions Committee survey from the parents and guardians of children with an ADHD diagnosis. Some 17% said that their child had to wait between six months and a year for an assessment, 28% had to wait between one and two years, 21% had waited between two and three years, while 7% said that their child had waited for more than five years.

Those examples involve people with suspected ADHD who are referred, but many more slip through and are completely missed by GPs and teachers or are rejected from being referred prior to assessment—I believe that applies to in the region of 46% of all cases. As the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), quite rightly says, young women and girls in particular are likely to be underdiagnosed, with a male-to-female ratio of 3:1. Again, that highlights the need for better training and understanding of neurodiverse

conditions. The misconception that ADHD is exclusive to hyperactive young boys is rife, and is another contributing factor to the failure to assess ADHD properly and in time.

The statistics regarding diagnosis are concerning, but the real-life implications of inadequate and late ADHD diagnoses are really quite harrowing. Last week, I had the pleasure of meeting Lisa, one of the creators of the petition calling on the Government to tackle ADHD waiting lists. Lisa's son was one of the many people to visit their GP in the hopes of receiving a swift diagnosis and support. Instead, however, the GP's referral was delayed, because the documentation was not submitted by the surgery following a consultation. The family were then informed that getting an assessment could take up to three years. Sadly, last year Lisa's son took his own life. I thank Lisa for the courage she has shown in sharing her story with me and allowing it to be told in the Chamber today. I am sure we all agree that it is a story she should not have had to tell.

Although ADHD is not a mental health condition, it does have close links to mental health conditions. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) pointed out earlier, those who do not receive support are more vulnerable to trauma, which can trigger depression. In fact, adults with ADHD are five times more likely to take their own lives than those without it.

The repercussions of inadequate and delayed support for those with ADHD are deadly. When we consider the lack of available data on ADHD diagnosis and waiting times, we can only guess at the true extent of the effect on society. For those who do receive a diagnosis, support is often inadequate because of the lack of training and understanding of ADHD in hospitals, schools and wider society. I hope that the Minister can update us on what plans the Government have to improve waiting times for ADHD assessments and support for those living with it.

Although the state of play for autism diagnosis is a lot clearer, the outlook is no less bleak. Thankfully, data for autism exists on a national level. There are over 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, and the latest NHS data suggests that over 120,000 people are waiting for an autism assessment in England alone. Despite guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence stating that no one should have to wait longer than three months between referral and first being seen, more than 100,000 people have waited longer than that. The Petitions Committee survey echoed that, finding that 43% of adults and 47% of children have been waiting for between one and three years for an NHS autism assessment. As with ADHD, long delays risk people's needs escalating and autistic people falling into crisis unnecessarily. That ultimately ends up putting more pressure and costs on other services, including mental health services.

I had the pleasure of meeting Jess, the co-creator of the petition calling for action to reduce ADHD and autism assessment waiting times. She shared her family's experience of trying to get diagnoses for her children and her partner for ADHD and autism. Her frustrating story demonstrated an all-too-familiar experience of someone waiting multiple years for an assessment, waiting multiple years for an EHCP and waiting multiple years to receive support for her child's deteriorating mental health.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My postbag has been full of people writing in with examples of how their child has suffered from a late diagnosis of autism. Does my hon. Friend accept that the younger the child is, the greater the problem for the parents and the greater the loss for the child?

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, that all comes back to the very important point that early intervention and diagnosis are key, because then there is the potential to prevent problems from escalating to crisis point.

One of the respondents to the Petitions Committee survey echoed Jess's story, saying:

"My daughter has been waiting almost 4.5 years for an NHS ASD assessment. In this time, she has spent 1.5 years out of school, 6 months being unable to leave the house, had no social life, had severe anxiety, is depressed and had suicidal feelings."

Jess also shared with me her experience of the referral consultation and the assessment itself. She described the process as "antagonistic" and said it was "almost like the parents are on trial".

Many parents, like Lisa and Jess, have also described the questions asked during the assessment process as a box-ticking exercise that played heavily on stereotypes about autism and ADHD. An example I was given by another witness I spoke to included a question asking the patient if they liked to put things in order.

As with ADHD, autism can be misdiagnosed or overlooked. Often autism exists alongside other conditions.

Mark Eastwood: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the conditions being overlooked and about the attitude of the services dealing with them. Does he agree that there needs to be better training for people involved in those professional services, including in child and adolescent mental health services and in the councils, for EHCPs?

Elliot Colburn: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is absolutely right: more and better training is definitely needed.

When diagnosing autism, there is often a big focus on the anxious behaviours that some people display. When a person does not display those behaviours—that template example of what an autistic person looks like—they are unlikely to get a diagnosis. I again thank the petition creators for sharing their courageous stories with me, and all those who responded to the Petitions Committee survey.

In the national autism strategy, published last year, the Government promised:

"By the end of the strategy"—
by 2026—

"we will have made demonstrable progress on reducing diagnosis waiting times and improving diagnostic pathways for children, young people and adults".

I would appreciate it if the Minister could update the House on the strategy and, in particular, on the steps the Government are taking to bring down waiting times and improve training for assessments.

Many Members want to speak, so I will bring my remarks to a close. There is clearly a systematic failure at the heart of ADHD and autism diagnoses. Millions of neurodiverse people are left undiagnosed and wait years to be assessed. Training on and awareness of ADHD

[*Elliot Colburn*]

and autism are lacking, resulting in misdiagnoses and inadequate support post diagnosis. For some, support is almost non-existent. I commend the brave families who are being failed by the system but have taken the time to speak out and speak to us about the issue. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other right hon. and hon. Members, and I very much look forward to the Minister's response on some of the good news we can look forward to on improving diagnosis and support.

4.51 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank the Petitions Committee for granting this important debate and all those who signed the petition to make it possible.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on attention deficit hyperactive disorder, I am proud to speak in today's debate on behalf of all those with ADHD and autism. I want to raise the enormous challenges and barriers they face daily and the importance of improving resources, training and access to diagnosis and treatment.

On 13 September 2017, in a debate I secured in this very Chamber, I spoke about waiting times, and diagnosis and treatment following a diagnosis of autism or ADHD. It is very disappointing that, six years on, ADHD and autism remain significantly underdiagnosed and undertreated in the UK, at great cost to individuals, public services and the workforce. I will focus my comments on ADHD.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that results in a group of behavioural symptoms, including difficulty concentrating, inattentiveness, hyperactivity, impulsivity and difficulty sleeping. The symptoms affect people's everyday lives—their development, education, work, relationships and family life. According to the ADHD Foundation, one in 20 people in the UK has ADHD. Although the disorder is associated with children and young people, up to two thirds of cases persist in adulthood. There is a growing understanding of the challenges that ADHD causes for adults.

Although awareness has increased and a lot more people—especially women—are openly talking about ADHD and seeking a diagnosis, there remain severe delays and barriers to diagnosis and treatment for ADHD in the UK today. That is leaving people in limbo and in need of support, and means that enormous untapped potential is restricted and hidden away.

Others have rightly mentioned that an early diagnosis of ADHD has a transformative impact on individuals. For someone with ADHD, a diagnosis can help them to understand their symptoms and gain control over behaviours such as inattention and impulsivity, allowing them to fulfil their potential. Diagnosis is absolutely crucial in enabling people to access treatment and get the support they need.

Although one in 20 adults is believed to have the condition, only 120,000 have had a formal diagnosis. There are many reasons for that. One is stigma, which manifests itself in many different ways, not least in societal attitudes to ADHD and the misconception that it affects only boys and young men. Others dismiss ADHD as an undeserving drain on health resources.

Kim Leadbeater: My hon. Friend makes the valuable point that sadly we still have a lot of work to do to reduce the stigma associated with ADHD and autism. Does he agree that we need an education system and, indeed, a society that celebrate neurodiversity and all the wonderful things it brings with it?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We need education in society, and the acceptance of people with ADHD and autism, to ensure that people with those neurodiverse conditions are able to flourish and live to their full potential.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): That is twice that the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) has intervened and I have agreed with what she said. As Chair of the Select Committee on Education, I am passionate about ensuring that we have the provision to address children's needs. One challenge with the current delays in diagnosis is that although local authorities have the statutory duty to measure where provision is needed and to provide places accordingly, if children are not getting the diagnoses, they do not have the statistics. One thing that we can perhaps do with this debate is encourage faster diagnosis so that we can help to meet that need and ensure that, where specialist support is needed, it is provided.

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Member is absolutely right: faster diagnosis is needed to ensure that the resources go to those who need the support the most. I very much look forward to the publication of the special educational needs and disabilities paper, because it might be a game changer if it delivers.

The inadequate services available for ADHD are another key barrier. As more people seek referrals for ADHD, there just is not the service capacity to match the demand. This is also an issue with staffing levels with regard both to people who can assess ADHD and to the support that is given after an assessment has been made, because there is a need to recruit people with those skills.

People are waiting years for an ADHD diagnosis, as access to services and treatment in the UK is limited and inconsistent. Indeed, according to survey data published in the ADHD Foundation's "Born to Be ADHD" report, more than a third of adults and children diagnosed with ADHD had to visit their GP at least three times before being referred to a specialist, with 28% waiting two or more years before receiving a diagnosis. In advance of today's debate, the Petitions Committee carried out a survey and found that most people who responded to the petition had had to wait more than a year for an assessment of ADHD or autism.

The impact of the delays cannot be overstated. The long-term effects of untreated ADHD are documented and include increased rates of other health problems, poor social functioning and antisocial behaviour. For example, those with ADHD are twice as likely not to take up full-time employment. It is also estimated that 24% of the prison population has ADHD, so intervention and diagnosis of ADHD would clearly improve the life chances of people with ADHD who fall into the criminal justice system.

Another problem is the inconsistency—what has been described as a postcode lottery—in support for people with ADHD. Where someone lives is critical in determining how long they are likely to wait to be referred.

Mark Eastwood: The hon. Member mentions a postcode lottery, dependent on where people live. Is it the case that that applies in the school system as well, and that some schools within a postcode even are better than others when it comes to looking after special educational needs?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Member is absolutely right: getting the resources after a diagnosis has been made is affected by which school the child is at and what resources it has available to provide the support needed.

As I was saying, where someone lives is critical in determining how long they are likely to wait to be referred for an assessment or diagnosis of ADHD, especially given increasing demand. As we know, there is no NHS waiting time standard for ADHD assessment, which means that waiting times are not measured and reported. Last week the Minister, in response to a Westminster Hall debate, pledged to look into national data collection for ADHD assessment waiting times. That would be a positive step forward and I urge the Government to take it. Will the Minister confirm today that she will ensure that that data is publicly available so that we can start accurately to measure waiting times and standards, and end the postcode lottery that exists in ADHD support?

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I ask the hon. Member, who is clearly something of an expert in this area, how reliable he thinks the diagnoses are when people eventually get their appointments? Two of the three cases brought to my attention feature quite strongly a resistance to making the diagnosis of ADHD, even though in these cases—one involving a child and the other a young adult female—they were absolutely convinced that this was the answer. All sorts of reasons are found, including a lot of misinformation, for not making what we think is the correct diagnosis.

Bambos Charalambous: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the inconsistency in diagnosis. The unwillingness to give a diagnosis impacts on people's ability to get on with their lives, which also needs to be addressed. On that point, will the Minister see what can be done to ensure consistency across the board on diagnoses?

I end by paying tribute to the incredible work of those involved in ADHD support: the charities, including the ADHD Foundation and my local National Autistic Society group; clinicians in the NHS; and members of the public who are pushing for change in how we think about and support people with ADHD so that those with the condition can thrive. As chair of the APPG, I know that the work of the ADHD Foundation and others is incredibly valuable. I hope that today's debate, with the many excellent contributions that will follow from Members from all parties, will show the breadth of support in this place for ending the delays and barriers in ADHD diagnosis and treatment. It is time for the Government to act so that we can break down the barriers to success that thousands across the country continue to face in their everyday lives.

5.1 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington

(Elliot Colburn) for his excellent leadership of the debate. I also thank the 38 people of Darlington who signed the petitions. In addition to those signatories, I have had correspondence from more than 40 constituents who have faced issues with assessments for autism and ADHD.

Since being elected to Parliament in 2019, I have engaged with many families in Darlington who have children with autism or are awaiting a diagnosis. We must do more to improve the speed of the assessments and improve our guidance to parents on the support and help available when a diagnosis is given. From the many conversations that I have had on this issue, I know that families feel alone and are often unaware of the full range of support that is available to them, either pre or post diagnosis. More than 300 people in Darlington under the age of 18 are awaiting an assessment. Some 40% of them have been waiting for less than a year, 40% have been waiting for up to two years and 20% have been waiting for almost three years. That is just not good enough. In the absence of a diagnosis, these families' lives are on hold and these children's lives are not progressing as they should.

On average, there are 40 referrals per month in Darlington, but as each month ticks by the number assessed is always less. The backlog of cases awaiting assessment will never go down, and that is simply unacceptable. I am aware that the petitions we are debating call for more funding—indeed, the answer in this place to every problem seems to be more funding—but this issue is about more than money alone. There are insufficient numbers in training, and recruitment to these challenging roles is not sufficient. Questions have to be asked of local service providers. What more could they do? For example, could weekend working or evening assessments help to clear the unacceptable backlogs?

Last Friday, I was pleased to visit Daisy Chain to learn about the services that it provides across the Tees Valley, and I place on record my thanks to Daisy Chain for all it does to help families in Darlington.

I regularly engage with Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust on this issue. As the Minister is aware, we cannot underestimate the challenges and circumstances that TEWV service users and their families face. I have raised concerns about the need to improve TEWV's services on many occasions, in particular in the light of a recent unannounced inspection by the Care Quality Commission. Following the inspection, some services at TEWV's mental health trust improved, but the trust's overall rating remains "requires improvement". The Minister is aware of the problems faced by my constituents, and I thank her for her extensive engagement with me on that issue. I hope she Minister will confirm that the Government will keep a laser-like focus on TEWV and do everything in their power to ensure that the trust continues to improve, as it is so desperately needed.

I warmly welcome the recently published review of special educational needs and disabilities. With the majority of children with SEND attending mainstream schools, it is right that the review proposes to improve the mainstream provision for children with SEND, including through an overhaul of the training for special educational needs co-ordinators. I also welcome the fact that more specialist places for children needing non-mainstream support will be made available, alongside an improvement programme for alternative-provision schools.

[Peter Gibson]

Last year, I tabled a number of written questions regarding the number of teachers and teaching assistants in each constituency who have undergone autism-related training and was disappointed to learn that the Government do not collate or collect any data on this issue. I ask the Minister to recognise the benefit of collecting that kind of data, which would show us where the educational system requires further work in providing support for children with autism, and I encourage holding data on teachers who have received specialist ADHD training, for the same reason.

The CQC's report on TEWV, "Out of Sight", acknowledges the shortcomings of some of our mental health facilities, the challenges they face with patients—particularly those who suffer with autism—and the sense that places designed for care are not therapeutic. I firmly believe that it is vital to embed a culture of learning, safety and improvement across the mental health care sector. I welcomed the recommendations from the report, which would address some of the shortcomings, and ask the Minister to update us on what action the Government took following the report.

When it comes to people with complex needs, I believe that a conversation is required with our local authorities, which are paying massive sums of money each and every month to out-of-area providers. In my view, some imaginative and collective commissioning could put an end to seemingly ever-increasing costs, much of which are taken up by astronomical transport costs.

We can go so much further for children with complex needs to ensure that there is proper support in place to allow them to flourish, but it starts with prompt diagnosis. I trust that the Minister has listened closely to all the contributions today and that she will do everything in her power to end the excessive waits and give these kids a chance.

5.7 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair today, Ms Fovargue. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for leading this vital debate, and my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill who have signed both of the petitions.

In 2018, NICE updated its guidance for the diagnosis and management of ADHD, yet the provision of services for adults with the condition is not well understood across all the nations of the United Kingdom. The long-term consequences of failing to treat ADHD effectively are well known and well documented. Up to 65% of adults with ADHD who were undiagnosed in childhood tend to suffer from myriad mental health conditions such as mood and anxiety disorders, leading to clinical depression and even suicidal thoughts, as we have heard. A combination of poor understanding and delays in diagnosis means that 120,000 adults across the United Kingdom are currently waiting to be assessed. By improving the identification, care and management of ADHD in adults, we could reduce the number of adults reaching a point of crisis and developing the significant and myriad mental health conditions I have mentioned.

The Scottish Government fully understand the situation I have outlined and have committed to deliver a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity Bill, which is coming through the Scottish Parliament. As with every single piece of proposed legislation, working with those affected and those with lived experience will be at the heart of all that we do. The Scottish Government are currently actively recruiting neurodivergent people to take part in a panel that will help to design an inclusive consultation for the proposed new Bill. That is how real, effective policy should be made: through engaging with those persons who are most affected in their day-to-day lives. Of course, the final situation is problematic, but the Scottish Government have allocated £46 million to improve the delivery of mental health and psychological services, including CAMHS, psychological therapies, treatment for eating disorders, and neurodevelopmental services. A report by the National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism found that 96% of people surveyed support the introduction of the Bill both to promote and to protect the rights of autistic people.

In order to promote instrumental change, the UK Government must invest in early diagnosis and mental health support, and follow the lead of the Scottish Government with the introduction of a new Bill. Collectively, across the four nations of the United Kingdom, we must all do better in advocating for early diagnosis and ensuring that waiting times are lowered to encourage access to diagnosis and support. We must ensure that those who are disabled have their rights adhered to and fully respected.

In the proposed Scottish Government Bill, the SNP will pledge to create a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity commissioner, yet the UK Government have no plans for an equivalent position here in England. I ask the Minister: why not? Under the UK Government system, the position of Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is a mid-level ministerial post in the Department for Work and Pensions, which has responsibility for every realm of legislation affecting disabled people. I do not think that is good enough.

There are potential merits to having a separate commissioner, independent of any Government, who may improve the lives of disabled people and better scrutinise the Government, leading them to act on health, education, criminal justice and other areas of society for neurodivergent people. There are similar roles in other countries, such as the health and disability commissioner in New Zealand and the mayoral office for people with disabilities in New York. I urge the UK Government to take urgent action and give those with neurodevelopmental disorders the attention and legislative commitments that they truly and rightly deserve.

5.11 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I thank the Petitions Committee for scheduling the debate on these two petitions and I congratulate everyone who signed them.

I take a close interest in diagnosis and support for autistic people, because early assessment and diagnosis can make a huge difference to people's lives. As we have heard, we do not identify autism quickly enough at any stage in life, despite the increased awareness of and

focus on autism in recent decades. In my work as an MP, I have seen what a difference diagnosis and support can make to the lives of autistic people, unlocking their potential and further improving our understanding and treatment of the condition.

I remember clearly one woman who came to my surgery very concerned about how her daughter was getting on at secondary school. I tentatively asked her whether she had thought about a diagnosis of autism, and she said she had not. A couple of years later, I got an email from her thanking me for changing their lives. The daughter received a diagnosis of autism and is now getting the help she needs. Apparently she is a completely different person now.

Undiagnosed autism has a huge impact on education. I was chair of governors at Milton Park Primary School in Portsmouth, which has autism provision in its dedicated inclusion centre. Crucially, the centre works with children undergoing assessment, as well as those who have been given an education, health and care plan. Autistic children often struggle in mainstream education settings and specialised support is important. We must ensure that this area is properly resourced.

Autistic people face stigma and a lack of understanding in education, work and society. It can affect their socialisation and how they handle transitions from familiar surroundings to unfamiliar ones. Mental health conditions are an increased risk for autistic people. Even now, there are still cases of autism being mistaken for a learning disability, which is a concern because of the different kinds of support the two conditions need. While it is possible for someone to be autistic and have a learning disability, the two are distinct conditions.

I know from my own casework and research that the process of getting an EHCP for any condition can be long and difficult, even in areas such as that covered by Hampshire County Council, which has an outstanding child services team. Diagnosis and support for autistic people later in life is even more fraught with difficulty. Often people are diagnosed having faced barriers to employment or career development, but eventual diagnosis still makes a huge difference to the rest of their lives and can allow them a new start and a better understanding of who they are.

We are around halfway through our national autism strategy, launched in 2021, and I appreciate the additional funding and improvements to the diagnostic pathways that it brings. However, like everything in social services, autism services have been set back by the covid pandemic. Research by the Autism Society shows that the waiting list for autism assessment has grown by nearly 40%. Autism, as we have heard, is not a mental health condition, but it falls within the scope of the NHS mental health services dataset, as well as the community services dataset. Will the Minister look at setting up a separate dataset for autism and related conditions to give us a clear picture of the time from first referral to diagnosis and the beginning of support? I know that other Members have talked about that, too.

Can the Minister also assure me that, as part of our catching up in education, we will have further support for autism diagnosis and support in schools? We cannot afford to allow young people to slip through, because that would amount to a loss of support for them.

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She will recognise that we are launching an inquiry into persistent absence from school. Does she share my experience that so many children are away from school because their parents do not feel that they are getting the support that they need? In many cases, clearer, earlier diagnosis and getting the right support in place would help us to solve that problem and help to make sure those children get the right support in the safest place for them to be.

Mrs Drummond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am also asking for a register of home-schooled children so that we can look into that and identify them quickly.

We need support for autistic children and autistic people generally so that society does not lose their potential and value, which would be much missed.

5.16 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I will speak mainly about ADHD because we have limited time, but I want to put on the record that autism services need more resources, and autistic people deserve support and aftercare following diagnosis.

Currently, as we have heard, there is no NHS waiting time standard for ADHD assessment. It is not generally measured and reported, so we have to use anecdotal evidence. In Leeds the waiting time for the first appointment is a minimum of two years, although it is often much longer. Adult ADHD services are a postcode lottery. Some areas have no adult ADHD service at all, and many others have waits of five years-plus.

On top of long waiting times and limited support, people with ADHD are often stigmatised. I have heard people deny its existence, claiming that children with the condition are simply not disciplined properly, and that adults just need to grow up and take responsibility for their shortcomings. Others say, "Everybody has those symptoms." Of course, anyone can struggle to concentrate or might sometimes act impulsively, but having numerous symptoms present from childhood that are so intense and frequent that they take over your life is a very different thing. Neuroimaging studies have shown that there are structural differences in ADHD brains. ADHD is real, and without treatment it can ruin lives. Why, then, are clinical staff not routinely trained in adult ADHD?

One person I know was told that their GP refused to refer them for an assessment because they had what they considered to be a "good job" and so could not possibly have ADHD. I am sure that the academics, authors and MPs I know with ADHD would disagree. I want to share something that a constituent told me:

"As a child I was always the class clown type, constantly in trouble. At 9 years old I was taken to the doctors, who essentially told my mum that 'boys will be boys'. As the years passed, my life became progressively more unmanageable. I drank and took drugs to excess, was unable to manage my finances, and ruined many of my relationships and friendships. The cycle repeated endlessly, until one day a friend who taught at a college said she reminded me of a few of her students who had ADHD. I looked into it and realised I ticked so many boxes, so approached the NHS for a diagnosis, and was put on a lengthy waiting list—with no information about how long I would have to wait for my assessment."

They went on:

"A few months later, I was handed a short prison sentence after a violent offence. After getting out a few months later, I tried once again to contact the NHS team, but to no avail. It didn't take long

[Alex Sobel]

for the drink, drugs and reckless spending to start again. I was also made homeless. Eventually, a support worker got me an appointment with the NHS ADHD team. I was told that I did have ADHD but that my life was too chaotic to start treatment. Shortly after, I ended up back in prison. After getting out I managed to find a flat, got a really good job, met my partner and my life was going well. But as anyone with ADHD will attest to, healthy routines are almost impossible to keep up without proper support, and it wasn't long until old habits crept back in."

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I listened very carefully to that story. The hon. Gentleman's mention of the criminal justice system allows me to intervene to say that there are grounds for hope, because 48 neurodiversity support managers have been appointed in our prison system, with more to come, to screen and identify people with neurodivergent conditions. Does he agree that that is a step forward that is long overdue?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely. In a BBC interview in 2019, I called for compulsory screening and diagnosis for everybody who received a custodial sentence. So many people in our criminal justice system have ADHD, and we would save far more money if we screened and gave people treatment, rather than making them go through the awfulness of that experience.

My constituent continued:

"I realised I needed help, and contacted the NHS ADHD team that gave me my original diagnosis. I was told that even with the diagnosis, it would be an 18-month-plus wait and I would have to start the process all over again. In the end, I went private, which is extremely expensive. I pay a monthly fee for the calls with my doctor, a fee for the prescription, and a fee for my medication. It comes in at around £500 a month, which I can only afford because my mum died last year and left me some money. It was a struggle finding what worked for me, but I'm now on a treatment plan, which has changed my life. I don't drink anymore, my relationship with my partner has improved dramatically. I'm managing my finances better and my performance at work is a level I've never hit before. Life is just so much easier and happier now."

For so many, their ADHD is not known to them. They are not aware that they have it, but it is sitting there undiagnosed. Someone may know something is different about them, but they do not know what it is. Some people cope, but others just do not. My constituent's story shows the transformative power of an ADHD diagnosis and treatment. It shows how people are increasingly turning to the private sector for help. I have to say that that appears to suit the Government's agenda—to encourage provision out of the NHS and into the private sector.

ADHD and autism services are in crisis. They need proper funding for training, screening, diagnosis and aftercare. I do not want to live in a country with a two-tier healthcare system, where those who can afford it get support and the rest are left to suffer. I hope the Government will heed the calls made today and act to fix their broken system.

5.21 pm

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): As we can see from the number of Members present, this is a really important issue. It is quite a personal one for me, my wife and my family. My heart goes out to everyone affected, including parents of children with autism and ADHD.

Most of us have experienced the despair of being at the school gate and having to drag our child out of the car and into school. It is agonising. There is guilt as well. When parents are focusing so much attention on one child, the others feel left out. Parents feel guilty about that. It puts pressure on marriages and on people's relationships with their family and their children. Worst of all is not knowing where to turn to or who can help. A diagnosis is the starting point on the path to getting crucial help for both children and families. Waiting months—sometimes years—for a diagnosis is frankly unacceptable, and that theme has been picked up by Members.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on his opening speech. As I say, this debate is quite personal to me, but I do not want to be too emotional about it in front of everyone here. The reason the debate is so crucial is that delays in assessments for diagnosis are one of the main reasons families contact me from across Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale. Some families have waited up to two years for an CAMHS assessment, which has a significant impact on children's ability to receive the support they need to access their education.

That is further compounded by delays in obtaining education, health and care plans in my constituency. An EHCP should be completed in 20 weeks. That is rarely the case, although it depends which council is involved. For example, Bradford issued 80.6% of EHCPs within 20 weeks and Leeds around 88.7%, but Kirklees—I see the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater)—issued only 40.6%. That needs to be addressed. Why is Kirklees Council not performing as well as others? I am not making this issue political; some of these are Labour councils and they are doing better than us. I might be going out of scope, but the point I am trying to make is that, given the waits for assessments and EHCPs, children and families can wait three years or more to get the complete support that they need, and they definitely need it.

There is help at hand from some fantastic volunteer groups, in particular in my constituency and across West Yorkshire. The hon. Member for Batley and Spennings has mentioned it already, but I have had various meetings with the West Yorkshire ADHD Support Group. I had the pleasure of being with it at the Make A Difference awards in Leeds, when it was presented with a volunteer award, which was well deserved, because it does great work. I do not like to mention the hon. Lady again, but we were both at the Christmas party in my constituency when Santa turned up, to meet the kids and their parents, and we went through all their experiences.

Last year, I met parents and children at Growing Works, which runs two-hour, weekly outdoor social support groups at weekends for families who have children with a range of additional needs. That is called the Sprout—Strong Parents Reaching Out—project. It is a vital support network for those undergoing this process.

In 2020 I wrote to the Department for Education to highlight the severe impact of CAMHS diagnosis delays on mental health and educational development as part of my submission to the SEND review, which, as has been mentioned, is coming out next week. My submission outlined the importance of a co-ordinated effort between

school SENCOs—special educational needs co-ordinators—local authorities, health professionals, CAMHS, children and their families.

I therefore welcome that the total high-needs budget of £9.7 billion announced in July 2022 has been increased by £400 million to £10.1 billion as a result of additional schools funding included in last year's autumn statement. That does not include the £325 million allocated for 2022-23 under the schools supplementary grant. I also welcome Kirklees' designation as an education investment area in the levelling-up White Paper, with £30 million allocated to councils across the UK for positive opportunities in SEND support.

I am sympathetic to the petitions about increased funding but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) said, a change in finances will not necessarily resolve the issue. Instead, I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose, and suitable for the applicant, their family and the educational support network.

Finally, I have a message for those who are experiencing the challenges of getting a diagnosis or an EHCP to get their child to the right school: with the help of the right people, a positive outcome is possible. Your child could even end up completing a master's degree at university—with a distinction, no less.

5.27 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue.

I congratulate the Petitions Committee on not just scheduling the debate, but the surveys and outreach work it has done, which has come a long way since the Committee was first set up. What it does is really valued. I also think that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) once again did justice to the topic that he presented.

Over recent years, awareness of neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD and autism has improved massively. I am slightly worried that we are seeing a bit of push-back, with people saying it is fashionable to have ADHD because a number of celebrities have come out and said that they have it, and almost casting doubt on the diagnosis behind that. We have heard people's stories about how much they have gone through, wondering what is wrong with them or why they do not fit into society, and about the obstacles that they had to get through to get a diagnosis, so no one should say that this is something people do just on a whim, because they want to look cool. It is unfortunate that people say that.

Of the constituents who have come to me about this, a lot were diagnosed as adults. They had years of being misunderstood and having their abilities underestimated. A lot of them started out as very bright kids at school, but had something go wrong at secondary school, just because it was not designed to fit how they learned or how they conducted themselves in the classroom. They were often misdiagnosed as suffering from anxiety or depression, for example.

One of the things that struck me when constituents told me how they got their diagnosis is the role of GPs. It was sometimes very perceptive GPs who spotted that it might be ADHD after other people had not, and that was the gateway to a life-changing diagnosis. As well as talking about what mental health services can do, and

about SEND and EHCPs, we need to ensure that GPs have the time to spend with their patients. They should be able to see their patients face to face if that is what is needed so they can play that crucial role.

There is wider understanding about children, but that does not always translate into practical knowledge of how to manage their needs, particularly if they have complex backgrounds. The mother of one of the children in my family was told that her child did not need another diagnosis because she already had physical disabilities linked to learning disabilities—it was like she had enough wrong with her, so she did not need something else. It was only when it reached crisis point that it was accepted that a physical disability is not treated in the same way as autism. Parents who come to us because they are struggling to get EHCPs really are at their wits' end because of all the obstacles and the number of times they get pushed back by the system, particularly when they are suspected of being over-anxious parents.

In Bristol, we are seeing some progress in EHCPs. The number of children waiting for autism diagnostic assessments has gone down fractionally, and the health service is trying to recruit extra staff to carry out the assessments. For adults, particularly when it comes to ADHD, it is still pretty bad. At the moment, the waiting lists are about 14 months for children to be assessed for ADHD and autism. For adults, it is 12 months for autism but four years for ADHD.

I met a constituent, Jacob, who goes by the name *adhdfatheruk* on Instagram and TikTok. He was diagnosed as a teenager and often struggled at school. Many labelled his hyperactivity as bad behaviour, and his inattentiveness was put down to laziness. He is very keen to press for greater awareness of ADHD in schools. He thinks that training teachers to recognise the signs of neurodivergence could mean that children's needs are picked up sooner, so they might face less stigma and be mislabelled less often. I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that. Obviously, she is a health Minister, but that role in schools is really important.

My constituent Laura recently appeared on ITV News to talk about her son Zac, who is eight years old and has autistic traits. He was referred by his school in December 2020 and still does not have a diagnosis. When I raised it with the local autism hub, it said it was expecting to see him by summer 2022. Well, he has still not been diagnosed.

I tabled a written question to the Minister last month, and I was told that between July 2021 and June 2022, more than 95,000 children were in a position similar to Zac's, with an open referral for suspected autism. That could be more than 95,000 children in limbo, up and down the country, just like Zac's family. As I understand it, the Department of Health and Social Care does not collect data on ADHD assessments, so it is quite possible that many more thousands of parents of children with ADHD may be waiting.

I know many other Members want to speak, so I will conclude. We have heard from other Members how much more likely people with ADHD are to attempt suicide. One study showed that 35% of autistic people have at some point planned to take their own life.

It was very interesting to hear what the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) said about assessments in the prison system. We know

[Kerry McCarthy]

that about a quarter of the prison population meets the threshold for an ADHD diagnosis, and up to 19% may be autistic. Particularly at young offender institutions, we need to crack that if we are to stop that lifelong criminal offending.

Finally, we are still waiting to hear about the SEND Green Paper and the improvement plan. The consultation document was co-authored by the Department of Health and the Department for Education, but there was not much in it about the overlap with CAMHS. My final plea is that we need to ensure that, particularly in the case of children, we look at this as a SEND issue and are getting the EHCPs, but that, where mental health support is needed, the two organisations are talking to each other.

5.35 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I thank the Petitions Committee for agreeing to the debate. This is a bittersweet moment for me: I brought a debate on this issue to this Chamber exactly one year ago. You were in the Chair, Ms Fovargue, and the same Minister was in her place. The kernel of my argument was that children in West Berkshire were waiting far too long for diagnoses of autism and ADHD, with sometimes devastating implications for their educational and social development.

I have been campaigning since then for no child ever to have wait more than one year for an initial diagnosis. That may sound as if it lacks ambition, but the reality for many children in West Berkshire is that the wait is more like three years. I would like to be able to say that there has been some progress. I had West Berkshire CAMHS in the dock last year, but I pay tribute to the service. I have spoken to the service a number of times this year and have relayed the impact of waiting times. The service has assured me that by March 2023, which is next month, it will have capped waiting times at two years, and by March 2024—in 13 months—it will have capped waiting times at 12 months, so my campaign will have eventually got there. But I regret to say that, of the many parents who wrote to me in advance of the debate, far too many still say that they have been waiting for much longer than that.

I will give a couple of examples; I could not possibly fit everybody in, which says something in itself. One lady, Kathleen, who looks after her two grandsons, told me about the 12-year-old boy, who is now approaching three years on the CAMHS waiting list:

“He is no longer in education. If I don’t get help soon I feel he is in danger of being criminalised due to his anger and behaviour being out of control”.

Another lady, Vanessa, told me about her eight-year-old son. She was initially told to expect a three-year wait, but says her GP pushed to get that reduced. She described filling in endless forms, and ended by saying:

“We are crying out for help he is 8 years old and seeing him so angry, upset and hating life is breaking our hearts.”

I know that the Government understand the impact of this issue, because they wrote about it, sensitively and with real understanding, in their SEND review, which was published last year. I look forward to hearing what they have to say about that, because I know there is more coming soon.

One of the petitions calls for an emergency fund. I can talk only about my local service. West Berkshire CAMHS received an extra £1.6 million in April 2021 to reduce waiting times. At the time, the service told me that it hoped that that would enable the recruitment of an extra 27 members of staff to help with diagnoses, and it has now recruited those people. None the less, it does not disagree that families continue to face long waits. The service has had an awful lot of extra money. I wonder whether there are other issues; I will touch on them today and invite the Minister to respond.

First, I wonder whether the system for diagnosis is too complicated. I know that the system falls between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, and that there has been a surge in demand for diagnostic services of this kind. However, I find it surprising that the experience of every single parent seems to be the same, irrespective of whether the child is still in mainstream school. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether there could be a flagging system at the initial point of triage, so that a child who is failing to access the curriculum or at risk of exclusion could be prioritised for diagnosis.

Another route I wanted to ask about stems from something that West Berkshire CAMHS said to me. I do not know whether this is true, but I will repeat what the service told me verbatim, which is that schools erroneously say that they cannot help until there is a diagnosis, although in fact they can on the presentation of need. If a school is confronted with a child who is presenting with typical ADHD-type symptoms, could there be an online tool, perhaps run by CAMHS, that would allow for a preliminary “We think it’s ADHD”? The child could then progress down that pathway while they wait. I do not know whether that is possible.

I also invite the Minister to comment on whether there could be better joined-up work between health and education services. In preparing for this debate, I refreshed my memory as to what she said when she responded to my debate last year. In that debate, the Minister talked about a £600,000 autism early diagnosis pilot taking place in Bradford that was creating testing facilities in

“at least 100 schools over the next three years to assess whether new approaches to...faster diagnosis can be rolled out across the country.”—[*Official Report*, 9 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 382WH.]

That is a commendable pilot. By now, it must be at least a year in. After the debate, I went to see Ministers at the Departments of Health and for Education to see whether West Berkshire schools could join the pilot. Unfortunately, I did not get anywhere with that, and I have not had much of an update on the pilot either. I would be interested to know whether on-site testing in schools is now ready for roll-out, or at least how the pilot is going.

My final point about CAMHS is something that other Members have touched on. When I visited the Downs School—a secondary school in Compton—last Friday, a pupil told me that one of the limitations of CAMHS is that mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are bundled together with neurodiversity diagnoses. While there is sometimes an overlap between the two, they are, in fact, distinct areas. Could the Minister comment on whether she thinks the neurodiversity aspect of CAMHS would work better if it was completely separated from the mental health element?

I know there is no magic bullet for any of these issues, but the solutions and ideas I have presented, some of which come from CAMHS professionals and teachers, suggest a simplified, more streamlined and accountable approach to ADHD and autism diagnoses. I would like to hope that this time next year, we will not need to have this debate again.

5.41 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on introducing this debate and on the many important points he made. I will certainly not repeat all the statistics that have been stated, as it is clear from what Members have said that there is a very serious issue here.

Instead, I want to focus on one particular statistic, quoted by the chief executive of the ADHD Foundation, which suggests that there has been a 400% increase in the number of adults seeking a diagnosis nationally. Between July and September alone, an estimated 170,000 people were prescribed at least one drug for ADHD, a 20% increase on the figure for the previous year. That is a huge increase in one year, and services have clearly been unable to cope with that increase. We have heard of some horrendous waiting times—I know that a recent FOI request by *The Guardian* showed that some people were waiting up to three years for an ADHD diagnosis.

However, I am afraid that in my part of the world it is even worse than that. My local adult ADHD service, provided by the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, has been closed to new referrals since April 2019. Despite the trust saying that it would be taking new referrals from last year, we are yet to see any notification of that happening. It is really letting down people who need help. I have been informed that part of the reason why the trust closed its doors to new referrals was that the funding it was allocated between April 2018 and March 2019 was enough to provide capacity for 79 assessments, so when it received 362 referrals in that period it was clear that it would not be able to manage. However, to close altogether to new referrals is completely unacceptable.

The fact that the trust was telling people that they might wait up to five years for an assessment is also completely unacceptable. We would not accept a five-year wait for a physical condition, so we should not accept it for ADHD. We certainly would not close our doors altogether to new referrals in that case. Could the Minister indicate whether action will be taken to ensure that my constituents can be seen in a timely manner, and actually seen at all, when GPs are referring them for an assessment? Surely refusing to see patients or assess them for specific conditions is discrimination. It is certainly against the founding principles of the NHS.

Once we realised that that was a problem, we noticed that it was not only a problem with adults. As we have heard, there is a huge issue in education. The fact that more adults are now seeking diagnosis points to past failings in the education system. There is certainly increased awareness in our school system now, but that begs the question of what opportunities have been lost because people were not diagnosed or identified as needing assistance at an earlier stage.

However, as hon. Members have said, not everything is rosy in the education system now. Every Member of Parliament will be able to tell us about how parents feel they have to fight every step of the way just to get a referral. Then they have to fight to get adjustments in the school and seem to have a constant battle to ensure those provisions are maintained.

When the umpteenth constituent came to see me this year about delays in receiving an EHCP, I looked into why that was the case and found there is a huge shortage of educational psychologists. When one constituent was recently informed that their child could not have the assessment within the legal timeframe required because there were no educational psychologists available, I decided to look into the numbers. I discovered that the ratio of educational psychologists covering the Cheshire West and Chester area was one for every 5,822 children and young people.

That is a stark comparison to figures from 2017 to 2019, when a report from the Department for Education found that the average number for the whole country was one for every 3,500 young people, and in the north-west it was one for every 3,900. I would be interested to see whether those national and regional figures have changed in the last two or three years; I suspect they have gone in the wrong direction. I know the Government have spent around £32 million on more support and on training for educational psychologists, but if we do not have the people able to undertake the assessments, we will never get the backlog sorted.

I want to say a little about some of the impacts that is having on constituents. An individual who has a child with ADHD came to see me. They have just begun the EHCP process, which they understand will take a number of months, but in the meantime they are struggling to find a school that will take their child. The child has already been removed from one school because of challenging behaviour, and now they are being kept off school for their own and other children's safety. My constituent has had to give up work, meaning both she and her child are losing out. From talking to parents, it seems that more and more children are dropping out of the school system altogether for a whole range of mental health issues. The number of pupils who are no longer on any school roll is a national scandal on which we need far more concerted action.

To end on a more positive note, I have heard from people with ADHD how transformative a diagnosis can be—the difference it can make to their lives and the sense it brings to some of the issues they have been struggling with, possibly for many years. That shows the importance of putting investment into diagnosis, to ensure that everyone gets opportunities to fulfil their potential. The waiting times we are talking about—five years, in some cases—are cruel and inhumane.

5.48 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I have had the good fortune of working with the ADHD Foundation, thanks to the work of my constituent, Jane Roberts, which culminated in my following quite closely some of the ins and outs, successes and not, of work on neurodiverse conditions. We had a beautiful display in Stroud to raise awareness, with a number of colourful umbrellas

[*Siobhan Baillie*]

throughout the town. Many constituents asked, “What are these umbrellas?” and we were able to have conversations about what ADHD is and what needs to change to support people with the condition.

Day in, day out, I am battling for Stroud district parents of children with special educational needs. I am talking to the Government, local authorities, councillors, Ministers and health teams, but my efforts are nothing compared with those of the hundreds of Stroud families who are battling every single day to be heard. There are some really worrying decisions being made and situations for children, particularly those waiting for diagnosis or for an EHCP. One mum told me that her little lad with autism has an hour in a mainstream school, so by the time he has got his little coat off, he has to put it back on again and leave. We all know that a feature of autism is the need for stability and a steady day, which is absolutely not what this child gets.

Many parents are waiting for diagnosis for ADHD and autism. They are fighting to be listened to and to get a way forward. They are fighting to find the right person to talk to, or even to get a response in some cases. They are fighting for funding, they are fighting for dates, they are fighting to understand timelines and they are fighting against delays. All too often, they are being pushed into tribunals and getting into debt in the process, but they keep going because they are fighting for their children. Parents do not want their children to be labelled or medicalised, as is so often mentioned in response to these discussions; they want them to be understood, and they want to have the right support in place so that their children can thrive.

I am in my late 40s, so I went to school in the '90s—Oasis, Blur, Kula Shaker and the Spice Girls. It is a long time ago now, and many of my peers are in all sorts of jobs. I have often wondered how many of us would have benefited from an early diagnosis of autism or ADHD when we were kids. Such conditions were not discussed when we were at school. It was not something that was raised or thought through. I am not surprised, therefore, that there has been a 400% increase in adults obtaining an ADHD diagnosis; it is because, unfortunately, this is quite new to many adults I talk to.

The parents and adults in Stroud who talked to me about these conditions said that there is nothing more discomobulating than constantly feeling that they are in the wrong job or career and do not understand why. They are never quite able to get the right help and are constantly changing things, such as diet and exercise; they will suddenly get medication, then come off it, but nothing helps. Again, adults who have had late diagnoses of autism and ADHD told me that they did not want to be medicalised or labelled; they wanted answers.

Mark Eastwood: My hon. Friend mentions the delays to adults getting a diagnosis in years gone by. Is it not the case that that is because there has until now been a misconception that ADHD is a sign of bad behaviour and not a medical condition?

Siobhan Baillie: My hon. Friend is completely right, and he spoke movingly about his own family's experiences of these conditions. It is incumbent on all of us in this place to try to raise awareness of what these conditions are and how they affect people. Of course, with every

individual being so wildly different, people will have different outcomes and different behaviours. We should not write anybody off or put them into one single bucket.

For the parents and adults I have spoken to, it is a complete relief when they finally receive a diagnosis and get to talk to somebody. One woman said to me, “Of course, when I looked up the condition, everything in my life made complete sense.” We should have got there earlier in her case.

When the Government look at this, I know that Ministers will carefully study the evidence, the data and the targets—the very smart people in the civil service will be doing the same—but the data is wanting, as we have heard from many hon. Members, and so much is hard to quantify. How many jobs and careers have been lost through the failure to diagnose autism and ADHD early? How many opportunities lost? How many people are on depression and anxiety medication, when clarity about their health through an early diagnosis could have helped them? How many people are secretly self-harming, and how many have taken their own lives?

That leads to my constituent, Jane, whose son, Ben, sadly took his life in 2020. I remember early conversations with Jane on Zoom during the pandemic, when we were on lockdown. I would have fallen apart; she obviously has had incredibly dark moments, but in response to Ben's death she has dedicated her life to trying to raise awareness about ADHD. She has invested £30,000—probably even more now—to ensure that there is early diagnosis for other children, and she funded the Umbrella Project I mentioned in Stroud.

Another constituent, Zaphira Cormack, has written to me about this issue. She founded the ADHD Hub in Gloucestershire last year. Since lockdown, she has seen an influx of adults seeking diagnosis, and daily she receives calls from parents struggling with children who are self-harming or suicidal. There was no pathway for children and young people in Gloucestershire, although this has now been commissioned for Gloucestershire, so we are hoping to see change.

I will be interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister, who is a hugely compassionate and knowledgeable Minister, and a nurse by background. I want to hear her views in response to some of the questions asked by hon. Members. Many people talk to me about the lack of understanding and awareness at primary care level, as GPs are often the first port of call when people have concerns. Parents are concerned in particular about lack of training, so I would like to know whether this is a feature of the work of the Department and whether anything is being done about training in primary care. I would also like to know how the Department of Health and Social Care is working with the DFE and local government, because we know that waiting times and the daily experiences of parents often do not sit with her Department when it comes to education.

I am very interested in the pilots that my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) mentioned. We would very much like some pilots in Stroud, if there are any going. I would like a comparison study to be done: when there are swift and early diagnoses, how many children and adults are found not to have ADHD or autism, because they had early treatment? My biggest fear is that people are waiting so long that they are ending up in a very difficult place, and they may go without education in the meantime.

My approach to politics is quite simple. Once we strip away all the drama in this very beautiful building, with political parties shouting at each other, saying that the other side does not care or does not have the right ideas, at the very core of this job is spotting problems and solving them. When family after family are telling all of us, across the House, that, at a time when we want everyone to be more productive and active, GPs, the NHS, central Government and local government do not have quite the right policies to ensure that children and adults can thrive in this country, we absolutely have to act, and we have to get in earlier. I am really looking forward to hearing from the Minister today.

5.57 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your guidance, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who introduced this debate, and the Petitions Committee on organising the debate, even though the petitions had not reached 100,000 signatures. This is a very important debate. We have heard heartbreaking stories from Members across the House. I am sure that the Minister will have noted the unity across the House on this matter and will respond appropriately.

I argue that there is a crisis in our country. It is a crisis for millions of individuals. I think it was said that there are 3 million people—children and adults—with ADHD and nearly three quarters of a million, at least, with autism. For each one of those people and for each of those families and households, this is a personal crisis. Of course it is a crisis brought on by the way in which we organise our society, but I will come back to that in a moment. I want first to record the experience of one family, although of course we all have many similar stories.

This is a family with a three-year-old son awaiting assessment for autism, sensory processing disorder and ADHD. He is non-verbal at three years old and has high sensory needs; he receives the high rate of disability living allowance. The referral in this three-year-old boy's case was made in March 2022. As of two weeks ago, he had had no access at all to any support. The family are managing on two to three hours' sleep a night. The mother felt it was necessary to give up her job to care for the boy—no doubt there are many mothers, fathers and grandparents all over the country doing similar things. The family spent every penny of their savings on home adaptations, and now there is no money left. The mother has had to go on to universal credit. Even if they wanted to go private, they could not afford it, and they should not have to do so.

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

There is a second case, on which I do not want to spend long because it is neither autism nor ADHD—it is dyspraxia, which is a related condition. A daughter was diagnosed and received some support, but the system failed to allow for her transition from school to university, which caused a great crisis in the family. We are seeing problems all over the country but, as I said in my opening remarks, these personal, familial and household crises are brought on by the way in which we organise our country.

We have heard these figures before, so I will be brief, but in England alone 120,000 people are currently waiting for an autism assessment, and 100,000 have waited more than three months, which is an important moment because NICE says that people should be seen within three months. That is a huge increase in the number of people waiting for assistance, diagnosis and treatment—a 40% increase in a single year. This problem exploded during the period of lockdown. No doubt there are a number of reasons for that, but these are individual human beings whose lives could be transformed if an early diagnosis was made and treatment recommended.

Late diagnosis causes problems for children in school, for the other children, for teachers and for parents and families. These children would be less likely to develop mental health issues later in life if they are diagnosed early, and the same is true of adults who are awaiting diagnosis. Both sides of the House agree that is clear.

I congratulate everyone who signed the petitions asking for Parliament to debate this subject, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I do not want to strike a discordant note, but two Conservative Members raised the question of money. I am from Yorkshire, and Yorkshiremen and women do not like spending money, although it is occasionally necessary—moths fly out of my purse if I ever manage to take out a £5 note. ITN and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism did a careful analysis across the country, and they estimate that the true scale of the SEND funding crisis, the true financial black hole facing councils, is more than £1 billion, which is a staggering amount of money. It would be interesting to know whether the Government have an accurate assessment of how much it would cost to resolve these issues. After all, the Government can make a difference to people's lives if they choose to act, which is what they should be doing.

I looked at the national autism strategy, which was published last year and offered peanuts to try to resolve some of these problems. I understand how difficult this is, and how we have to train skilled professionals; none the less, it offered peanuts. The Government promised that by the end of the strategy in 2026, which is years away, they would have made

“demonstrable progress on reducing diagnosis waiting times and improving diagnostic pathways for children, young people and adults across the country.”

That is not an ambitious statement. I do not want to be too discordant, because there is agreement on both sides of the House that this problem needs to be addressed and that we can transform lives. I am sure the Minister is fully conscious of that, given her professional background.

I will not continue too long, because a number of Members still want to speak, but I want to say that is important that we reflect on school admissions and exclusions. I wonder whether school academies, which are relatively autonomous and self-governing, have sufficiently strong guidance relating to children and young people who have what is called “challenging behaviour”. It may well be that some of them are challenging, but many of them have undiagnosed neurodivergent issues that need to be addressed. Is the Minister satisfied that there are sufficiently strong processes in place to prevent the exclusion, sometimes from more than one school, of young pupils who are neurodivergent? Eventually they either abscond or truant from school, or are simply kept at home by their parents because they feel that the

[Jon Trickett]

system is almost abusive to their child. I say that because I have become aware of large numbers of people over the years whose children have been excluded from school and who subsequently said that they realised that their child had undiagnosed and unaddressed health problems. I have to say that it seemed to be a particular issue in school academies. I wonder whether the Minister has had a look at that and whether she could write to the relevant Committee with any data on that matter.

6.6 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. I thank the petition organisers and the many people who signed it for ensuring that we could debate this incredibly important subject today. Many lives have been affected by delays in diagnosis, as evidenced by the huge number of MPs we have heard speak today. We talk about numbers and timeframes, but the thing that makes this situation entirely unacceptable is the scale of impact on all these individuals, their lives and the time they spend without the support they need.

One of my constituents shared his story with me. Around six years ago, Ben began having increased periods of depression, which eventually led to a situation in 2019 where he went through weeks of being unable to sleep and being confused and distressed, with suicidal ideation. Ben was referred by his GP for an autism assessment. It took more than three years for Ben to be diagnosed—three unbearable and unpredictable years of miscommunication, waiting and suffering for him and his family.

It is not just about the time. It is about the fact Ben continued to live undiagnosed with unmitigated challenges that impacted hugely on his work, social life and family life. It had a huge impact on his ability to focus and sleep and on his concentration and memory. He also suffered from rejection sensitive dysphoria. Ben has managed to turn the pain of his experience into energy. Alongside his wife, he has set up an autism charity to support other families dealing with the impact of autism. Too many people like Ben are left waiting, wondering and suffering for way too long. We must do more.

In my part of the world we have some incredible charities that work to support people with ADHD and autism. Daisy Chain is a fantastic Stockton charity that was set up by the late Lesley Hanson when her son was diagnosed with autism. It started life as a small charity but has gone from strength to strength. It now offers the lifeline of life-changing specialist provision to more than 3,000 families and neurodiverse individuals every year. I recently met with Daisy Chain and heard about the incredibly work it is doing to support people and ensure they can live their fullest lives.

I have also met representatives of the Stockton Parent Carer Forum, which supports families of children with special educational needs, providing an incredibly valuable place where parents can share experiences and seek advice. Importantly, it helps signpost parents to support and helps to try to mitigate any impact on children's development and education. All of these specialist organisations deserve our thanks. They make an incredible difference to the lives of many people across Stockton,

but they all share concerns about waiting times and the support made available to those suffering from autism and ADHD.

In the last five years, the number of people being treated for ADHD has risen by 80%. People with ADHD are five times more likely to commit suicide than somebody without the condition. That is why reducing waiting times for diagnoses and providing support for people with ADHD is so important. Currently, one third of adults awaiting assessment have been waiting for longer than 13 months. Those people are unable to receive much-needed support and medication while awaiting diagnosis.

I welcome the Government's commitment to addressing the issue and improving the diagnostic pathway and care for people with ADHD. By 2023-24, children and young people with a learning disability or autism—or both—with the most complex needs will have a designated key worker. That will improve the care and support they receive. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what the Government are going to do to drive down unacceptable waiting times and improve the support available so that those with autism and ADHD can live their lives to the full.

6.10 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for opening this afternoon's debate, and the constituents from Rutherglen and Hamilton West who signed the e-petitions. Although health is a devolved policy area, this issue affects people right across the United Kingdom. It is with that in mind that I speak here today, and I will focus specifically on the impact on women and girls.

Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and autism are chronically underdiagnosed and misdiagnosed in women and girls. Primarily that is because, broadly speaking, the conditions present differently than in males. There is also the fact that owing to societal pressures and expectations, women often become adept at masking, developing techniques to hide the conditions from others to avoid being stigmatised, or to feel accepted.

For the most part, women are into adulthood by the time they receive a diagnosis. One of my own staffers is a prime example and she has given me permission to mention this today. She was not diagnosed with ADHD until she was 24, and it was another year before the service she was under could provide her with a treatment plan, because slots were so limited.

Sometimes it is only after women have had their own children, usually sons who receive a diagnosis, that they begin to realise they share the traits and pursue a diagnosis for themselves. Even when that is not the case, diagnosis is often delayed by years because girls and women are highly likely to be misdiagnosed with a mood disorder such as depression, bipolar disorder or anxiety disorders. Both autism and ADHD are often viewed through the lens of mental health, but they are not at root mental health issues. The brain is literally wired differently. It is neurodevelopmental.

The image we conjure up in our minds when we think about ADHD is probably an outdated stereotype—a naughty little boy disrupting a classroom. We are more likely to focus on the H in ADHD—hyperactivity in its

most obvious sense. Women and girls are more prone to an inattentive or combined type of ADHD where the hyperactivity is not external but internal. Many women and girls describe a constant and endless stream of thoughts and ideas that never quieten, never stop. Naturally, that is very distracting. So how does that manifest itself?

School-age girls might be dubbed daydreamers. School reports have comments such as, “Bright, but needs to apply herself better”, “Clever, but makes silly mistakes”, or, “Needs to stop chatting”. It is often dismissed as just that: “She needs to try a bit harder, concentrate a bit better”, but rarely is it looked at any closer. That constant over-thinking, never-ending activity in the brain as they start to get older often starts to spark secondary symptoms or conditions. That is where the misdiagnoses of depression, anxiety and more come in. They are treated for the secondary symptoms that are much more easily identified, but unfortunately rather ineffectively. If someone is not looking at the underlying cause, it is just plastering over the cracks.

If a woman or girl does not suspect that they have ADHD or autism, they are reliant on their GP picking up on the signs. In a short 10-minute or so appointment, a GP does not have the time to dig deeper than the surface level and recommend a referral to a specialist service. Those specialist services with psychiatrists qualified to assess, diagnose and support patients are few and far between.

When access to the right support is so life changing and necessary, it is downright depressing for someone to be told that they might have to wait a year, 18 months or two years before they will even get in front of the right person to start the process. The cost of an initial ADHD assessment appointment is somewhere between £500 and £800, but it can be up to thousands and several appointments are often required to make a diagnosis. The average monthly cost of a private prescription for ADHD medication is around £100. The average cost of an autism assessment is around £2,500. Even when we are not facing an economic crisis, those are huge amounts of money that most people and families just cannot spare.

It is important to recognise that diagnosis is just the beginning. People with both conditions benefit from treatments, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, and the state of the waiting lists for those is equally as dire. Sometimes CBT is essential to the development of coping mechanisms and strategies that allow neurodivergent people to get their lives in order for the long run.

The prevalence of illicit drug use in people with undiagnosed ADHD is not spoken about often because of the stigma, but it is essential to understanding what a lack of resourcing in the healthcare system can lead to. ADHD is often treated with stimulants, which are controlled drugs. Stimulants affect the neurodivergent brains of those with ADHD differently from those without it. The length of waiting lists inevitably means that people will want to find alternative ways to relieve their symptoms. People with ADHD are more likely to have addictive personality types, which can lead to tricky territory. Illicit stimulant drugs, such as cocaine and amphetamines, can have a similar positive-feeling effect on the ADHD brain in a way that they do not on others, so when those with undiagnosed ADHD try those drugs for the first time, they may be surprised at the effects. For that reason, cocaine use in university students with the condition is not uncommon. They make the connection and realise

they have found a way to relieve symptoms to allow them to study. With earlier access to the right support, that would be avoidable.

It is really concerning that illicit drugs are easier to access than a diagnosis and a treatment plan. We do not want to see situations where, once diagnosed with ADHD, people are not allowed to access the right medication because of previous drug misuse, which could have been avoided with earlier intervention and access to prescribed treatment. It is really important to point out that ADHD medication is carefully monitored through titration and beyond, while self-medication is not.

The petitions are calling for access to urgent support. I wholeheartedly support those calls. So many constituents are under immense pressure as a result of completely unacceptable waiting times. Waiting lists have been creeping up for years. Improving recognition of the conditions in women and girls, which has led to more requests for assessments, may be part of the reason, but the biggest reason by far is the lack of funding.

I hope that the Minister will be in a position to provide more than just assurances. I hope she can provide a funding commitment for those in England. I hope she can tell us what discussions the Government have had with the Scottish Government about service provision and how funding will be replicated in the devolved nations. I hope that the Minister will be able to shed some light on the Government’s work to support NHS boards to recruit and retain expertise.

Children, adults and parents cannot wait endlessly for someone to address what is now beyond a crisis. They deserve better recognition and support, and they deserve it urgently.

6.19 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have learned a great deal from so many of the speeches that it seems invidious to pick out anyone, but I would like to compliment the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) because of her concentration on treatment. We have heard a great deal about diagnosis, but I was interested to hear about what the treatment options are.

I have no medical expertise or qualifications, but it is fairly obvious even to me that although many people who experience severe sleep disruption are not suffering from ADHD, people who are suffering from ADHD also commonly seem to have the terrible burden of a huge shortage of high-quality, slow-wave, deep sleep. Anyone who knows anything at all about the methods of interrogation and torture used by totalitarian regimes will know that the strongest and bravest person alive can be broken if they are incessantly deprived of decent, slow-wave, restorative sleep. It is appalling that young people and older people struggle for years before they receive a diagnosis that might lead them to the sort of treatment that could ameliorate the suffering described by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and many others, so I hope and trust that this debate will go some way towards alleviating that situation.

In the short time available, I will touch on the three cases that I alluded to earlier in a brief intervention. They are all different. The first case is of an 11-year-old boy who was correctly diagnosed as having ADHD three years ago. His mother says that the problem is that

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

CAMHS locally has no full-time psychiatrist who can provide the medication that he needs. Admittedly, the letter about this case came to me only within the last few days, so my office and I have not yet had the chance to find out if that statement is in fact correct, but if it is, that is obviously a serious gap in the system.

The second case is worrying because it involves the consistent refusal to give an ADHD diagnosis for a 12-year-old boy whose widowed mother, after a very long delay, finally gained access to the notes of his previous assessments, which were clearly full of demonstrable inaccuracies. For example, it was suggested that it was the loss of the husband and father that was causing the child such disturbance, when in reality the child had been struggling with his symptoms since the age of three—long before the loss of his father. Indeed, the notes also suggested that the child was affected by having to move out of the family home to live with grandparents, when in fact no such thing had happened. So, even allowing for the fact that I am hearing only one side of the story, it seems unlikely that my constituent could misreport such incontrovertible issues of fact.

I will finish with the final case, which involves a young lady who contacted me specifically to urge me to take part in this debate. I spoke to her on the telephone just before it began and I have her permission to quote from her letter to me, in which she says:

“I was recently diagnosed with ADHD myself, having been able to access an assessment through private medical insurance. Not only are the waiting lists for NHS assessment unduly long but the knowledge and experience of doctors and psychiatrists of the condition is, in my experience, severely lacking.

My mental health first deteriorated to the extent that I needed psychiatric intervention in 2018. At this point, I was suicidal. I had read about ADHD and mentioned to the psychiatrist that I believed that I had it. His response was, ‘I don’t know a lot about it, other than that it’s very difficult to diagnose as an adult and the medication is amphetamine, so you probably want to think very carefully about pursuing that.’”

She then gives a long list of severe symptoms and difficult experiences through which she had to pass, culminating in her making plans to end her own life. She says:

“If it weren’t for one GP questioning the dosage of the aforementioned antidepressant”—

which she was being incorrectly prescribed—

“and actually listening to me, I would probably have spent the last 6 months taking medication I didn’t need and still not have an answer. And there is a distinct chance that I might not be here at all.”

She concludes, and I endorse her point, that she was in the fortunate position of being able to get a private diagnosis. Celebrity cases are frequently diagnosed on the basis of a private diagnosis. There is something wrong if we have a two-tier system whereby those who can afford to pay can find out what is wrong with them, while those who cannot have to carry on thinking that they know what is wrong but without ever getting a diagnosis until perhaps, in some cases, it is too late.

6.25 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela, and to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who made a powerful speech advocating on

behalf of his constituents. I thank the Petitions Committee for granting this debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on leading it.

In the UK, as has been said, about 700 people have autism and about 3 million have ADHD. The average waiting time for a diagnosis is far too long, with some adults having to wait up to seven years for an ADHD diagnosis. Barnsley East is in the top 10% of constituencies with the highest rate of special educational needs. A number of local people have contacted me about their struggles to get the right diagnosis, especially for children, in an appropriate timeframe. They are frustrated with a system that seems to hinder access to support. In Barnsley, the average waiting time for an ADHD diagnosis for under-fives is 10 months, and the average waiting time for those aged five to 16 is among the highest in the country, at two years and four months. Until 2021, Barnsley had a funding black hole of more than £35 million for SEN provision. There is a desperate need for more resources and for the Government to act to enable local authorities to deliver for their communities.

The NHS suggests that the wait for an ADHD diagnosis can be damaging to children, as in the meantime they are likely to miss out on education due to wrongfully being punished for symptoms of undiagnosed ADHD. They also often suffer with anxiety, depression, dyslexia and even epilepsy. Those with undiagnosed autism are likely to struggle living independently, maintaining employment and creating interpersonal relationships. It is clear that the system for diagnosis is inadequate, and it is unfair that people are suffering because of it.

A number of people have been in touch with me over the past few years to share their experiences, especially as parents seeking support for their children. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) recently held a meeting in Barnsley to speak with parents who are trying to navigate the system and secure support for their children. They told us that they experience difficulty in getting a diagnosis and in accessing specialist provision, and they also spoke of ongoing care issues. This included but was not limited to ADHD and autism provision.

NICE recommends that the maximum wait for the commencement of an assessment should be three months for autism. However, even if an assessment has begun, that does not mean that a diagnosis will be achieved quickly, as we have heard in this debate. Many are stuck in the system for months or years after the process has started. There is currently no advisory wait time for an ADHD assessment. The Government do not even include data on ADHD diagnoses and waiting times, and have expressed no desire to do so, even though, as has been said, there was a 34% increase in the number of people waiting for an ADHD assessment between 2021 and 2022.

For both conditions, there is a postcode lottery of assessment and diagnosis, meaning that access to much-needed services is effectively restricted depending on where someone lives. Most respondents to the Petitions Committee survey stated that waiting times for assessment for both ADHD and autism are inadequate.

This, of course, speaks to a larger issue of worsening regional inequality over the past 13 years. As the backlog of urgent healthcare cases gets longer, assessment and support for long-term conditions such as ADHD and autism are pushed further backwards. The majority of

respondents to my local SEN survey said that it was either difficult or very difficult to access SEN provision. This must change. More data on waiting times for neurodivergent conditions needs to be collected. We need to end the postcode lottery of assessment and diagnosis. Most importantly, to achieve that, more resources must be committed so we can speed up diagnosis and provide the support that is needed for people with ADHD and autism.

6.30 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to close for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Dame Angela. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and the Petitions Committee for securing this incredibly important debate. I also thank every person who signed the two petitions, and everyone in the Public Gallery for their time, patience and commitment to the cause, which has led to them to sit here for a number of hours. We are all very grateful to have them here.

Normally, when we close, we pick a few comments from those on our own side to praise, but every single contribution to this debate has been heartfelt. Many have been personal, and every single one has added a great deal to the discussion. It is always a pleasure to see cross-party agreement in this place that an issue absolutely needs to be dealt with.

Some of the take-homes, which are really stark, are things that I knew already but which have been brought to the forefront of my mind yet again. For example, hon. Members raised the increased suicide rate among those with ADHD and autism. It is a wasted opportunity for a life well lived when someone takes their own life. That could have been avoided if they had early diagnosis and treatment, and that is why it is so important that we are here today.

On the postcode lottery, it is alarming that there is a real divide based on where someone lives, how much money they have and their ability to access private care. As a parent, I understand the desperate feeling—although not with regard to autism and ADHD—of just wanting the best for one's child. I have many friends, colleagues and constituents who live in purgatory—they just want to know when they can get help and support for their child. The feeling of being at the school gates and not knowing what kind of day their child is going to have stays with them for the entire day, so they cannot even concentrate at work. Many parents take time off work, so are unable to contribute to the economy, to raise children who will never fulfil their potential because they have been let down.

In 2021, the Government committed to making progress on reducing diagnosis waiting times in their national autism strategy for England. However, the latest data shows that more than 125,000 people are currently waiting for an autism assessment—an increase of more than 30% in the past year alone. The vast majority of those people are waiting longer than the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's recommended 13-week wait, and far too few have a care contact each month.

Far too often, there is sadly a postcode lottery when it comes to access to a timely assessment. Waiting times are still far too long in many parts of the country, leaving some autistic adults and children waiting many months or even years for a diagnosis.

A constituent of mine, a woman in her late 20s, will not mind me telling the House of the letter she sent me to confirm that she had been accepted on to the waiting list, but it is expected to be 36 months before she is seen. That is 36 months of insecurity in the workplace, in her marriage and in her life.

Reports are emerging of patients having to spend thousands of pounds on private healthcare to get a much-needed assessment and diagnosis. Frankly, patients and their families are being failed. That is simply not good enough. A diagnosis of autism or ADHD is vital to accessing appropriate support, which we know can make such a difference. Concerning reports have emerged recently of people waiting up to five years for an ADHD assessment. That is five years without the crucial support that they need and access to services.

For ADHD assessments, there is no NHS waiting time standard. How can it be right that we have no idea of the number of people waiting for assessment? Without routinely published figures, we cannot get a handle on the scale of the issue. Will the Government please reconsider that?

Without a formal ADHD or autism diagnosis, many people will struggle at school, in the workplace and at home. It is crucial to understand that people with autism or ADHD are more likely to experience mental illness and, all too often, end up in crisis and, at the very worst, taking their own life. Imagine the desperation someone must feel to do that.

Over the past few months, I have been honoured to sit on the Joint Committee on the reform of the Mental Health Act 1983. In an evidence session, we heard from Alexis Quinn. Her evidence cut to the core of how patients are being failed and why the Government must act. For anyone present who does not know, a misdiagnosis meant that Alexis was locked inside in-patient mental health settings for three years. Eventually, she had to flee the country to get help. It is inhumane that autistic people can end up detained in inappropriate settings because they are incorrectly diagnosed. I thank the National Autistic Society for feeding into the draft Bill and for its input during the pre-legislative Joint Committee—its evidence was vital.

I appreciate that this debate is specifically about assessments, but I would like to hear from the Minister about what the Government are doing to provide tailored, appropriate care for people with autism or ADHD after the assessment stage. Speedy access to an assessment is prevention in action—prevention of worsening mental health in people with ADHD or autism—yet the Government fail to ensure that assessments are readily available. How many more people with ADHD or autism will be left behind, stuck on long waiting lists with their mental health steadily worsening, before this Government finally get their act together?

I know that we do not like to play political football in this place—well, we do, but this is not one of the issues on which we ever like to do it. I know that the Minister is full of integrity and cares greatly about this issue, but we need the Government to take their head out of the sand and to take action on waiting lists. The NHS does an incredible job with the resources that it has. However, long waits for treatment have a considerable impact on patients and families. It is heartbreaking to hear Members in this Chamber talk about constituents who have lost children—children who felt that there was no other

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

option but to take their own life. That is a failing of what we can do in this place to make things better. There is a moral imperative on us to do that.

When will the Government increase capacity and resourcing to ensure that waiting times for assessment can be reduced? It is unacceptable that a six-month wait has become the standard for autism referrals, with many adults waiting years to be seen. The Government keep kicking vital health strategies into the long grass, with yet another new strategy scrapping those that came before it. There is no clear message from the Government about what that means for people living day to day with autism or ADHD. Will the Government please now outline whether future work on major conditions will tackle waiting times for assessment of autism and ADHD?

I truly believe, unfortunately, that the longer the Conservatives are in power, the longer patients will wait, because a 13-year track record has nothing to show us other than that fact. Labour will lead on early intervention and prevention by providing a mental health specialist in every school, allowing children with ADHD or autism—who disproportionately experience mental illness—the ability to access mental health support in their school. This debate is timely, because it is Children’s Mental Health Week, and perhaps that policy could be adopted in a cross-party way to ensure that children do not have to wait in the way that they are doing. For people with ADHD or autism, receiving an assessment is the first step to accessing often life-saving support. We cannot allow people to be failed at the first hurdle.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for introducing this important debate, and I thank the wider Petitions Committee. I also echo the words of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), in thanking those in the Public Gallery who have listened to the debate.

This debate is the second on this issue; we had one on ADHD specifically in Westminster Hall last week, secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). One of the key points made in that debate was about the lack of data collection on ADHD, and we have heard from many Members this afternoon about the impact of that. Although the data is there, it is not pooled together at a regional or national level, and I gave a commitment in that debate that we would look at a data dashboard so that, for ADHD, we can start to piece together who is waiting, where and for what.

I thank all the Members who have taken part in this debate. The fact that we have heard from more than 15 right hon. and hon. Members from different parts of the country and different political parties shows the sheer scale of the problem. I thank everyone for the tone of the debate and for raising these serious issues so well.

Public awareness of autism and ADHD has grown over the past decade, and that is really welcome. The National Autistic Society estimated that 99.5% of the public is now aware of autism. We have a wide range of

people to thank for that, from public figures who are increasingly open in the media about their experience, to advocates such as the petitioners, who have helped to bring this debate to this Chamber, and right hon. and hon. Members, who keep neurodiversity firmly on the parliamentary radar and high up the priority list.

The more conversations we have, the more people are empowered to recognise that they or a loved one could be autistic or have ADHD. While this is positive, the debate has been focused on the challenges people face. As I said last week, I am not going to duck away and pretend that there are not significant problems with diagnosis, assessment and getting help and support for ADHD and autism. My own postbag as a constituency MP in Lewes reflects much of what has been said about not just waiting times for referrals but difficulties getting EHCPs—and about the high refusal rate, which we did not hear a huge amount about this afternoon. It might be my particular area, but we have a high number of tribunals in my part of the country. Around 90% of the cases are successful at tribunal, which tells me that there is a problem with parents having to fight tooth and nail to get plans in place.

We have heard about the impact of not getting the help and support that is needed. Early intervention and support avoids a child, young person or adult going into a crisis where even more intensive support is needed and in which damage is done during vital years of their life. That is particularly the case for young people, who should be in school getting educational support but cannot be because they do not have the help and support they need.

My hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) talked about whether there is enough funding. That is an interesting debate. Funding is going in like never before, including over £74 million to the autism strategy. Specifically on autism diagnosis, £2.5 million has gone in in the last year to improve autism diagnostic pathways, but it is about how that money is spent and whether it is making a difference. We are putting in more funding, because the issue is significant.

For too many people, the path to diagnosis is too long. There is a great deal of frustration from patients and professionals alike. NICE has a recommendation that autism assessments should be done within 13 weeks of referral and we know that in many cases that recommendation is not being met.¹ For ADHD there are no recommended waiting times for diagnosis, and we are committed to looking at that specifically. NICE sets out for ADHD who should make a diagnosis and the criteria that should be followed. In the absence of a physical test for diagnosis, it can be challenging, especially when other conditions are at play that may overlap and mask symptoms. However, that does not mean we should accept the current long waiting times as the norm.

As many have said this afternoon, we have over 125,000 people waiting with a referral for suspected autism who have not yet received a diagnosis. Only 8.5% of referrals are within the 13-week wait, which is completely unacceptable. We have heard that there are challenges in Wales, as there are in England, and I am absolutely happy to work with colleagues from all the devolved nations to improve assessment, diagnosis and services across the board. However, there are opportunities coming

1. [Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 3MC.]

through and a number of colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), mentioned some of the pilot studies.

NHS England has developed a framework that is transforming learning from autism and ADHD pilot schemes into scalable action, which will improve support and care for people across the country.¹ Last year, part of the £13 million autism funding enabled 72 pilot tests for improvements in diagnostic pathways, and these pilots are now helping NHS England to develop a national framework on autism that will improve assessment across the country for people of all ages. I am happy to send colleagues the details of those pilot studies, the initial findings and their potential scope as we roll out them out further.

We now expect integrated care boards, which were set up in July of last year, to lead the charge on how pathways can be best delivered in local areas. The guidance will provide signposting at each stage of the assessment process, helping to map out a clear route for diagnosis. We now expect every integrated care board to have an executive lead for learning disabilities and autism, and there was talk in the debate about having a national lead. Actually, we want leads at every single local integrated care board to be the lead person to whom MPs can go if assessments are not being done on time, to hold local services to account, to compare best practice and to make sure it is happening in every part of the country. We are putting in the investment needed to meet the demand, because further investment will be needed. This year, we have committed an extra £2.5 million to the scheme, which will help roll it out further.

Many Members have talked about CAMHS. Although autism and ADHD are not mental illnesses, we know that people with such conditions are often more at risk of mental illnesses, including anxiety and depression. One of the key things that is making a real difference for young people is the introduction of mental health support teams in schools. The shadow Minister touched on that earlier, and we currently have 287 mental health support teams offering support to about 4,700 schools and colleges around the country. That is making a difference by supporting young people with mental health issues, but it is also about identifying whether they could have an ADHD or autism diagnosis and getting them into the system much more quickly.²

Mr Robin Walker: I welcome the expansion of those teams and the fact that we have more mental health support in schools, but does the Minister recognise that one of the big challenges, particularly with children waiting a long time for diagnosis, is children who are out of school and who are remote from the system, where parents do not feel that their needs are being met and children can wait a very long time for an EHCP? Does she agree that the system as a whole would benefit enormously from faster diagnosis to address that problem?

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The mental health teams will support children in schools so that, we hope, we can get in at an earlier stage and children are not excluded in the future. For too long, appeals from parents for assessments and diagnosis have gone unheard. I talked about my own constituency, where tribunals are very frequent, which means that children escalate, get into crisis and are excluded far more often than they should be. The teams will make a

real difference by signposting for the children and getting them assessed much more quickly, and we will continue the investment to roll out support more widely. Last year, we invested £79 million to give around 22,500 more children and young people access to community services, which will make a long-term difference.

The pilot in Bradford was mentioned. We are investing in identification in educational settings and committing £600,000 to expand an autism early identification pilot to at least 100 schools over the next five years. I am keen to ramp that up further and faster if we can. Again, positive early findings from that pilot have seen staff reporting that they are better able to identify and support those children.

A number of Members mentioned the interworking between health and education—I admit that it has not been great up until now. We are working to improve that. I hear from teachers who take up the heavy lifting of supporting children and their parents and they often feel that healthcare does not do its bit in terms of getting assessments done quickly. That is why we are working jointly on the SEND review, for which the Green Paper was published last year. We are hoping to update colleagues imminently on the implementation of that. It will make a strategic difference with getting people assessed, diagnosed and supported as quickly as possible. That review is on top of our national autism strategy, which was published in 2021. We are working up the guidance that will help implement that strategy on the ground to improve access to services that people expect.

I hope that I have outlined some of the work that has been done to manage demand, cut waiting times and deliver meaningful change for both autistic people and those with ADHD. I am the first to admit that we are not where we want to be, and that there is a lot of work to be done. With health and education working together, the SEND review, and our autism strategy, as well as by collecting data so that we know what services are where, setting the standards we expect to be met and working with local integrated care boards, we can ensure we improve the experience for everyone.

I will touch on a final point, raised by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), which was that ADHD is under-diagnosed in women and girls. She is absolutely right, and that is because the symptoms and signs are very different in girls as opposed to boys and men. We are looking at that in the women's health strategy.¹ We see a number of young women taking their own lives because they have not been diagnosed in time and given the support they need. That is a priority area for the Government.

I thank colleagues for a very constructive debate. I hope I am not here again next year, and that we see the improvements we are determined to make. I am encouraged, but I realise that it has to feel different for parents, children, young people and adults who are waiting for an assessment and the care they need to improve their experience of living with autism and ADHD.

6.52 pm

Elliot Colburn: I do not want to detain Members much longer, as we have had a long debate. I thank the Minister for being so honest and up front about the scale of the challenge. I know that is greatly appreciated.

1.[Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 4MC.]

2.[Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 4MC.]

1.[Official Report, 14 March 2023, Vol. 729, c. 4MC.]

[*Elliot Colburn*]

The scale of the challenge has also been felt throughout the huge range of contributions we heard. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood), the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock).

I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their attention to detail. In particular, I thank the petitioners for bringing us here today to talk about this important issue. I thank the representatives from ADHD UK and the Autistic Society, and the many charities who have helped and briefed us in advance of today's debate. I thank the TV and radio host Melanie Sykes for all of her input and briefings, as well as the creators of the petition, Jess and Lisa.

It is very clear that the situation with waiting lists for autism and ADHD assessments is desperate and requires urgent attention. These are waiting lists that we would not accept in any other area of the NHS. We are poorer as a country for not taking full advantage of the talents that neurodiverse people can bring. That was illustrated by the fact that there were interventions from the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), and the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes).

There is still a lot of work to do. I hope we do not have the same discussions next year, and instead can come back to celebrate success. I am grateful to Members for their attention and to those in the Public Gallery for their attendance.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 589667 and 597840, relating to assessments for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

6.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 6 February 2023

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Resilience and Security of Software: Call for Views

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government have published a document entitled “Call for views on software resilience and security for businesses and organisations”. This document sets out the Government’s existing assessment of the cyber-security risks posed by software and seeks responses from industry, academia and other organisations over a 12 week period. These views will help to formulate UK Government policy in this area.

Digital technologies play a crucial and ever-increasing role in the UK economy, and in the day-to-day lives of citizens. Increasing digitisation brings huge economic and social opportunities, and the UK is well placed to take full advantage of this. Embracing digital technologies across our economy is crucial to delivering the ambitions we set out in the National Cyber Strategy and UK Digital Strategy to secure the UK’s prosperity, national security, global competitiveness and geopolitical standing in the world.

To achieve these aims, we must ensure consumers and businesses feel confident in the use of digital technologies, which means the foundations of our technology must be secure. Software is a fundamental building block of all digital environments, and is often the point of entry for a cyber-attack. Over the past 3 years, there has been an average annual increase of more than 700% in the number of software supply chain attacks globally. Incidents in recent years, such as the 2020 SolarWinds attack and the discovery of the Log4j vulnerability in 2021, have demonstrated the widespread impact that software incidents can have on national security as well as businesses, charities, educational institutions and other organisations operating across the UK. Strengthening the resilience of software is an important part of strengthening organisational cyber resilience more widely. This will help reduce the cyber threat to the economy and prevent harm to businesses, UK citizens and the UK’s worldwide customers.

As such, we have launched this 12 week call for views process, where we welcome views on the key risks linked to software, and where the Government will be best placed to help mitigate them. These views will help shape UK Government policy, and ensure that our resources are directed at the highest priority areas. We look forward to working with organisations, policy makers, academics, international partners and other interested parties, to make the UK a stronger and more secure place for organisations to do business.

I will place a copy of the “Call for views on the resilience and security of software used by businesses and organisations” document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS544]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 30 November 2022)	2
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 30 November 2022)	2
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices expired (during reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	1
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during this the reporting stage)	1

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were held on 19 and 26 October 2022.

On 4 October 2022 one individual pleaded guilty to one count of breaching the residence measure of the TPIM notice. The individual was sentenced to a four week night-time curfew and a fine of £100.

[HCWS543]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Local Government Finance Settlement 2023-24

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove):

Introduction

Local government plays a vital role in supporting, improving and helping communities up and down the land. Councils do amazing work, every day and often away from the headlines, on a huge range of many different subjects and important issues.

This settlement will ensure that councils across the country have further resources available to deliver services to their communities.

Today I am laying before the House the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2023 to 2024, the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2023 to 2024, and the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative

Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2023 to 2024. Together, these form the final local Government finance settlement for 2023-24.

Total funding—core spending power

In recognition of the work undertaken by councils, this settlement makes available an increase of 9.4% in cash terms of national level core spending power. This makes available £5.1 billion in additional resources, to help local authorities to support their communities through challenging times.

Funding guarantee

Local government delivers a broad range of services for all our communities. That is why we are supporting all tiers of local government through this settlement with a new, one-off funding guarantee that ensures all local authorities will see a minimum 3% increase in their core spending power before taking any local decisions on raising council tax.

Council tax

The Government manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers, in normal circumstances, from excessive council tax increases. The package of referendum principles we are proposing strikes a fair balance. This settlement confirms our intention for referendum principles of up to 3% for core council tax and up to 2% for the adult social care precept in 2023-24, significantly below headline rates of inflation. These provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level. When taking decisions on council tax levels, I expect councillors, mayors, police and crime commissioners and local councils to take into consideration the pressures many households are facing.

The Mayor of London has requested flexibility to levy an additional £20 on band D bills to the Greater London Authority (GLA) precept to provide extra funding for Transport for London (TfL). The Government have expressed ongoing concern about the management of TfL by this Mayor, and it is disappointing that London taxpayers are having to foot the bill for the GLA's poor governance and decision making. While the Government will not oppose this request, any decision to increase the precept is solely one for the Mayor, who should take into account the pressures that Londoners are currently facing on living costs and his decision to raise his share of council tax by 8.8% last year.

Social care

This settlement ensures a significant additional taxpayer subsidy for social care services. Ahead of any consideration of council tax, it provides around £2 billion in additional grant for social care in 2023-24. This includes:

£300 million discharge funding to be pooled as part of the better care fund to get people out of hospital on time into a care setting.

£1.3 billion to be distributed to councils through the social care grant for adults' and children's social care, on top of the rollover in funding from 2022-23.

Adult social care market sustainability and improvement funding of £400 million, which will be combined with the existing £162 million in fair cost of care funding.

I am also pleased to announce that we have published an explanatory note on social care funding today, setting out more detail on the different social care grants provided for through this settlement.

Changes following consultation and engagement

We received 157 responses to the provisional local government finance settlement consultation, and I am grateful to everyone who took the time to respond. Following the consultation and engagement process on the provisional settlement, we have made the following changes:

New homes bonus allocations

Alongside the provisional settlement, we asked local authorities to check the accuracy of homebuilding data they have returned to us and tell us if it is inaccurate. Following these representations, we have increased new homes bonus allocations by £0.63 million and funded this through contingency set aside at the provisional Settlement.

Rural services delivery grant

In recognition of specific cost pressures in rural areas the Government are increasing the rural services delivery grant by £10 million, bringing the total value to £95 million. This is funded through contingency set aside at the provisional settlement.

Contingency funding

Increasing services grant by £19.1 million above the provisional settlement proposals, by distributing unused contingency back into local government as proposed at the provisional settlement, through the services grant. To account for changes between the provisional and final settlement, the funding guarantee has been recalculated to ensure that all authorities will see at least a 3% increase in their core spending power before any decision they make about organisational efficiencies, use of reserves, and council tax levels. Any funding no longer going to the funding guarantee has been allocated back through the services grant.

Thurrock, Croydon and Slough Councils

Following significant failures in their local leadership, governance and financial management, the Government received requests from Thurrock, Croydon and Slough for the flexibility to increase their council tax by an additional amount, to provide extra funding to support their financial recovery. This is on top of the significant additional support Government have already granted through the exceptional financial support process. Given the exceptional circumstances of these councils, including unprecedented financial deficits driven by poor decision making in the past and the need for ongoing Government intervention to drive their improvement and recovery, the Government have decided not to oppose the requests.

In line with their requests, Thurrock and Slough will be able to raise council tax by an additional 5% above referendum principles applied to other councils, and Croydon will be able to raise an additional 10%. The Government are of course conscious of the impact on local taxpayers, particularly those on low incomes, of having to foot part of the bill for their councils' very significant failings. We have been clear to each of the councils that in implementing any additional increases, they should take steps to mitigate the impact on those least able to pay.

Other

Every authority in England will receive a share of the accumulated surplus currently held in the business rates levy account. I can confirm that £100 million will be returned to the sector on a one-off basis to be distributed based on each local authority's 2013-14 settlement funding assessment.

The services grant allocation for the Isle of Wight council includes an additional £1 million that was allocated to the council for 2022-23 and 2023-24 in recognition of the unique circumstances facing the Isle of Wight and

its physical separation from the mainland. This funding is reviewed each year as part of the local government finance settlement.

We have also seen the representations from local authorities facing significant increases in internal drainage board levies and will commit to working with the most affected local authorities ahead of the new financial year.

These changes seek to address some of the concerns raised during the consultation period on our proposals, and to even better provide local authorities with the tools to support their local communities, continue to reform their services for the long term, and to help communities prepare for the future.

[HCWS545]

ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than
Monday 13 February 2023**

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