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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 February 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prisoner Skills Development

1. **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): What steps he is taking to help prisoners develop new skills. [903698]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): We are delivering a new prison education service. The first prisoner apprentices have now started on highway maintenance for Kier and hospitality for Greene King. We are launching an employability innovation fund to bring more businesses into prisons.

Siobhan Baillie: MMC Homebuilding Ltd in Hardwicke is working with inmates from Leyhill Prison to build affordable homes quickly. I have met some of the lads, and they have mastered the skills needed to create thousands of homes for key workers, but there are daft barriers in place, particularly in relation to the acquisition of public land. What is the Ministry of Justice doing, with the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Treasury, to unlock those issues so that win-win schemes such as this one can build thousands of key worker homes and allow prisoner rehabilitation at the same time?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend; she is championing a brilliant project in her constituency. Getting more prisoners into work is absolutely vital for them, but also for reducing reoffending. Training prisoners in modern methods of construction is one of the ways we can equip them with the skills to deliver. As a former Housing Minister, I am very conscious of the need to release more surplus land for those purposes and I will speak to my colleagues in the way she asks.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last month, the chief inspector of prisons wrote a paper on why prison education is so poor. He said it is not a priority, prisoners are not taken to classes, there is an inadequate curriculum and there is no accountability from the MOJ. Does the Secretary of State agree with all that, and if so, what is he doing about it?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the problem. In relation to covid, it has been more difficult. What I can tell him is that: first, through the use of in-cell technology; secondly, with vocational skills and apprenticeships; and thirdly, when I became Justice Secretary I applied a whole set of key performance

indicators and lifted up the waiting for both study in prison and getting offenders into work. That is having a dramatic effect.

Levels of Reoffending

2. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of his policies on levels of reoffending. [903699]

6. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of his policies on levels of reoffending. [903704]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): The overall proven reoffending rate has fallen since 2010, from over 31% to less than 25%, but that is still too high, so we are making major investments in drug treatment, accommodation support, education and employment to drive it down further.

Selaine Saxby: Onward's latest levelling up report found that tackling antisocial behaviour in crime hotspots is one of communities' top priorities. In the six months to October 2022, the top 10 offenders in North Devon committed 137 offences. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to reduce that reoffending and to support communities in tackling antisocial behaviour?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that antisocial behaviour is a blight. It is one of the reasons we are upping the amount of unpaid work hours available, including in Devon and Torbay probation unit. There were 37,000 hours of such work last year, and we want to increase that further. On stopping people reoffending, a number of things need to come into play to make that work, including some of the things that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was just talking about: sustained attention on drugs, both outside prison as well as inside; and the Turnaround programme for young people on the cusp of offending.

Mark Pawsey: Futures Unlocked, a charity based in my constituency, does great work to rehabilitate ex-offenders, with a 30% reduction in reoffending rates among its clients. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the £90,000 grant it has just received from national lottery funding, which will allow John Powell and Laura Halford, together with their team of 33 volunteer mentors, to continue this really important work?

Damian Hinds: Yes, indeed. It really is important work across Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull. I join my hon. Friend in strongly commending John, Laura and the whole team of volunteers. I also very much welcome the news about the grant from the national lottery community fund, which will help Futures Unlocked to extend its support for ex-offenders to lead crime-free lives and help to ensure that communities are safer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the Minister agree that education and training are absolutely crucial in preventing reoffending? If so, how does he account for the 90% reduction in the number of prisoners taking AS-level qualifications over the past 10 years? Will he address that Select Committee finding from just three years ago? Will he also address the fact that one in four people in the prison estate are care leavers? How will he target those who have been in care to ensure that they do not go into the prison system in the first place?

Damian Hinds: That is a multifaceted question; I do not think I will do justice to all of it, but there were a number of very important points. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about care leavers. We are very conscious of the prevalence of care leavers in the system. Of course, we do not always know exactly, because it depends to some extent on self-declaration and not everybody wants to do that, so we have to be very conscious of that. I am also very conscious of people who leave the youth offending estate who may be going back into it. That is another thing we need to look at. I am slightly puzzled by his focus on AS-levels. As he will know, the whole landscape has changed, away from the AS and A2 system and towards a more linear programme of study—that is nothing to do with prisons; it is the general education system. But he is absolutely right about the centrality of education, which is why we have such a focus on literacy, numeracy and, increasingly, IT skills, as well as crucial vocational qualifications.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A company in my constituency called LettUs Grow, working with HM Prison Hewell in Worcestershire, is introducing prisoners to vertical farming, which is an excellent way of not only growing food for the prison but teaching prisoners new skills. However, it is disturbing to note that many prisons are doing less in the way of food growing and involvement in farming. Is the Minister planning to roll out this pilot to other prisons?

Damian Hinds: We are, in fact, introducing more variety of employment in prisons, but I want to see that go even further. One of the advantages of urban vertical farming is the fact that, for obvious reasons, it takes up less space than traditional farming. There are, of course, limits to what can be grown in that way, but the hon. Lady has made an interesting point that we shall no doubt have an opportunity to discuss further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): An effective probation service is key to reducing reoffending, but ever since the disastrous Tory privatisation the probation service has been in crisis. Six serious further offences are committed each week, experienced staff are abandoning the service, and the chief inspector of probation has said that it is

“impossible to say the public is being properly protected”.

The Tories’ legacy is failing to protect the public, failing to punish criminals, and failing to prevent crime. Is it not time they stood aside and let Labour fix their mess?

Damian Hinds: If I may start at the end of the hon. Lady’s question—no. I do not think that we will be taking lessons from the Opposition Front Benchers when it comes to clamping down on crime and standing up to criminals.

The people who work in the prohibition service do a unique and immensely difficult job, making difficult judgments and helping to support people, but also determining when it is necessary for them to be recalled to prison. It is important that when things do go wrong we learn lessons, and we have been learning those lessons. Let me also gently say to the hon. Lady that, sadly, serious further offences, although rare among

people who have come out of prison on probation, happen every year, and it is important that we bear down on them and seek to learn lessons whenever they occur.

Criminal Courts Backlog

3. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the size of the backlog of criminal court cases in Weaver Vale constituency. [903701]

4. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the backlog in the criminal courts. [903702]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The outstanding case load at Chester Crown court at the end of September stood at 626. We are taking action across the criminal justice system to bring down backlogs and improve waiting times for those who use our courts. We have introduced new legislation to give more flexibility for cases to be returned to the magistrates courts, we have ramped up judicial capacity, and we are investing a significant amount of funding for the criminal justice system.

Mike Amesbury: We are now witnessing a backlog of 60,000 Crown court cases and 350,000 magistrates court cases, all as a direct result of political choices to close 260 courts, one of them in Runcorn in my constituency—it became a cannabis farm next to a police station before being burnt down. Does the Minister actually believe that a four-year wait for victims to have their day in court is acceptable?

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman is right on one count: it is about political choices. If the Opposition stopped backing strikers, there might not be the current case backlog in our criminal justice system, which is a direct result of action by the Criminal Bar Association. It is this Government who are increasing the judiciary, who have settled the dispute and who are increasing court capacity, for instance by opening more Nightingale courts. We are taking the action; the Opposition back the strikers.

Mr Speaker: It would also help to reopen the court in Chorley.

Rehman Chishti: In the context of addressing the backlog and engagement with the legal profession, when I spoke to leading criminal lawyers such as Sarah Forshaw KC, they raised with me a specific question: when will the Government appoint the chair of the Criminal Legal Aid Advisory Board? The board was set up in October 2022, nearly a year after the independent review conducted by Sir Christopher Bellamy. Is there to be another year’s wait before this appointment is made?

Mike Freer: The appointment of the chair following the independent review is currently being considered by the Secretary of State and an announcement will be made in due course. The board has met and continues to do its work. It is working effectively while we decide on the best form of chairing the meetings.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Government's common platform roll-out has been nothing short of disastrous. Among many other problems, I have heard of dozens of prisoners being released without the tags that their licence conditions demand and other instances where individuals have been detained in custody beyond their release date. This is all avoidable chaos caused by Tory incompetence. Can the Minister explain why, despite the best efforts of the staff, the data systems simply do not work? Will he outline when he will finally get a grip and sort out this very wasteful scandal?

Mike Freer: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman yet again that if he wishes to return to the legacy systems he is welcome to argue that case, but those systems are at the end of their useful life. Since taking on this portfolio, I have gone out of my way to speak to the practitioners—the people down at the sharp end—and ensure that their concerns are reflected in all the technological enhancements. To describe the common platform as a disaster is simply untrue. This Government are investing in modernising our criminal justice system; Labour Members are nothing more than luddites.

European Convention on Human Rights

5. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of withdrawal from the European convention on human rights on human rights in the UK. [903703]

8. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of withdrawal from the European convention on human rights on human rights in the UK. [903706]

10. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What his policy is on the future of the UK's adherence to the European convention on human rights. [903709]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (**Dominic Raab**): Our Bill of Rights will envisage us remaining a state party to the ECHR and fully availing ourselves of the margin of appreciation to restore some common sense to our human rights regime.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: As we prepare to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, will the Secretary of State recognise the extent to which the ECHR is integrated into that agreement, and the fact that leaving the convention would be a breach of his Government's obligations under the peace process, which I am sure is something he would never countenance?

Dominic Raab: No one is more committed to the integrity of the UK than this Government. I set out the position on the Bill of Rights earlier. We have made it clear that we would not rule out ever withdrawing from the ECHR in the future. We certainly need to make sure that we have a viable legal regime that allows us to tackle illegal immigration.

Angela Crawley: Does the Secretary of State agree with the former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, who reminded the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee earlier this month that, far from being some bureaucratic

creation, the ECHR was championed by Churchill and his Conservative Government, and that leaving the convention would place the UK in the dubious company of Belarus and Russia?

Dominic Raab: I do not think that many people take issue with the convention. Of course, it was negotiated at a very different time and place. The real issue has been the mission creep and the expanding and elastic interpretations of the ECHR since that time. I am confident that, with the Bill of Rights, we can address that in a comprehensive way.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to the two Members who want to leave that they should stay for two full questions after they have spoken? We have not yet completed this question.

Mr Carmichael: May I take the Secretary of State back to his answer to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes)? If he is not ruling out ever leaving the convention, is he then not ruling out ever breaking the Good Friday agreement?

Dominic Raab: We are absolutely committed to the Good Friday agreement and the stability of Northern Ireland, which is why the efforts of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister are so important.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State's proposed Bill of Rights will mandate British courts to override the European convention on human rights in certain circumstances and restrict access to convention rights through British courts, but the Good Friday agreement guarantees direct access to the courts for any breaches of the convention, so how will he achieve his plans without breaching the Good Friday agreement?

Dominic Raab: We can remain absolutely committed to the Good Friday agreement with the Bill of Rights, not least because—the hon. Gentleman would know this if he had bothered to read it—the ECHR is retained within a schedule to the Bill of Rights. He has to face up to the fact that at the moment we have too many foreign national offenders whom we cannot remove from this country because of things like elastic interpretations of article 8. If he really wants to show his mettle—as he beats his chest, given the potential reshuffle on the Labour Front Bench—he should back us in taking every measure to remove foreign national offenders, because that is what the British public care about.

Steve Reed: The truth is that the Justice Secretary has no answer to the question and his plan to rip up the Human Rights Act will create fresh divisions in Northern Ireland, where there is still no agreement on the protocol. What discussions has he had about this reckless plan with the Government of the Republic of Ireland or with the US Government, who have made it clear that any unilateral attempt to weaken convention rights in Northern Ireland would threaten a future US-UK trade deal?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman needs to read the Bill of Rights. It envisages that we will stay a state party to the ECHR, which is retained in a schedule, so all his other concerns melt away.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have repeatedly failed to rule out withdrawing from the convention in the longer term, the impacts of which would be international humiliation for this country and a severe blow to international human rights law. It is shocking that these questions even have to be asked of the Government. What we need from the Justice Secretary is a full-throated defence of the convention and a commitment to the UK's long-term membership. Instead of playing along with his more extreme Back Benchers, will he now deliver that unequivocal defence and a long-term commitment?

Dominic Raab: I am surprised to hear the SNP talk about extreme members of other parties. At the moment, the UK's single biggest human rights concern is the trade in misery we see with the small boats and illegal immigration across the country. If the hon. Gentleman is committed to human rights, he should back us in taking every conceivable measure to deal with that problem.

Youth Offending

7. **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): What steps he is taking through the criminal justice system to help young people avoid crime. [903705]

20. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking through the criminal justice system to help young people avoid crime. [903722]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): The "Beating crime plan" of 2021 highlighted, once again, the importance of early intervention for young people. One such programme is our support for 200 voluntary and community projects to engage children at risk of involvement in crime through mentoring and sports activities.

Suzanne Webb: I am keen to see a more preventive approach to crime committed by young adults, particularly knife crime. In 2017, Ryan Passey, aged only 24, lost his life to a perpetrator with a knife, and we are still seeking justice. Will the Minister join me and the Passey family in exploring more ways of reaching out to young adults to ensure that carrying a knife does not become the norm? We all know that people who carry a knife risk becoming either a perpetrator or a victim.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Obviously I cannot comment on this individual case, but I join her in extending my sympathies to Ryan's family. We have to do everything we can to bear down on serious violence, and serious violence reduction orders are part of that. The work of youth offending teams is also important in trying to catch people before they turn into more hardened criminals. Even before that,

what happens in schools and in our communities is fundamental to helping children and young people stay on the right course.

Jack Brereton: We see a concerning number of young people being criminally exploited by drugs gangs, particularly in Stoke-on-Trent. Will my right hon. Friend look at what more can be done to prevent young people, particularly the most vulnerable, from being drawn into a cycle of criminality?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I am always keen to hear from him on this important subject. The Government have invested a lot of money in the 10-year drugs plan, and there is a strong commitment across Government to making sure we see through those commitments. He is also right that the best intervention point draws young people away from the lure and the great personal danger of drugs in the first place. The youth offending teams are part of that, and the new Turnaround early intervention programme goes further, alongside programmes such as the youth justice sport fund.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I do not think the public are convinced that the Minister is serious about preventing children and young people from entering the criminal justice system. I say that because £1 billion has been slashed from youth services, 750 youth centres have closed and 14,000 youth and community jobs have been axed. This Government have consistently cut services for children and young people. Will he agree to look again at the Government's policies and, indeed, to follow Labour's plan to invest in youth services?

Damian Hinds: It is not the case that we do not have a comprehensive approach to supporting young people. The Turnaround programme is an important new investment in this area. By the way, fewer under-18s are being incarcerated than when Labour was in government. It is right to try to keep people out of young offender institutions—out of being deprived of their liberty—where, quite often, they turn into more hardened criminals. We must also ensure that there is community support, and programmes such as the youth justice sport fund, which my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary launched the other day, are an important part of that.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): People in Hull North are a bit fed up with a very small minority of young people who are blighting their community through antisocial behaviour, including, most recently, throwing objects at buses, which has meant the suspension of bus services to an area of the country that has a very low rate of car ownership. What more can the Government do to help police forces such as Humberside, which is a top performing police force, and Hull City Council, which has seen its budget slashed over the past 13 years by this Government, to divert young people from crime and to deal with young offenders early?

Damian Hinds: I understand what the right hon. Lady says about the frustration and anger felt by her constituents when they have to deal with antisocial behaviour. In different ways, it is something that all hon. Members have to deal with, and it is important

that we bear down on it. A range of out-of-court disposals is available to be used for young people, and there are diversions to help them get back on the right path. It is difficult for me to comment about the specific case of the kids throwing things at buses without knowing more about it, but I have no doubt that she will be in close contact with her local authority and her police as needed.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

9. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [903708]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): The hon. Lady raises a hugely important issue. It is completely unacceptable that women and girls continue to be subject to violence and to the horrendous crimes that constitute VAWG—violence against women and girls. That is why, on top of the significant measures already taken by the Government, the Home Secretary yesterday announced a range of additional steps, including adding the most dangerous domestic abuse offenders to the violent and sex offender register. Much has already been done, but it is right that the Government remain focused on doing more and on continuing our reforms in this area, as I am sure the hon. Lady would expect.

Chi Onwurah: Fewer than one in 50 recorded rapes results in a charge and it takes two years on average for a rape case to come to court. I hope the Minister will congratulate Northumbria's police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, on introducing independent sexual violence champions to support victims in their journey through the criminal justice system in the face of the massive failure of his Government, which is retraumatising victims. Will he agree to the immediate roll-out of specialist rape courts to prioritise rape victims, to which Labour is committed?

Edward Argar: I am happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating her local police and crime commissioner on her work on this hugely important issue. I would highlight the significant progress that has been made under this Government. The number of reports to the police of rape and serious sexual offences is going up, the number of referrals from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service for charge is going up, and the number of Crown court receipts is going up. Those are all significant signs of progress, but there is more to do.

On the hon. Lady's point about courts, she will be aware that three courts—Snaresbrook, Leeds and Newcastle—are piloting additional measures on these issues. Those pilots are in their relatively early months and it would be wrong to prejudge them, but I continue to follow the progress of those courts with specialist measures with care.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister is right to emphasise the importance of bearing down on these dreadful offences. Has he seen the research published this week in the *Criminal Law Review* based on the largest ever dataset of Crown court cases, which suggests that convictions for rape have risen markedly since 2018 and now stand at 75%, against

an increase in charging as well, and that the conviction rate for rape and serious sexual offences is now higher than for other offences of violence against the person? That is important information. That work was carried out by Professor Cheryl Thomas, who is regarded as the leading academic expert on juries, using the largest ever dataset. Does the Minister agree that we should take that into account when we consider how best to take forward our policies to bear down on these serious offences—using up-to-date information to adjust our policies?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I confess that while I am aware of the *Criminal Law Review* article, I have yet to read it in full. I will certainly do so, given his strong recommendation. He is right to highlight what it says, which is that significant progress has been made, and that it is important to base our debates on this hugely emotive and important subject on evidence. A lot has been achieved, but there is still more to do.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Two years on from the Government's end-to-end rape review, rape allegations leading to a charge or summons stand at 1.6%, rape victims are waiting 1,113 days for their case to get to court, and only 2,500 rape prosecutions were completed last year—half the level of 2016. Is this not a Government who are letting rapists off and letting victims down?

Edward Argar: I debate these matters regularly with the hon. Lady, but I have to say to her, as I have said to other hon. Members, that while there is still more to do, there has been considerable progress under this Government. The number of people convicted of an adult rape offence went up by 65% over the past year; compared to pre-pandemic levels, convictions are up by 41%. That is significant progress, but of course there is more to do. That is why the Government are supporting the roll-out of Operation Soteria, quadrupling funding for victim and witness support services, and increasing the number of independent sexual and domestic abuse advisers by 300, to over 1,000. Those are just some examples of the measures the Government are taking. There is no complacency here—just a strong track record of work and delivery.

Support for Victims

11. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support victims in the criminal justice system. [903710]

15. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support victims in the criminal justice system. [903714]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): The Government have consulted on the draft Victims Bill and have now responded to the Justice Committee's excellent prelegislative scrutiny of it. Alongside that Bill, which we will bring to the House when parliamentary time allows, we continue to invest in victims' services, as I set out in response to the previous question.

Liz Twist: A survey by the former Victims' Commissioner revealed that less than half of victims who had made a police report would do so again, due to their traumatic experiences. Victims are important, but seven years and six Justice Secretaries since the victims Bill was first promised, it still has not made it to the statute book. Will victims ever be a priority for this Government?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, with whom I normally have a measured interaction on these issues. We have been clear in our commitment to the victims Bill, and we have been clear that we will bring it forward as soon as parliamentary time allows. It is a priority for my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor.

I say gently that this party and this Government put the needs of victims front and centre. We have massively increased the support and funding they receive. Through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, we have ensured that courts have the powers that they need to give tougher sentences to ensure that victims get justice. The Opposition talk tough, but when it comes down to it, as we saw with the PCSC Act, they fail to back victims and to put their votes where their mouths are. They talk; we get on with delivering for victims.

Stephen Morgan: A staggering 3,000 incidents of antisocial behaviour take place every day, with almost 20 million people having experienced it last year. With the Government allowing this behaviour to fester and go unpunished, when will Ministers finally appoint a Victims' Commissioner to champion the rights of victims of ASB?

Edward Argar: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being drawn in the ballot to ask a similar question to the one that he asked at the last Justice questions. The Victims' Commissioner is a hugely important role, so it is right that we follow due process and ensure that we get absolutely the best candidate installed, as he would expect. That process is ongoing, and I look forward to a Victims' Commissioner being appointed shortly.

Strengthening Human Rights

12. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening human rights. [903711]

13. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening human rights. [903712]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): We introduced the Bill of Rights to this House, which will limit the abuse of human rights and restore some common sense. I have regular discussions with my colleagues, particularly the Foreign Secretary, on the work that we are doing to support the International Criminal Court and end impunity for war crimes in Ukraine.

Alison Thewliss: In an article this morning, Lee Marsons of the Public Law Project sets out the significance of the European convention on human rights to LGBTQ people and the fact that the ECHR has allowed the expansion of human rights. Does the Secretary of State understand that human rights are for us all and that

withdrawing from the ECHR is a specific threat to marginalised communities, whose hard-won rights should not be undermined?

Dominic Raab: I remind the hon. Lady that this Government introduced single-sex marriage—I did so proudly, along with my colleagues—and there is nothing in our reforms that would undo the important work we have achieved.

Hannah Bardell: Given that the Joint Committee on Human Rights has said clearly that the UK Government should not pursue reform of the Human Rights Act 1998 without the consent of the devolved nations, will the Secretary of State promise right here, right now that he agrees with that and that his Government will not roll back or interfere with our human rights?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady will be shocked to know that I did not agree with all the contents of the JCHR report, but I refer to the statements we have made on how we have approached the devolved Administrations. I have personally been to all the nations of the United Kingdom to speak to not only politicians and Government officials, but academics and practitioners. We will continue that engagement and I am sure we will get the right thing for all people and all citizens of the UK.

Forensic Science: Miscarriages of Justice

14. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If he will have discussions with his Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the quality of forensic science provision on the likelihood of miscarriages of justice. [903713]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The Department has been working closely with the Home Office and other criminal justice partners to deliver on our commitment to drive up quality standards in forensic science. Yesterday, the House debated the new statutory code of practice required by the Forensic Science Regulator Act 2021, which will grant the independent regulator statutory powers to investigate providers who fail to meet the required quality standards and who may put the interests of justice at risk.

Mr Sheerman: Is the Minister aware that the Chair of the Justice Committee and I are co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice? The group is very concerned at what leading forensic scientists are telling us about the running down of the forensic science service in this country—a service that must be at the heart of any good justice system. Some £55 million was put into the pot to improve forensic science over the past three years, but nobody knows where it has gone, where it was spent or when it will take effect to stop the loss of great experts that we are experiencing.

Mike Freer: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This is a complex issue and I am more than happy to sit down with him and my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee to discuss it in further detail, to get their expertise and to see how we can move things forward.

Legal Aid

16. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the availability of legal aid. [903715]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): We have launched the early legal advice pilot; we have invested in domestic abuse legal aid; we have invested money for housing reform and immigration legal aid; and legal aid spending is £1.2 billion per annum. The Government have a record of delivery on legal aid, investing in key areas, unblocking access and ensuring that money is well spent to protect those who need access to justice.

Beth Winter: With the number of civil legal aid providers falling from more than 2,100 to fewer than 1,400 in the past 10 years and with areas such as the south Wales valleys, including my Cynon Valley constituency, becoming legal aid deserts, what assurances can the Minister provide that he will not allow further closures of legal aid providers before the review of civil legal aid concludes?

Mike Freer: In fact, since the new standard contract was introduced in October, we have seen an increase in duty solicitors and firms taking on legal aid. We have restored some stability to the system. I understand the hon. Lady's concerns, but I can tell her that the Legal Aid Agency monitors the issue of what are known as deserts closely to ensure that no part of the country is left uncovered.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Government have repeatedly made political choices that have left our criminal justice system on its knees. They have recently found additional money to ensure that defence and prosecution barristers are given the 15% increase in line with the Bellamy review recommendation, but solicitors have been given only a 9% increase. That unequal decision puts at risk access to justice for victims, with more than 1,000 duty solicitors quitting in the last five years. Will the Lord Chancellor commit to funding all of Bellamy's recommendations and put solicitors on the same footing?

Mike Freer: The uplift for solicitors and barristers has already started to be paid. The hon. Gentleman mentions duty solicitors and, as I have said, since the new contract has been in place, we have started to see an increase in the number of people taking on those roles and in firms taking on legal aid, so we are seeing the benefits of the investment in both the litigators' graduated fee scheme and the advocates' graduated fee scheme.

On the general investment in legal aid, I am aware of the concerns of the Law Society, with which I am having constructive discussions to try to find a way forward.

Violent and Sexual Offences: Processing Times

17. **Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve processing times for cases involving violent and sexual offences. [903718]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): Although I have faced the hon. Gentleman in Westminster Hall, I think this is the first opportunity that I have had to congratulate him from the Dispatch Box on his election to the House last year—[Interruption.] Wait and see.

It remains our priority to deliver swifter justice for victims. We are increasing court capacity by removing the limit on sitting days in the Crown court for the second financial year in a row, and we are recruiting up to 1,000 more judges across all jurisdictions in 2022-23. The Government took action to tackle the Criminal Bar Association strike, which added to those delays, and alongside all those measures we are implementing the £1.3 billion court reform programme, which aims to make our court processes more efficient.

Andrew Western: Under this Government, just 1.5% of recorded rapes result in a charge. When charges are made, sentences are often woefully inadequate. That is why Labour has proposed minimum seven-year sentences for rapists. Why do the Government not support that?

Edward Argar: As I highlighted in response to previous questions, reports to the police are up, referrals by the police to the CPS are up, and charges and Crown court receipts for such crimes are up. As I said to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is no longer in her place, I will take no lessons from the Labour party about being tough on sentencing. That party voted against measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 to give judges the power to increase sentences.

Female Prison Estate

18. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What steps he is taking to ensure the safety, privacy and dignity of women within the female prison estate. [903719]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): Last month, we published our plan to deliver the female offender strategy for England and Wales, including better outcomes and physical conditions for women in custody.

Neale Hanvey: The recent controversy over the custody of double rapist Adam Graham and other violent offenders has illustrated the danger and naivety of self-ID, with tumultuous consequences, yet the Ministry's latest statistics for England and Wales show that 230 trans-identifying males are being held on the female prison estate, and that there have been 97 sexual offences, 44 of which were rape. The Scottish Government acted swiftly, so what action will the UK Government take to limit that harm, review practices and clarify equalities legislation to ensure that prisoners are protected from abusive males?

Damian Hinds: Of course, safety must always come first. I can confirm that we do not hold prisoners based on their self-declared gender identity. Our approach is that transgender women, including those with gender recognition certificates, can be held on the main women's estate only if a risk assessment concludes that it is safe. The changes to our policy mean that no transgender

woman convicted of a sexual offence, or who retains male genitalia, can be allocated to the general women's estate other than in truly exceptional circumstances.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): May I welcome the comments about the female prison estate? Turning to the male prison estate, His Majesty's Prisons Garth and Wymott in my constituency—

Mr Speaker: Order. That does not link into this—
[*Interruption.*] Order. One of us will have to sit down, and it is certainly not going to be me. It might help us both if I suggest to the hon. Lady that she might catch my eye during topical questions, when it would be appropriate to raise the very important matter in her constituency.

Transgender Prisoners

19. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department's policy on the allocation of transgender prisoners in England and Wales. [903720]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): This question relates to the previous question, as well. Since the 2019 strengthening of our policy, there have been no assaults or sexual assaults committed by transgender women in women's prisons, and last year we further strengthened that policy.

Andrew Lewer: I welcome the fact that the Government are issuing new guidance on the accommodation of such prisoners, but does my right hon. Friend agree that having no biological male imprisoned in a woman's prison should be a strong principle henceforth? Does he agree that women's prisons and the women within them must not be used as therapeutic support for trans-identifying male prisoners?

Damian Hinds: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend, as I said a moment ago, that safety must come first. We want to support everybody who is in our care and who we are keeping inside for the protection of the public. We need to make sure that safety in prisons is as strong as it can be, and I can confirm to my hon. Friend that following the policy updates, transgender women with male genitalia will not be held in the general women's estate except in truly exceptional circumstances. Exemptions will require sign-off by a Minister to ensure they can be considered only in the most truly exceptional cases.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): For those who identify as transgender, it is important to recognise, as the Minister has, the safety issues. Across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it is important that we have a policy and a strategy that is the same everywhere. Has the Minister had any opportunity to talk to the police and the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to ensure that we in Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Assembly have a policy that follows the route and focus here?

Damian Hinds: The short answer is that I have not had a chance to have that conversation. It is true that there are differences in different parts of the United Kingdom, and those have been played out in the media substantially over the past couple of weeks. I believe

our policy here in England and Wales is the right one. It is respectful to everybody, but makes sure we are making safety paramount.

Topical Questions

T1. [903723] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Since the last Justice oral questions, I have announced the expansion of incentivised substance-free living units from 25 to 45 prisons and investment in up to 18 abstinence-based drug recovery wings. I have also announced 220 community support organisations that will benefit from a £5 million fund to prevent young people from falling into crime, and I visited Strasbourg to discuss with colleagues at the European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe how the Government's Bill of Rights Bill will protect and promote human rights.

Mary Kelly Foy: Testimony provided by the POA trade union to the Justice Committee shortly before recess illustrated just how cruel, degrading and utterly dangerous it is to make prison officers work on the landings until the retirement age of 68. Would the Minister have wanted his own grandparents to have been forced to restrain violent young prisoners, or will he agree to open negotiations with the POA over the retirement ages of officers? We all know that 68 is too late.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady. Of all the public servants I have worked with in my time as a Minister and an MP, none command greater respect than prison officers. I understand the huge job they do, which in the pandemic in particular was difficult. We are not going to revisit the retirement age issue, but I am always willing to discuss matters with prison officers and in particular the POA, and my door is always open.

T4. [903727] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that getting prisoners off drugs is a critical part of reducing reoffending? Can he therefore set out the work his Department is doing to ensure that prisoners leave prison drug free?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right about this. It is one of the crusading missions we have, along with getting offenders into work. That is why we are increasing the number of incentivised substance-free living units from 25 in 2022 to 100 by March 2025 and investing in drug recovery wings. The big thing is not just to stop illegal drugs getting into our prisons, but to wean offenders off heroin and opiate substitutes such as methadone.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It has become apparent that if the Justice Secretary does not act, the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill could see thousands

of part-time judges face a massive loss of pension rights, pushing many away from office at the worst possible time. This morning, when we debated the matter in a Delegated Legislation Committee, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), was a little vague about whether the Department would fix this specifically by retaining the relevant regulations. Can the Lord Chancellor give that clear commitment today?

Dominic Raab: Of course, as the retained EU law Bill goes through, we will consider any significant issues that are raised, but that Bill is critically important as we take control of our own destiny and make sure that we have laws tailored to the UK that best suit the circumstances of the UK, whether that is England, Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. The hon. Gentleman ought to support that.

T5. [903728] **Kate Kniveton** (Burton) (Con): The Government have been reviewing the presumption of parental involvement in family courts for some time. Given that when this presumption is applied, it can put a child at risk of harm from an abusive parent, can I urge my right hon. Friend to publish that review as soon as possible?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): I am aware that this is an incredibly sensitive issue, and one that the Government want to get right. I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government will be publishing the response to that review very soon—as soon as we can do so.

T2. [903724] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Like those of many Members in the Chamber today, my constituency is a legal aid desert; in fact, the nearest centre for special provision, welfare advice, mental health and much, much more is miles away in Wilmslow. After 13 years of Conservative government, that is not good enough, is it? What is the Minister going to do to improve access for all?

Dominic Raab: We published our response to the Bellamy review and the criminal legal aid independent review, and indeed are already implementing those reforms. They include uplifts of 15% to most legal aid fee schemes, which is very significant given the current context of public sector pay challenges. The hon. Gentleman needs to put this in some kind of perspective: just to give one aspect, criminal legal aid spend is expected to be £1.2 billion a year, so we are doing the right thing to make sure we support the most vulnerable who need access to legal aid and to the courts.

T6. [903729] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): We have an excellent target—up in lights—of recruiting 20,000 more police officers, but prison officers can appear to be out of sight and out of mind. These are brave men and women who regularly get assaulted. What are we doing on prison officer recruitment and retention?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend and pay tribute to him for the work he did as Prisons Minister—I remember it, because I was a junior Minister in the Department at the same time. He is absolutely right

about the value of prison officers, and how they are out of sight and out of mind; people do not bang pots and pans for them in the same way they do for other public servants, but we should take every opportunity to sing their praises.

To answer my hon. Friend's specific question, between the end of 2016 and 2022, the number of full-time prison officers increased by 3,677 to 21,632. That shows that the recruitment programme is bearing fruit.

T3. [903725] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Ealing Law Centre, a fantastic practice in my constituency, is forced to turn away people eligible for legal aid because it is at capacity. Legal aid pays an average of just £74 per case, and civil legal aid fees have not increased since 2010. As people struggle during the ongoing housing crisis, my constituents risk losing their homes. Does the Minister think that that sum is enough, and that his Department is doing enough to prevent unnecessary home loss in court?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who I know has a very considered and long-standing interest in this issue. Legal aid needs more money, which is why we are increasing spend by up to £138 million a year, taking the expected criminal legal aid spend next year to £1.2 billion, but it also needs reform. We cannot have the situation that we always have with the Labour party, where it just asks for more and more money but does not face the challenge of reforming systems so that they work in the best interests of the people of this country.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): HMP Garth and HMP Wymott are successful prisons that do great work rehabilitating prisoners, but the Ministry of Justice has plans to put a third prison on the site, almost doubling the number of prisoners there—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the two people who are talking stop? I want to hear the hon. Lady. Sorry, please just sit down. Can I just say to the Whip that this is a very important question that really does matter to all of us?

Katherine Fletcher: The MOJ plans to almost double the number of prisoners on the site of HMP Garth and HMP Wymott, but those plans are hamstrung by an almost complete lack of public transport improvement or roads infrastructure improvement. Does the Minister acknowledge the deep concerns about these plans in Ulnes Walton, Croston and Leyland, and will he withdraw them, think again, and stop the third prison?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): I acknowledge what my hon. Friend says about the concerns that people have. She could not be faulted for the strength and consistency with which she has campaigned on behalf of her constituents on these matters, and particularly the transport infrastructure that she mentions. She knows this, because there are already two prisons there, but a new prison delivers hundreds of construction jobs locally, hundreds of ongoing jobs and a whole range of roles and careers, with a very significant boost to the local economy.

Mr Speaker: It affects all constituencies around it as well, Minister.

T8. [903732] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): In just one year, between 2021 and 2022, nearly 5,000 reports of spiking-related incidents were recorded by the National Police Chiefs' Council. The Ministry of Justice recently confirmed that in the four years between 2017 and 2021, there were just 40 convictions for spiking-related offences. Does the Secretary of State agree with the assessment of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines), that there are no gaps in the law relating to spiking, and if so, how can this low conviction rate be explained?

Dominic Raab: The challenge is less gaps in the law and more evidential difficulties in bringing prosecutions, but I share the hon. Lady's aim to do everything we can with new technology to ramp up the number of prosecutions, to make sure there is accountability for what is, it must be said, an awful crime.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): HMP Berwyn in Wrexham is piloting an MOJ employment board, chaired by John Murphy of J. Murphy and Sons and the governor, Nick Leader. The board brings together businesses and agencies to equip prisoners with meaningful employment ahead of release via work academies that certify them in logistics, construction and hospitality, while addressing issues for reoffending. I sit on the board, and I know that the Justice Secretary has not visited the UK's newest and largest prison, so will he visit, please?

Dominic Raab: How could I resist such a tantalising offer? My hon. Friend makes the case powerfully. As the Prisons Minister just said, this can bring huge opportunities to the local economy, but critically, it gives offenders who are willing to take a second chance to turn their lives around an opportunity to get skills and get into work, and that makes our communities safer.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the availability of legal aid, does the Secretary of State agree that where successful applications for legal aid are made by the same person successively on similar or the same issues, it is important that freedom of information requests tabled by Members of Parliament are answered, and the full cost of such legal aid is made available to the public?

Dominic Raab: I certainly support the hon. Gentleman's pursuit of maximum transparency. If he is having problems, he can feel free to drop me a line and I will see what I

can do, but the FOI Act sets out clearly prescribed limits, and we want to make sure we process those applications fairly and properly.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Around 12 months ago, the Minister set out a plan to recruit a further 4,000 magistrates. Can he give us an update on how that is progressing? What steps is he taking to retain the most experienced presiding justices?

Mike Freer: There are a couple of things we are doing to achieve our target of 1,000 additional judicial vacancies this year, which is on track, and I am willing to share that with my hon. Friend. We have reformed judicial pensions today. In addition, we have increased the age limit, so that we can retain the best judiciary.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware that probably the greatest scandal in the justice system at the moment is joint enterprise? I believe that there are nearly 1,000 young people in prison with long sentences for it. He should take this cause to his heart. I will be here every time he is in the House, reminding him about joint enterprise, until he talks to the senior judiciary and gets something done about it.

Mike Freer: I am meeting the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) tomorrow to discuss this issue, and I am about to be briefed on the announcement that the Crown Prosecution Service made over the weekend on this subject. I will, of course, make sure that the hon. Gentleman is kept informed.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State will know the importance of good, reliable data in driving justice policy and will recognise the work done by the Legal Education Foundation and its director Dr Natalie Byrom in this regard. Will he welcome its establishment of Justice Lab, a new dedicated research centre in this field, which is being launched in Dining Room A in this House tomorrow?

Dominic Raab: As always, the Chair of the Justice Committee draws our attention to critical developments in the criminal justice system. Data and that initiative are incredibly important. The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) will attend the event in the House of Commons, so he will laud that even further and at more length.

Water Company Performance

12.30 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if she will make a statement on what measures can be deployed to ensure water companies are performing adequately.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): First, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for bringing the matter of ensuring that water companies are performing adequately before this House. I think we all agree that this is an incredibly important and serious issue. I have been clear that water companies' current performance is totally unacceptable and that they must act urgently to improve to meet Government and customer expectations. The British people expect better and so do this Government.

We have committed to deliver clean and plentiful water, as set out in the environmental improvement plan, and we have set out clearly how water companies must deliver that. First, our strategic policy statement to Ofwat, the water company regulator, sets out four clear priorities for water companies to protect and enhance the environment, deliver a resilient water sector, serve and protect consumers, and use markets to deliver for our customers.

Secondly, we have set new duties, through the Environment Act 2021, on water companies to monitor their overflows and set new legally binding targets to restore our precious water bodies to their natural state by cracking down on harmful pollution from sewers and abandoned mines, and improving water usage and households.

Thirdly, the storm overflow reduction plan, launched back in the summer, requires the largest investment programme in water company history and builds on the existing statutory duties. Water companies already have a statutory duty to provide a supply of wholesome water under the Water Industry Act 1991 and associated water quality regulations. They must ensure the continuation of their water distribution functions during an emergency.

I will begin by addressing my right hon. Friend's concerns, because she has been in touch. I appreciate the lengths to which she has gone to hold her own water company to account, particularly over the supply interruptions experienced by Southern Water's customers following multiple emergency incidents back in December 2022. A more recent incident last week led to approximately 15,000 Southern Water customers being off supply for an extended period, as she will know. Although some supply interruptions cannot be avoided, the repeated failure to properly ensure customers' continued water supply is totally unacceptable. I will be meeting with Southern Water's chief executive officer to understand how it plans to address its failings.

The Government and their regulators hold water companies to account in a number of ways, particularly through transparent reporting and performance. As the economic regulator for the water industry, Ofwat tracks performance against performance commitments, which are set at the start of the funding cycle.

The current performance commitments were set for the cycle from 2020 to 2024 and include pollution incidents, treatment works compliance and supply interruptions. Ofwat assesses performance against each of those metrics annually and ranks the companies in the water company performance report according to whether the metrics have been achieved. It reported that five water companies were extremely poor. The Secretary of State and I met them to hold them to account and to make it clear that we need further progress—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are now a minute over—we are on four minutes. Can you do the conclusion to help us out? Just pick the last sentence.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to be clear that where water and sewage companies are found to be breaking the law, there will be substantial penalties. We have increased all our measures on those penalties, and we are looking at whether we will go ahead with the £250-million cap that has been proposed. We will be consulting on that shortly.

Caroline Nokes: Water companies' performance is not just about finances and Ofwat must not just be an economic regulator. It is about customer satisfaction, consistent supply, treating waste water, investment in networks, and making sure that our constituents have a clean drinking water supply all the time. In addition to compensation, customers need there to be better ways to hold water companies to account for significant outages, such as the three that we have seen in southern Hampshire in just five months, each of which lasted for days.

There is the ignominy of being in the Ofwat category of "lagging behind", but that does not seem to have improved Southern Water or Thames Water, which have been in that category for two years running—shame does not appear to be effective. There are poor customer satisfaction ratings, but what do they change? There is a requirement to produce an action plan and targeted improvement plans, but by when, and what are the penalties for not delivering on them?

My constituents have gone without water to wash with, to drink, to cook with and to flush the loo with for days on end, with poor and in some instances misleading communications and without access to bottled water stations in my constituency. The only one was accessible on foot only, but water is really heavy to carry. They want significant fines for failure to supply, in the same way that there are significant fines for pollution. They want a requirement for emergency and back-up supplies to be available when parts of the network go down. Is it acceptable that if one part of the Otterbourne water supply works in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) is out of action, there is no provision to bypass the problem and continue supply?

Ofwat has said that it will push the "lagging behind" companies, but how hard, and what is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs doing to make sure that that happens? What is the penalty for not delivering on improvement plans? Last year, only 68% of the forecast improvement moneys were spent. At what point will DEFRA step in and recognise that the current situation is not working for the companies, the regulator or the poor customer?

[Caroline Nokes]

We heard last week that there were plans to “water down” excessive fines, but a record £90 million was levied on Southern Water a few years ago, and that was not enough to convey the message. Rather than fines, can we therefore ensure that money is levied to force investment in the network, because current performance suggests that, so far, it simply has not worked?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for reiterating the situation that we have just witnessed with Southern Water, which was completely and utterly unacceptable, particularly following the incidents in December. I have communicated with the chief executive and I am asking again for an urgent meeting as a result of the situation last week.

My right hon. Friend raises some pertinent points about holding water companies to account. She knows that there is a system whereby water can be credited back to the billpayers, and I urge that that will be looked at and followed up. She also asked about the action plans for different companies. The Secretary of State and I had the five worst-performing water companies in before Christmas to talk about their failures, including leakages. We are taking swift action against them: they all have to produce an updated action plan to say what they are doing.

We have done a great deal to ensure that there is enforcement, which is critical, because everybody wants water companies to be held to account for what they do. The Environment Agency already has powers to issue unlimited fines through the criminal courts, but that can take a long time, as my right hon. Friend knows. It also needs data, but because of all the monitoring that the Government are doing, we are getting more of that, so we will be able to take more enforcement action. DEFRA is currently consulting on plans to raise the cap on fines and to make it quicker and easier to issue fines when we know things are not working correctly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) on securing this urgent question. She, like many of us, is absolutely sick and tired of the impact that sewage discharges are having on our streams, rivers, seas and local economies. They are devastating whole regions and devastating our coastlines. Frankly, we are here again with the same old excuses and the same old promises for action getting drawn out, but there is no action behind it. The water companies know they can laugh all the way to the bank because the Government will not take action, and the regulators know that the Government will not take action because they have taken away the capacity to take action from the regulators.

All the while, it is local people who are suffering—whether that is people being able to enjoy their local beauty spots and to take a walk down the river, or that is coastal businesses that are reliant on seasonal tourism to provide jobs and livelihoods to people. They are affected, not the Government, and what do we see? This year alone, when the Bank of England and the Government are telling hard-working people to rein it in and stop asking for pay rises, the water bosses are asking for

20% increases in salary. There is not a single thing the Government have said—in the environmental improvement plan or in anything said at the Dispatch Box—that sends out the message that things will be any different, and the water companies know that. They have already banked £66 billion in dividend payments and more will follow.

Labour does not want to sit on the sidelines and witness our country being turned into an open sewer. We set out at the Labour party conference in September a position that would clean up the water industry in this country, deliver value for money for consumers and bill payers, and finally work in the national interest, so when on earth will the Government get on and deliver Labour’s plan?

Rebecca Pow: It is so easy to just stand there with no facts and no detailed information, and level an attack. I agree, as does the Secretary of State, that sewage in water, unacceptable leakage and so forth are not to be tolerated, and that is why we have set so many actions in train—more than ever before. We are taking more action than any Government have ever before on the water companies.

Do not forget that, since privatisation, the water companies have made a huge investment—billions of pounds of investment—in improving our water company infrastructure. Because of our new storm overflows discharge reduction plan, they are now committed to £56 billion of investment up to 2050, and £7.1 billion of that is already under way, including the Thames Tideway super sewer. A great deal of enforcement action is already taking place. Just in 2021, £121 million of fines were meted out to water companies. Because of the very detailed investigation now under way by Ofwat, the regulator, and the EA, we have more and more data and information to pinpoint where permits are being contravened and where water companies are not taking the actions they should be, and enforcement will follow. We are now consulting on a potential figure of £250 million to make sure we have a realistic and sensible fine that will really do the job in holding our water companies to account.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): The Minister knows that the River Mersey flows through the middle of Warrington—she has been to see it for herself—and I was struck recently by the comments of a local resident who reminded me of the pink film that used to exist on top of the river. Much has been done to clear up our rivers. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that it is absolutely right that water company dividends are directly linked to their performance in providing services to their customers and in cleaning up our rivers?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. In 2019, transparency became much more critical in Ofwat’s holding the water companies to account, because it had to agree, in the price review, how much they should be spending on infrastructure to provide clean water and to ensure the supply. Ofwat has now been directed to ensure that water companies can demonstrate that payments to bosses and so forth are linked to environmental performance.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with the almost 209,000 voters who have signed a petition started by my constituents, SOS Whitstable,

calling on the Government to at least consider renationalisation of the water companies? Profit-driven, largely foreign investors do not prioritise the cleanliness and economy of British beach communities or the way of life in constituencies such as mine? If the companies were answerable directly to the taxpayer, they might start to act at last.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Member forgets that since privatisation £120 billion has been invested by the water companies in the critical infrastructure that we need not only to provide clean and plentiful water but to ensure the supply, so I do not agree with her that we should be renationalising them. What we do need to do is hold them to account where they are doing wrong, but also enable them to continue to invest the £56 billion they are now required to spend to deliver our future water system, with our growing population and the demands of climate change.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The use of storm overflows is completely unacceptable, but does the Minister agree that the best way to tackle that is through enhanced monitoring, requiring a record £56 billion investment by the water companies, and the use of significant fines and criminal prosecutions? Does she also agree that the water companies should be in no doubt that they are in the last-chance saloon and that they and regulators must be held to account to deliver major improvements for our constituents?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for those sensible points. To be honest, it is because of the monitoring this Government have put in place that we now know what is going on. Under the Labour Government there was virtually no monitoring at all: in 2016, some 5% of storm sewerage overflows were being monitored; that figure is 90% now, and by the end of the year it will be 100%. We will also have to monitor upstream and downstream of every sewerage overflow outlet, so we will know exactly what is going on, and unacceptable behaviour will be acted upon.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Water bosses are actively allowing more pollution, because they know it is cheaper to pay the fines than to put in the investment, mend the leaks and stop the sewage. When will the Minister introduce the higher fines of £250 million that the Environment Secretary has pooh-pooed, and take the Environment Agency's advice to put directors in jail if they fail? Will she give an undertaking that the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill will not get rid of all the protections from Europe, so that we do not have even more stools in our rivers and on our beaches?

Rebecca Pow: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening earlier, he would have heard me say that we are consulting on plans to raise the cap on fines to £250 million, to make it quicker and easier to tackle enforcement. That will be a significant step, along with all the other measures we are taking, which I have clearly outlined, to hold the water companies to account.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): The Minister knows the importance of water quality for my beautiful constituency of Southend-on-Sea and that the use of storm overflows has been completely unacceptable. I

welcome the Government's actions to ensure executive pay and dividends are linked to environmental performance, but she will know that the chief executive of Anglian Water earned £1.3 million last year, including a bonus of £337,651. I have asked him repeatedly for meetings but have still not got a date; will the Minister meet the CEO of Anglian Water with me so that we can understand his plan to stop storm overflows being used in Southend West?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is a tremendous campaigner for Southend and I would be happy to meet with her and the head of Anglian Water to push that forward.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): We have seen £2.8 billion in water company profits, £1 billion in shareholder dividends, and a 20% rise in executive water company pay, 60% of which has been in bonuses—in my book, bonuses are for doing a good job, not a terrible one. Meanwhile in Cumbria, the River Eden at Kirkby Stephen has had 101 days of sewage outflows, Swindale Beck at Brough has had 115 days, the River Eea at Cark and Cartmel has had 252 days, and Windermere lake at the heart of the English Lake district has had 71 days. All of that, outrageously, is legal. When will the Government force the water companies to clean up not only their act, but our lakes and rivers too?

Rebecca Pow: If I might say, the hon. Gentleman is a fine one to talk. I believe the water Minister in the coalition was a Liberal Democrat: what exactly did he do? It is this Government who are taking action now on the water companies. This Government introduced the storm overflows reduction plan and, in addition to that plan and all the requirements it puts on the water companies, just this week the Secretary of State has asked that a plan be submitted for every single storm sewerage overflow, with water companies' proposed actions clearly outlined.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Before Christmas, some 20,000 of my constituents were without water—last week, thousands were—and this clearly stems from a chronic lack of investment in infrastructure by South West Water, despite its balance sheet showing an ability to do so. Six weeks later, we have the same issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) has organised a meeting with the chief executive later, but one word not elaborated on is “compensation”. Will the Minister contact the CEO to press that point, and will the Government up their game not by asking water companies to invest in infrastructure but by forcing them to do so?

Rebecca Pow: There is a clear compensation scheme, as my hon. Friend will know, and that will be being looked at by his water company. I urge him to press for that. If he wants my involvement in ensuring that that is properly understood and followed, I am happy to do that.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The same greedy water companies that are dumping sewage into our rivers and increasing people's bills, ripping the public off, have handed out more than £50 billion to shareholders since privatisation. That is the reality. Is it not time that we had our water back in public ownership, rather than empty words from the Minister?

Rebecca Pow: Clearly I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The water companies have invested billions of pounds since privatisation—£120 billion—and they will invest a further £56 billion up to 2050. That investment has already begun and Ofwat is going through the water companies' new plans to agree what is necessary in the next price review. We must remember that what comes out of our taps is considered the cleanest water in Europe. We must also be mindful of the cost to bill payers. We have to balance a clean and plentiful supply of water with holding our water companies to account, while enabling customers to be able to afford the bills.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In Edgware ward in my constituency we have had a large number of new housing developments without a single improvement to the sewerage system. As a consequence, during heavy rain raw sewage comes out of the manhole covers on to the streets. Will my hon. Friend have a word with the planning Minister to ensure that before developments take place sewerage systems are improved to cope with the additional housing?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend raises an important point about housing supply and the suitability of our water supply system. I have been in close communication with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about all those related issues, which is why I am delighted that we have agreed that sustainable urban drainage systems will now be mandatory. That will make a great difference to our water system. Similarly, the amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will enable the upgrade to tackle phosphates produced by waste water treatment systems—after all, sewage comes from us—and make sure that what goes back into rivers is clean, so that we can have the clean water that we all deserve.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): People in Lancashire know that we are lucky to live in an area with so many beautiful river walks by the River Wyre and the River Lune, but they are no fools—they can see their water bills going up as are the profits of companies such as United Utilities. At the same time, we are seeing higher discharges into our beautiful rivers. Can the Minister explain why she thinks the current system appears to be working just fine?

Rebecca Pow: If the hon. Lady had been listening, I did say that pollution—which is a range, not just sewage but phosphates, nitrates and pollution from old mines—is unacceptable, and that is why we have set all the targets through the new environment improvement plan, with a trajectory for making the changes that we need. It is also why we have signalled through the regulator that performance and payment must be linked to environmental performance.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that more will be done to give out accurate information when water companies invest in making improvements and to ensure that campaigners have that information, rather than the Opposition's fiction? Bathing water quality on beaches in North Devon is improving, following millions of pounds of investment, and our overflow usage halved last year and will continue to improve because of the work the

Government are doing through our world-leading Environment Act 2021 and the storm overflows discharge reduction plan.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that and I could not agree with her more. She is a strident campaigner for the beautiful environment in which she lives, and our bathing water status should be commended—72% of our bathing waters are classed as excellent and 94% as good. It is an extremely good record and we should be proud of it.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Over the course of 2020 and 2021, raw sewage was dumped in Britain's rivers and seas more than 770,000 times. That is almost 6 million hours of pollution discharge. But, as we have heard, the pay of water company executives increased by a fifth, on average. Will the Minister force water companies to invest those profits into urgently upgrading the outdated sewage infrastructure—not ask them, not require more plans, but force them to do it? Will she look again at bringing the companies into public ownership so that money is properly reinvested, not siphoned off to shareholders? She does not seem to understand why people are so angry when water companies are swimming in cash while the rest of us are swimming in sewage.

Rebecca Pow: I have said constantly that it is unacceptable that storm sewerage overflows have been used in contravention of permits. Let us not forget, however, that they were put there for a reason by the Victorians: heavy rainfall and sewage all goes down the same pipe and could back up in our loos, so storm sewerage overflows are there as an emergency precaution. It is clear that they have been relied on too much by water companies, and that is why the Government, having put in the monitors and got more data, can step in. We have launched the storm sewerage overflows reduction plan and the water companies are now committed to so much funding to put all the overflows into the correct operating position, concentrating first on areas near bathing waters and our wonderful protected sites and then all the others. There is now a clear plan of action against which to hold the companies to account.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The River Tame in my constituency is cherished by all the residents who live along it. The Tame valley is the jewel in the crown, but unfortunately the river is subject to regular pollution from several outlets, including chemicals as well as sewage. What more will the Minister do to work with United Utilities and—more importantly—to get the Environment Agency to tackle those companies that use the Tame as an open source to pollute?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman raises not only the issue of sewage but a whole range of issues. That is why the Environment Agency operates a permit system, why it has powers to take action to enforce, why we are looking at stronger enforcement through increased fines, and why we set targets under the Environment Act to tackle not just sewage but chemicals and the run-off from old and abandoned mines and to clear up whole stretches of rivers. I think—we met about this—that that applies to his particular area. It will take time—we cannot pretend things will happen overnight—but in fairness there is now a clear plan when under other Governments there was not.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister may be aware that Thames Water is considering plans to draw out water from the river at Teddington in my constituency in times of drought and replace it with treated sewage. That can cause all sorts of havoc with ecosystems if it is not monitored and regulated properly. She will appreciate that my constituents and I have little faith in regulators when Thames Water is currently losing a quarter of its supply every day through leaks and avoiding fines because the targets set for it are just not strong enough. Will she look at strengthening those targets so that companies are more liable to fines and at cracking down on the eye-watering bonuses executives are raking in, which is forcing them to look at these sorts of damaging river abstraction plans when they should be fixing leaks?

Rebecca Pow: The issue of leaks is important. We are tackling it and water companies have targets to cut leaks. In the 2019 price review, they had to cut leakage by 16% and reduce bursts by 12%. If they are not seen to be reaching their targets, Ofwat imposes penalties on them. Three companies are currently paying back £150 million because of leaks and supply cuts. So there is already a system in place and it needs to be adhered to. Water is a precious resource and we need all the water we can get, which is why it is so important to tackle leakage and not just tackle environmental performance in terms of bonuses. I agree with the hon. Lady that bonuses should be linked to environmental performance, and that is what we have directed Ofwat to do.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): As the Minister will know, Cornwall is often at the coalface of the fight against sewage. When we had a leak in St Agnes a few months ago, one issue we found was that the investigation did not take place immediately and there was some ambiguity as to whether it was sewage or run-off. Can the Minister explain to the House what we are doing to ensure that when there is a problem we get the data as quickly as possible so that there is no further ambiguity?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. I think the incident she refers to turned out to be one of not sewage but soil. That is another issue we face and we now have targets to reduce soil sediment run-off. We do not want all that soil in our water; we need soil on the land because it is so precious. She is absolutely right about having the right data. Now, because of the increased monitoring that the Government have set under way, every storm sewage overflow will be monitored by the end of this year. It is a phenomenal project that has happened at great speed, ramping up over the last few years. It will provide us with the clear data we need, as well as monitoring upstream and downstream. Real-time monitoring will come into play. That is what we really need, so we can go on to a website, look at our home area and say, "That storm sewage overflow should not be emitting. It is not heavy rain. We have not had a massive downfall. It should not be emitting." We will be able to go on there and truly hold the water companies to account.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure the Government are well aware that the public are really upset about this issue. In my constituency

people are very much disgusted by it and they do not see a market in operation. We had a 67% increase in discharges locally in the River Avon and River Leam. In Worcestershire, there was an increase of 80,000 tonnes of discharge into rivers which led to a £1.5 million fine for Severn Trent Water. Yet the chief executive got a 27% pay increase to £3.9 million. Can the Minister confirm whether chief executive pay is index-linked to discharges?

Rebecca Pow: I am not going to disagree with the hon. Gentleman that the discharges are unacceptable, but I would also like to say that it is because of what the Government are doing and because we have made this such a priority that it has come to light—a great deal more than it did under previous Governments. We are taking action. It is now a top priority through all the measures we have in place. The strategic policy statement to Ofwat, the targets in the Environment Act and our storm sewage overflows reduction plan—all that cumulative work—will take us on the trajectory we genuinely want and need. We still have clean and plentiful water coming out of our taps. We should not underestimate the fact that that is what the water companies are also delivering.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The fact is that every two and a half minutes people can smell sewage and see the sewage in their rivers and on their beaches, yet water companies are laughing all the way to the bank. The best we can get from the Minister is that we now monitor it. It is pathetic, isn't it, after 13 years of Tory government?

Rebecca Pow: I clearly understand the concern among the public. I count myself as one of them. I have said many times, as have other Ministers, that sewage in water is unacceptable. But let us not mislead; let us get our facts straight. As I said earlier, 72% of our bathing water is classed as excellent and 94% is classed as good. That is a tremendous record that has been achieved under this Government. It has improved year on year and will continue to improve. All the actions the Government have put into place will tackle the issues the hon. Gentleman talks about. They will tackle unacceptable pollution all round, and that is what we need. It is about not just sewage but getting the right infrastructure in place—the £56 billion the water companies will be investing, required by this Government, and all the other measures, not least working with farmers on the pollution they cause, through our new slurry infrastructure grants and so on. A comprehensive and holistic programme is now in place, which was not in place under previous Governments.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Labour's plan to clean up the water industry would include cutting sewage discharges by 90%, mandatory monitoring of outlets and automatic fines for discharges. Will the Minister enact it, for the benefit of Portsmouth people, with immediate effect?

Rebecca Pow: There is already a comprehensive system of enforcement. As I said, we are now consulting on the £250 million potential cap and what might be the realistic cap, to really make a difference and put a stop to unacceptable pollution incidents.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The current arrangements are clearly not working. Last month, I asked the Minister if she thought that water regulation was fit for purpose. She replied:

“Yes...but many tweaks and improvements”
are needed

“to ensure that it is working properly.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 702.]

Let me give her another opportunity to answer the question. Does she really think that the current system of regulation for the water industry is fit for purpose?

Rebecca Pow: We have a regulator. Its job is to regulate the water companies. The Government sent a very strong policy statement to Ofwat to direct the water companies on a whole range of measures, not least putting the environment at the top of the agenda but also enabling the supply we need for the future population, so we can all have the clean and plentiful water we deserve. We now have an extremely comprehensive plan in place to deal with that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As the Minister knows, Wolvercote Mill Stream in Oxford became the second river in the country to get designated bathing water status. Can she therefore understand our frustration when the official designation for 2022 was poor and over the Christmas period 676 hours—nearly an entire month—of sewage was discharged upstream in Witney? Can she seriously say, in light of that, that she and the Government are doing enough? Why will she not set even stricter targets, especially in areas with bathing water status? Can she give a cast-iron guarantee to our community that we will not lose bathing water status because of lacklustre action by the Government?

Rebecca Pow: As the hon. Lady will know, I visited that site, and indeed I even paddled in the water. She knows full well that the system we have introduced will help to clean up bathing water areas such as hers, and the monitoring that we have introduced both upstream and downstream will deliver the change that we need.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Minister does not want to mislead the House in any way when she talks about the quality of bathing water, but Yorkshire Water has told me that there is not one river in the United Kingdom that is fit to swim in, and that is a real mess. Have her Government considered—after 13 years—adopting a plan that Labour Members discuss frequently, namely, the introduction of a golden share in these companies with two directors, so that we can actually do something about the dreadful mess that we are in?

Rebecca Pow: Talking of misleading the House, I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman gets his data. Let me reiterate what I said earlier: 72% of bathing waters are excellent and 94% are good, so a great many are extremely clean and wonderful to swim in. We now have a comprehensive plan for inland bathing waters, and we have gone out to ask whether people want to present proposals for further bathing waters. There is a strict protocol applying to how they reach the right standards and whether they are classed as fit to swim in. I urge the hon. Gentleman to have a look at the details.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): The scale of the mismanagement of our nation’s water resources under the stewardship of the private water companies is far greater than that of the appalling disregard for our precious beaches and waters. Sir James Bevan has warned that much of the country is now staring into “the jaws of death”—the point at which we will not have enough water to meet our needs. Last summer demonstrated just how ill-equipped the water companies are to deal with protracted periods of extreme heat. Does the Minister agree that the most effective way of tackling water insecurity is to create an integrated publicly owned water supplier serving the whole of England?

Rebecca Pow: The answer is no.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): In July 2021 several hundred properties in my constituency suffered a combination of surface and sewer flooding, some for the third or fourth time in 20 years, despite these being—according to Thames Water—one in 100-year or one in 300-year floods. Last week Thames Water wrote to the affected households saying that if their properties were at low risk, medium risk or even high risk and were subject to surface flooding, they would “not require a solution”. This constitutes appalling complacency and neglect on the part of Thames Water. What is the Minister going to do about it? In the words of my constituent Brendan Smith, Thames Water needs to be “held to account”.

Rebecca Pow: The issue of the surface water flooding is serious. It is all related to the ground water table coming up and influencing the whole system. It is a complicated system, and the situation obviously needs to be addressed. Thames Water is investing a great deal in cleaning up its water; as the hon. Gentleman will know, it is the company that is putting in the super sewer. That scheme, which would never have happened without the Government’s support, is a tremendous model which I believe will be copied elsewhere and will make a significant difference. However, where Thames Water has contravened its permit, it will be held to account.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Earlier this month, along with some other Members, I received an email from Pennon Group, which owns South West Water, stating:

“we wanted to provide you with the most recent information so that you are able to have an informed debate”.

Does the Minister agree that what should inform our debate is the experience of our constituents, who are seeing their bills rise and sewage flood our waterways, and does she agree that water companies should be focusing on delivering a quality service to bill payers rather than quality lobbying of politicians?

Rebecca Pow: South West Water is a one-star company. It is one of the worst-performing water companies. I have had its representatives in a number of times to look at its performance, and it has a clear plan of action for its trajectory to improve. We must hold its feet to the fire in that regard. Let me also say, however, that our friends the Liberal Democrats have been spreading an awful lot of misinformation about this issue—particularly

in the south-west, where I come from—and independent fact-checkers have often found many of their claims to be false.

Mr Speaker: And now, someone who needs no turning on—Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her responses to all the questions.

Given the increased pressure on the water system as a result of the increase in the number of power showers and spa-type waterfall showers—as well as the increase in the number of homes, which I consider to be another critical factor in what is happening—it is clear that our current infrastructure is not up to scratch. How will the Minister ensure that we do not sacrifice the balance between quality, as developers who are under financial pressure owing to the cost of living are looking for cheaper options, and the bare minimum where permissible?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman has broadened the debate by talking about the water supply issue as a whole. The Government are looking closely at the issue of water efficiency, because we must ensure that we use water wisely. We have consulted on mandatory water efficiency labelling. If we use water efficiently in our homes, with the help of the correct gadgets and the correct legislation from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, we will use water better, and there could potentially be a beneficial impact on our bills. We must always think about the costs to bill payers, and about enabling them always to have the clean and plentiful water that they deserve.

Voter Identification

1.15 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities if he will make a statement on the roll-out of voter identification.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): Democracy is precious. The United Kingdom's electoral system has a hard-earned reputation for transparency and integrity, and that needs regular review and, where appropriate, enhancement to ensure that it works today just as it did in the past.

One of the most basic principles of voting is that the people who cast their votes are eligible to do so. The introduction of voter identification at polling stations from May will be another lock in ensuring that the integrity of our democracy is protected for the long term. Nor is this anything new: voter identification has been in place in Northern Ireland for nearly 20 years. As for elections in Great Britain, this Government stood on a manifesto that said we would introduce it, won on the basis of doing so, introduced legislation to fulfil that commitment, and are now delivering on that promise. We will not shirk our responsibilities to protect the integrity of the ballot box.

According to Government research, about 98% of the electorate already have an accepted voter ID, whether it is a passport, a driving licence or one of nearly 20 other eligible types of identification. That includes, for some, expired identification, in order to maximise participation. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of people already have what they need to fulfil this new protection at the ballot box. For those who do not, the Government have made available a voter authority certificate, which can be applied for today. It is free of charge and can be issued to everyone who wants it in readiness for May. To date, more than 21,000 applications have been made. Hon. Members will likely have seen—as have I, along with many millions of others—the extensive communications campaigns now under way, run by the Electoral Commission and, at a local level, by individual councils. Those will continue all the way up to May.

There are few tasks more important in public life than maintaining the trust of the British public in our electoral institutions and our electoral processes. A huge amount of work is under way, and that will continue until May. I am grateful to officials, to the Electoral Commission and to councils up and down the land for the work that they are doing. We are taking action to strengthen the integrity of those institutions and processes and to protect the sanctity of the vote. It is now incumbent on all Members—having had the debate and having resolved to do this last year—to send a collective clear signal that this change is important to protect the integrity of the ballot box, and that we should all get ready for this to happen in May.

Helen Morgan: For months and months, Members on the Opposition side of the House have fought the Government's voter ID plans tooth and nail. We have warned that this is using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, at an exorbitant cost to the taxpayer, and that it is a thinly veiled attempt to make it far more difficult for people to vote.

[Helen Morgan]

This morning I was appalled to read new statistics relating to the Government's botched roll-out of voter ID, revealing that of the estimated 2 million people who will now need a new form of ID—a voter authority certificate—in order to vote, just 1% have applied for it. And of that tiny number—not even 21,000—a tiny minority are older people or young people, groups who we were warned risked being disenfranchised under these new plans. We are just 10 weeks away from the local elections. Safeguarding our democracy and the fundamental right to vote should be the priority of any responsible Government.

I therefore urge the Minister to answer the following questions. What are the Government going to do to fix this? In particular, how are they going to target groups who have limited access to the internet to ensure that they do not lose out? What engagement will take place with local authorities and what support will be provided? It seems absurd that local authorities might have to pay the cost of the Government's botched roll-out of voter ID.

Will the Minister commit to, at the very least, pausing this year's roll-out? He will be aware of the Electoral Commission's analysis that this roll-out means that the May elections cannot be run in a

“fully secure, accessible and workable”

manner. Will the Government expand the list of acceptable forms of ID so that fewer people have to apply for a local authority certificate? Many Members were rightly concerned when it was revealed last autumn that some forms of student ID were not included in the list. Do the Government have any handle on the level of awareness among the general public regarding the need to bring ID with them to vote in May? I would say that the Government were sleepwalking into a disaster, but I am afraid that, to me, this looks a little more cynical.

Lee Rowley: We are clearly going to have a discussion today in which hon. Members have every right, should they wish, to use quite outrageous rhetoric in relation to this basic, fundamental change to ensure that we protect the integrity of the ballot box. I would encourage them to think carefully about how they approach this during the urgent question.

To answer the hon. Lady's questions specifically, I need to take on this notion that there are 2 million people who need voter ID. That is absolutely not correct and I hope that hon. Members will stop reiterating it. Of those 2 million people—which is an estimate—a large number will not have elections in their area this year. Secondly, of that group, a number will choose not to vote, much as we would like them to do so. They may have chosen never to vote, and although we would encourage them to do so, that is ultimately the purpose of a democracy: people have a right to vote and a right not to vote. We are seeking to encourage them to vote and seeking to guarantee that integrity. There may also have been a choice for people to change to postal votes. We are continuing to work to encourage take-up where it is necessary, but it is fundamentally incorrect for hon. Members in this House to suggest that some form of target is being missed.

The hon. Lady also asked what we were going to do to target groups. We are already doing that. We have engaged on multiple levels at multiple times with those

who could be hard to reach, and we will continue to do that all the way up until May. It is not correct that local authorities are paying the cost, as she suggested. New burdens funding has been paid and there will be a true-up process afterwards to ensure that people are not out of pocket. The list of means of identification that the hon. Lady asked to be expanded already had more than 20 on it, including passports and driving licences. As I said in my initial response, that includes some instances where expiration had happened. I would encourage the Liberal Democrats and other hon. Members to understand that we are seeking to ensure that the sanctity of the ballot box can be protected, and I wish that they would support these reasonable and proportionate measures to do that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Personation and multiple voting by individuals is notoriously hard to prove, which is one of the reasons that very few people get prosecuted. But we know it goes on, so does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to safeguard the validity of voting, it is vital that people can substantiate who they are when they go to vote?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

“Personation at the polling station will be made much more difficult by the requirement for all voters to provide a specified form of photographic identification.”—[*Official Report*, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 739.]

Those are not my words but those of the Labour Minister who introduced photographic identification in Northern Ireland in 2003.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The implementation of a voter identification scheme has always been a solution in search of a problem. We are more likely to be struck by lightning 54 times than to be queueing behind a person committing vote fraud at a polling station. Nevertheless, for their own purposes, the Government chose to force through voter ID legislation this time last year.

For months, those who administer and monitor our elections—the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Local Government Association, the Electoral Commission—all warned the Government that there was not enough time to safely implement the scheme for May or for those without ID to get a voter authority certificate. The Minister disregarded this expert advice and pushed ahead anyway, and the complacency that we have heard today is breathtaking.

I am sorry if the 2 million figure is such a problem for the Minister, but the reality is that the applications that have been made represent just over 1% of those who will need this. At the current rate of sign-up, it will take a decade to get credentials to everyone who needs them, but there are only 72 days to polling day. We are risking widespread disenfranchisement. When is the Minister going to wake up and act to prevent these voter ID requirements from locking huge numbers of people out of our democracy at the next election?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Gentleman continues to perpetuate the myth that this is some form of suppression. He is absolutely incorrect. Putting aside party political views, we have a responsibility in this place to make sure that we are temperate with our language, particularly when

it relates to something as important as the ballot box. *[Interruption.]* He chunters that I should listen to the experts, but if this urgent question had not been granted—although I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to it—I would have been in a meeting right now with the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Local Government Association and the Electoral Commission, to continue my regular interactions about making sure that this works.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that under the existing system people have to fill in a registration form in order to vote in an election, why should it be more difficult for people who have shown themselves capable of registering to vote to bring along a piece of identification when they come to exercise that right?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is right. An estimated 98% of people already have this ID and, as I have indicated, we are providing additional ID for the people who choose to vote but do not have ID at the moment, so that we can ensure that May is as successful as it can be.

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

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): If the proposal for voter ID is such a sensible and necessary requirement, as the Minister claims, can he tell us why fewer types of ID are to be acceptable for voting than the post office will accept for collecting a parcel? It would seem that there is some gerrymandering going on. Some types of student ID and Oyster cards for the under-30s will not be accepted, but Oyster cards for the over-60s will be accepted. How does the Minister explain that? If the Government are disenfranchising young people, how many would they see as a success in that regard? Does he also accept that what we are now seeing would be objected to in some of the more regressive US states?

Lee Rowley: Voter ID is a policy that has been implemented by many countries across the world. It is pretty standard, including in parts of the European Union, which the hon. Gentleman's party is keen to get back into. In 2010, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe carried out a review of the elections in the United Kingdom at that point and it was clear that there was a weakness in our system around ensuring that identification was provided. I would gently encourage the hon. Gentleman to come off the talking points and to look at what is actually the case. An example in question is the Oyster card point, which continues to be raised by Members in this House. It is extremely simple to answer that question. Members should go and look at the eligibility for 18-year-old Oyster cards and at the eligibility for 60+ Oyster cards. They are different. The eligibility for the 60+ card involves significantly more requirements, including a passport or a driving licence. Of course it will be the case when we try to expand the level of identification that can be used, as we try to ensure that people can take it to the ballot box, that we are going to say yes in some instances and no in others, if that eligibility is different.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): The proof is in the pudding. We had a successful pilot in Swindon where the turnout was up. Would the Minister agree that for each of those on the long list of my many Labour opponents over the years, in their respective selection meetings, their members required voter ID? If it is good enough for them, surely it is good enough for all of us.

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is right. That was also the case in the recent Wakefield by-election, where I believe the Labour candidate was selected on the basis of photographic ID. What is good enough for the Labour party should be good enough to secure the integrity and sanctity of our ballot box more widely.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If I go to the polling station at the local government election, I can produce my passport, which I do not normally carry, or my driving licence. If I do not have either, I could produce my pensioner's travel pass issued by South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. However, if I were a young person—

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): You are.

Mr Betts: I thank my hon. Friend. If I were a young person with a travel pass issued by the same authority, I could not produce it at the polling station. Quite simply, what do the Government have against young people? Why are they discriminating against them? Why are they finding every reason to disqualify their forms of ID? Is it because the Government do not expect that many young people will vote for them?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my near constituency neighbour for his question. No, it is absolutely not the case that we are discriminating against anybody. We want maximum participation in elections, and we want to ensure the integrity of the ballot box. I gently draw his attention to the Government research that found that younger people are more likely than the general population to hold a form of voter ID. His logic does not apply.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As we have heard, constituency Labour party meetings regularly request voter ID. I therefore challenge Labour Members to put their money where their mouth is and waive those requirements, if they are so confident that voter ID is not needed. Will the Minister remind the House of this programme's success in Northern Ireland not only in tackling fraud but in increasing voter confidence?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There has been voter ID in Northern Ireland for 20 years, and it has run successfully. There is absolutely no reason why that will not be the case in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I agree with the Minister that the integrity of our democracy is incredibly important, but I suggest that the best way to strengthen security at the ballot box is to increase turnout, which would reduce voter fraud.

[Cat Smith]

Two million people do not hold valid ID, and will not hold it in May. I remind the Minister that access to photo ID is a luxury and, in a cost of living crisis, the reality is that many of our constituents cannot afford the luxury of paying £82 for a passport or around £40 for a driving licence. They are being priced out of the ballot box. I urge him to look again at the list. After the May elections, will he make a statement to the House outlining what actually happened and how many people were turned away?

Lee Rowley: One of our reasons for offering a free voter authority certificate, which 21,000 people have already taken up, is to address precisely that question.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Picking up a parcel, borrowing a library book and voting in internal Labour party elections are all activities for which photo ID is required. Does the Minister agree that this battle, this argument, has already been won? Opposition Members would do better to ensure free and fair elections by encouraging photo ID sign-up in communities that do not have it.

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why we are focusing on making sure that people are aware of this change and vote in a way that reflects the change so that May is successful. There is a huge amount of work to do to secure the integrity of the ballot box for the long term.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Government were warned that their voter ID scheme would disenfranchise many people, and specifically disabled people. The Royal National Institute of Blind People's tracker survey found that 13% of blind and partially sighted people have no photographic ID. We know that not much additional resource is going into local authorities, so would it not make sense for the Government to invest significantly in making voting accessible and inclusive for everybody, including blind and partially sighted people?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady takes a keen interest in this area, and she will be aware that we are making changes to encourage blind and partially sighted people to get more involved in the electoral process and at the ballot box in May, which is one of the reasons I met the Royal National Institute of Blind People on 8 February. I will continue to meet all organisations representing these areas to ensure that this works as well as it is able to in May.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Many people who do not carry ID tend to be in already marginalised demographics, and now they will be disenfranchised. The Tories are "trying to gerrymander". I do not always agree with the editor of *The Spectator*, but he is right on this occasion, is he not?

Lee Rowley: No, he is not, for the reasons I have provided. Many countries around the world have voter ID to ensure the integrity of the ballot box, and I encourage the Labour party and the hon. Lady to encourage their constituents to get involved. It will be happening.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Rather than rail against a very sensible measure to improve the integrity of elections, would Opposition parties not do better to focus on supporting councils and the Electoral Commission to encourage people to check what identification is needed and, if they do not have it, to get the free voter authority certificate, which is readily available?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Now is the time to ensure the successful delivery of this policy. Work is under way in the Department, the Electoral Commission and councils, and it is for all parties in this place to ensure that the people who vote for them are aware of the change of responsibilities coming in May, to ensure that they continue to do so.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This Tory Government always lecture us about wanting to deregulate and not interfere in the freedoms and liberties of individuals as they go about their daily lives. All the independent research indicates that voter ID will disadvantage people who are least likely to vote Tory. What is it that attracted the Minister to this measure?

Lee Rowley: It is safeguarding the integrity of the ballot box for the long term, which the Labour party seemed to care about when it was in government in 2010. Its lack of care right now demonstrates its lack of interest in going into government in future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much. He probably knows what I will say but, having had voter ID for more than 20 years, it has become second nature in Northern Ireland. Free photographic ID is provided and can be used to fly to the UK mainland or to purchase age-restricted products. It is a simple process that can be facilitated with a simple form and photograph. It has cut down on fraud, and I stand behind the principle of one person, one vote, which it protects. Does the Minister agree that the free provision of electoral ID is an essential component of any legislation?

Lee Rowley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is one of the few people in this place with experience of voter ID. I encourage the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats to listen to what he says about its long-term success in Northern Ireland.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Seventy-two days out from the elections, the electorate do not know that they need to carry voter ID. It is one thing to say that people who are used to doing it will continue to carry voter ID, but people who do not know about it will not carry voter ID. Will the Minister set out everything he will be doing to communicate what each electorate will have to do between now and the election to get this ID?

Lee Rowley: The Electoral Commission, which undertakes regular advertising in advance of elections, has been engaged to do this, and its campaign began in early January and will continue until May. The polling cards going out to every household that votes will carry a clear message to indicate what is happening. We have provided individual budgets so that local authorities can reach out to make sure that their communities are aware of the coming change.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The census shows that 40% of people in Wales do not have a passport, compared with 2.9% in Westminster. We will have no experience of voter ID in Wales until May 2024, so how on earth will the Minister assess any potential and entirely unintentional voter suppression in Wales, given that we might have a general election before then?

Lee Rowley: The research indicates that 98% of people across the United Kingdom have ID. Where there is a gap, I encourage those who are concerned to make sure that their electorate are aware of the coming change and to highlight the point of that change, which is to ensure the integrity of the ballot box for the long term.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): A total of 505 people over 75 years of age have applied for the Government's voter ID document in the past month—that is fewer than the number of MPs in this House. Young people, too, are disproportionately disadvantaged. Will the Minister reflect on the fact that what he is taking part in is an erosion of a fundamental British freedom, a fundamental British civil liberty: the right to vote freely? We are more likely to be struck by lightning than to be impersonated at the ballot box.

Lee Rowley: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has managed to get in material for his usual social media clip. The reality is that we are trying to ensure the integrity of the ballot box for the long term. Ninety eight per cent. of people have access to ID. We will continue to work right up until May to ensure that those who do not have ID, but who want it, have it for the May elections.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The turnover of voters in my Glasgow Central constituency is significant, due to a large student population and the housing mix in the city, which makes turnover high in general. Can the Minister explain how people will understand the requirements for voter ID in Westminster elections, when there are different franchises and different elections? The challenge for many of us when campaigning in elections is in getting people registered at all. Surely it will be the case that people will turn up on the day expecting to vote, but will not be able to do so.

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady makes the important point that there are differences in how elections are run in some of the devolved Administrations, but that is nothing new. I say to her gently that her Administration are consulting on a proposal to greater vary how elections are run within the United Kingdom, and I encourage her to talk to the devolved Administrations about that. We will continue to do what we have outlined, which is to highlight the change to make as many people as possible aware of it and to encourage people to ensure that they can still vote, and vote in a way that is protected and has integrity.

Nick Smith: Just 1% of those who are eligible have signed up to the voter ID scheme. It will take 10 years to issue the new ID to those who need it, but, with local elections just 10 weeks away, would it not make more sense to go back to the drawing board? The Government must come up with plans to boost voter turnout, not suppress it.

Lee Rowley: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). It is incorrect to perpetuate this 2 million number. A number of those people do not have elections this year. Ultimately, it will be down to people to decide whether they wish to get a voter authority certificate. I encourage them to do so. I hope that they will do so, but, ultimately, it is the choice of an engaged citizenry how to do that. We will continue to highlight and advertise this change to those people up to May and beyond.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am proud to represent young people in my constituency and also the students at Oxford University and at Oxford Brookes. One of them wrote to me, saying:

“It is outrageous that the over-60s Oyster card will be considered valid ID, but the 18-30 card will not. This is clearly an attack on young people and will disproportionately impact their ability to vote.”

The fact is—we all know this—that younger people are less likely to vote. We encourage them to do so at every opportunity, but, because they are transient, many do not know whether they will be in one constituency or another. What are the Minister's plans to target young people in particular so that they can make sure that they are not disenfranchised? Can he seriously stand there and say with a straight face that this has nothing to do with the fact that most of them will not be voting Tory?

Lee Rowley: When I was a student in the hon. Lady's constituency, one thing I was told by tutors at my college was to look at the detail. The detail on the Oyster card for 18-year-olds is different from that on the over-60s Oyster card. That is identified on the website, and I encourage the Liberal Democrats to look at it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): My Liverpool, Riverside constituency has some of the most disadvantaged wards in the country and many of my constituents, particularly young people and black people, will not have access to valid ID. The Minister has spoken about the integrity and sanctity of the ballot box. Can he explain how many cases of fraud have been identified, and will he commit to undertake a review after the May elections?

Lee Rowley: On the hon. Lady's final point, absolutely we will review what happens in May. We have already committed to that both in this place and elsewhere. We want to learn from the experience, just as Labour wanted to learn from the engagement at the introduction of this scheme in Northern Ireland in 2003. We will absolutely do that, but if the hon. Lady has concerns about reaching out to communities in Liverpool, I encourage her to speak to her council, which has been given additional money to undertake communications to do that very job.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I now ask constituents when I knock on doors whether they know about producing voter ID, and so far this year not one has known about the requirement and not one has been in favour of it. Voter turnout depends on familiarity with where we go to vote and what we do. Low turnout is a much more serious problem for our democracy than

[*Andy Slaughter*]

the de minimis level of fraud. Does the Minister think that turnout will go up or down as a result of these measures?

Lee Rowley: As the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, we all want high turnout. We all want the maximum number of people who can vote to do so. That is one reason why in other parts of the Elections Act 2022, we are extending the franchise. This is part of a broad group of measures that seek to protect the integrity and sanctity of the ballot box while ensuring that as many people who wish to vote can do so.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What does the Minister think the overlap will be between those least likely to have the requisite ID and those least likely to vote for the Conservative party?

Lee Rowley: I think that I have already answered that question, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman, in readiness for the elections that will take place in his area in the future, to spend his time highlighting to his constituents how we are protecting the sanctity of the vote, rather than making cheap shots such as that.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): As of today, just 118 people have applied for the voter authority certificate in Cheshire West and Chester. I urge the Minister to apply some common sense to this. We have had debates on the principle of this, but can we pause the roll-out to ensure that we have integrity of the franchise for all?

Lee Rowley: As the hon. Gentleman outlines, it is important that we have integrity of the ballot box. I have explained multiple times why this is an important initiative to ensure that. If he has concerns about what is happening in Cheshire West and Chester, I encourage him to take it up with the leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council, who has been given additional money to make sure that they communicate with those in hard-to-reach areas so that the May elections are successful.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Government's website says that to apply for voter authority certificates, people need a recent digital photo of themselves. Even if applying by post, people will need access to a printer so that they can print off the form. This really misses the point that many people, especially elderly people and those on low pay, do not have access to a computer. It is also estimated that more than 3 million over-65s have no access to the internet, and more than 7 million adults have very poor literacy skills. How will the Government make sure that those with poor literacy and digital skills and those with no access to a computer or the internet will be able to exercise their basic and fundamental right to vote in elections?

Lee Rowley: There is no requirement for a person to be computer literate or to go through online processes to acquire a voter authority certificate. Alternative processes are available and have been used, and I have data on them. We want to make sure that those who do not have computer can still have a voter authority certificate should they want to have one.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that many council seats are currently decided by a handful of votes. Does he accept that, inevitably, there will be a change in how a number of seats are won or lost and that, in turn, the control of particular councils will be determined by a handful of votes in a number of seats? Does he anticipate that the Government will have to go to court charged with voter suppression and an intentional corruption of our democracy, because people will simply forget to bring their voter ID—it is not that they do not have it—and that will change the outcome? Those people will say that they had forgotten their ID, that they would have voted for X or Y, but they did not, and that will be the margin that determines the future of that council, which is a disgrace.

Lee Rowley: Many council seats have been decided on a very small number of votes in Northern Ireland for 20 years. The change brought in by the Labour party in 2003 requiring voter identification in that country is now being applied elsewhere in the United Kingdom. I gently ask the hon. Gentleman, when there are next elections in his area, to encourage his constituents to recognise that voter ID is here, and it is here in order to protect the sanctity of the ballot box.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Introducing further barriers to voting is like shadow boxing a phantom foe. The Government's changes threaten to disenfranchise millions and place an administrative burden on local authority staff. It was reported yesterday that fewer than 1,300 people aged under 25 have registered for the new paperwork. Can the Minister explain why it is okay for members of the Conservative party to elect the Prime Minister via an online ballot, while ordinary people face voter restrictions when they go to their local polling station?

Lee Rowley: One of the principles of liberalism, which Liberal Democrats often forget, is equality before the law. Equality before the law requires processes to ensure integrity. I gently highlight to him a quote from the former hon. Member for Montgomeryshire in 2001, when he spoke on this subject on behalf of the Liberal Democrats:

"we accept the need for a Bill...The Liberal Democrats also welcome the Government's intention to introduce an electoral identity card". —[*Official Report*, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 706.]

What has changed?

Raid of BBC Offices in India

1.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to make a statement on the raid of BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai, and allegations of tax evasion following the BBC documentary “India: The Modi Question”.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): I am grateful to my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for raising this urgent question, and appreciate his interest in the recent news that India’s Income Tax Department has conducted what has been described as a survey on the BBC’s offices in New Delhi and Mumbai. That began on 14 February, and finished after three days, on 16 February.

As everyone in this House will be aware, the BBC is quite rightly operationally and editorially independent from His Majesty’s Government. While I cannot comment on the allegations made by India’s Income Tax Department, the BBC has said that it is supporting its staff in its Indian offices and co-operating with the Indian authorities to resolve this matter as soon as possible. Respect for the rule of law is an essential element of an effective democracy, as are an independent media and freedom of speech. They make countries stronger and more resilient. That is why we regularly engage with and support different parts of India’s media. For example, the annual south Asia journalism fellowship programme, under the flagship Chevening brand, includes over 60 Indian alumni.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has previously said, the UK regards India as an important international partner, and His Majesty’s Government are investing heavily in strengthening our ties. Our broad and deep relationship, guided by the comprehensive strategic partnership and the 2030 road map for India-UK future relations, allows us to discuss a wide range of issues in a constructive manner with the Government of India. We continue to follow the matter closely.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response, but I want to develop the question. Let us be clear that this was a deliberate act of intimidation following the release of an unflattering documentary about the country’s leader. Since its release, there has been a concerted effort to prevent the documentary from screening in India. Take-down notices issued to Twitter and YouTube have resulted in an India-wide ban of the documentary on those platforms. There has been suppression of the freedom of expression of the media and journalists.

When students from universities across the country have tried to organise screenings of the documentary on university campuses, dozens have been arrested, while others face internet blackouts through power cuts. As the raids on the BBC offices commenced, the Bharatiya Janata party spokesperson issued a statement that said:

“The BBC indulges in anti-India propaganda. India is a country which gives an opportunity to every organisation as long as you do not spew venom”.

As has been said:

“These raids have all the appearance of a reprisal against the BBC...They have come at a time when independent media are being hounded more and more, and when pluralism is shrinking in India”.

Not my words, but the assessment of Reporters Without Borders—strong words indeed. In the past six years, claims of financial irregularities and tax evasion have been used as justification for shutting down more than 14,000 media outlets and non-governmental organisations doing great work in India. They include such household names as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Oxfam. That has had a chilling effect on journalists, human rights advocates and religious minorities.

The raids happened seven days ago. Since then—I say this respectfully—there has been silence from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. No Government statements have been issued, and it has taken an urgent question to encourage the Government to condemn this blatant attack on press freedoms. Alarming, the raids happened hours after the Government signed a trade deal with India. That has led to allegations that the silence from the Government is due to the proximity of the raids to that deal. In conclusion, can the Minister tell me and the House whether the Government intend to summon the Indian high commissioner, so that his counterparts can raise the issue with him?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I noted a bit of coughing going on, which will give him a clue to a few things.

The hon. Gentleman raised important points. The UK’s support for media freedom is well known. Media freedom and freedom of speech are essential elements of robust democracies. As I said in my opening remarks, I cannot comment on the specifics of the allegations, because the BBC is co-operating with the Indian authorities on the matter, and as the BBC has said, this is an ongoing investigation and it would be inappropriate for it to comment further.

The hon. Gentleman made important points about the implications for NGOs and faith-based organisations. He knows that we continue to work with them on the ground. That is an important issue for him, and certainly for me.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have often drawn the attention of the House to the very important work done by the BBC Monitoring service. Does not this extremely worrying raid on the BBC, in a country as advanced and potentially well disposed towards this country as India, once again illustrate the importance of not placing too much reliance on sources in countries on which we are reporting, because there is always the potential for action to be taken against local sources? Services such as Monitoring should have strong representation in this country, to guard against disturbing events of the sort that we have seen.

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend for his thoughts on these matters. He has been consistent on these issues. I highlight that we believe that the BBC plays an important role. The FCDO funds services in 12 languages, including four Indian languages: Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi and Telugu. It will continue to do so, because it is important to ensure that our voice—and an independent voice, through the BBC—is heard throughout the world.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): India has a rich heritage and is rightly proud of its place as the world’s largest democracy. However, in a democracy

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

with true media freedoms, criticism cannot be shut down unnecessarily and freedom of expression must be protected at all costs. Last week's raids on the BBC in India are therefore deeply worrying, regardless of the official narrative on why they took place. The BBC is a globally respected broadcaster, rightly renowned for its high-quality, trustworthy reporting. It should be free to report and operate without intimidation. We Opposition Members are particularly worried about reports that BBC staff were forced to stay in their offices overnight, and have faced lengthy questioning. In any democracy, the media must have the ability to criticise and scrutinise political leaders without fear of repercussions. That clearly applies in this situation. I therefore ask the Minister what discussions he has had with both the BBC World Service and his Indian counterpart regarding the welfare of BBC staff who have been questioned, and what steps he is taking to protect the BBC World Service from intimidation. It would send a deeply worrying message to BBC staff around the world should the Government not make their position on the protection of the BBC's trustworthy and valuable reporting absolutely clear to the House today.

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes important points. It is because of our broad and deep relationship with India that we are able to discuss a wide range of issues in a constructive manner with its Government. As part of those conversations, this issue has been raised and we continue to monitor the situation. He asks important questions about the BBC staff. The BBC said in its statement that it is supporting its staff; obviously welfare is a priority, and consular support is also available if requested. We continue to monitor the situation. He also raises the importance of media freedom. We absolutely support that, which is why we have agreed a package of funding for the BBC World Service. With that, the FCDO also has additional funding to help with key languages.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is important to understand that the BBC is not an arm of the British Government—in fact it is frequently critical of His Majesty's Government. Clearly that is something that resounds around the world, that people believe the BBC is actually representative of the Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that, wherever it operates, the BBC operates within the law and within the appropriate tax rules? Will he confirm that the income tax authorities in India have been investigating the BBC for seven years?

David Rutley: The BBC does have an independent voice and editorial capability, and that is vital. As I said earlier, and as my hon. Friend can read from the BBC, it continues to be involved in the ongoing investigation. The BBC has said it is not appropriate for it to comment further at this point, but it is an ongoing investigation that the BBC is actively engaged in.

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

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The SNP condemns this alarming attack on the BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai. The BBC World Service is a renowned and respected news outlet. For decades it has shone a light on global affairs, including human rights abuses and undemocratic practices. What we have not heard from the Minister is details of the diplomatic steps the FCDO has taken and will continue to take to convey its opposition to these raids in the strongest terms and to safeguard those BBC journalists affected. Human rights abuses, discrimination and governmental scapegoating against India's religious minorities are well documented. Political transparency and freedom of press are essential, but the BJP seems content to violate those principles. Does the Minister agree that additional funding is now necessary to ensure that the BBC World Service's independent and unbiased radio broadcasts in Hindi are not cut? Given these appalling raids, will the FCDO reconsider its approach to negotiations on the release of Jagtar Singh Johal, for whom the softly-softly approach does not seem to be working?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes important points about freedom of religion or belief. That is key, and I know it is at the heart of much of what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said in his opening remarks. The SNP spokesperson also talks about funding. As I said in answer to a previous question, the Government have put a package of funding together for the World Service, and the FCDO has provided funding particularly for those four languages I highlighted earlier, because we believe it is vital for the BBC to have that independent voice and to have the reassurance that it can carry on its work.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): We in the UK are very proud of our press freedoms and, indeed, are accustomed to having the BBC and other reputable outlets hold the UK Government, the Prime Minister and Opposition parties to account in a devastating manner. That is why many of us were so concerned that India, a nation with which we have shared values of democracy and press freedoms, decided to conduct a raid on the BBC offices after the airing of a documentary critical of the Indian Prime Minister's actions. Exactly what conversations has the Minister had with his Indian counterpart to ensure that journalists can undertake their work without fear or favour?

David Rutley: As I highlighted earlier, we have wide-ranging conversations with the Indian Government because of our broad and deep relationship. These issues have absolutely been raised as part of those conversations.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am a great fan of the BBC. It strides on the world stage and is revered by its listeners across the world. I would say the BBC is known for its honesty, which is integral to democracy. Some of the great democracies in this world will surely see this news with some trepidation. Will His Majesty's Government give consideration, if necessary, to contacting the United States and other democracies to put pressure on India and say that this is unacceptable behaviour?

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns and the passion with which he made his comments. I am not able to comment on the specifics

of the allegations in the ongoing investigation. The BBC is continuing to co-operate with the Indian authorities.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The recent actions against the BBC by the Modi Government represent yet another example of disregard for human rights. Back in 2020, the BJP Government froze the accounts of Amnesty International and its offices were forced to close. There are many other examples of the prosecution of minority groups. When will this Government publicly acknowledge the curbing of freedom of expression that is resulting in diminishing democracy in India?

David Rutley: As I have highlighted, freedom of religion or belief is vital for this Government. It is a key principle, as is freedom of media. The hon. Gentleman will know that we had a fantastic conference here in the UK last summer to promote freedom of religion or belief. We condemn any instances of discrimination because of religion and will continue to do so across the world. We have those conversations with the Indian Government, and we are able to do so because of the depth and breadth of the relationship.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this urgent question. With these raids we see an example of the increasing politicisation of the Indian justice system, along with a hostile attitude towards an independent media. Does the Minister agree that that politicisation and mediatisation of the Indian republic's judicial system is a matter of real concern for British citizens who might find themselves subject to it—for example, my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal?

David Rutley: We need to ensure that our views on media freedom are communicated clearly with other Governments. We have those conversations not only with the Government of India, but across the world. We think these are very important principles and, as I said, they are essential elements for robust democracies.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I understand why the Foreign Office does not want to comment on this particular investigation, but the Minister will well know that this is not the first time that the authorities in India have undertaken such investigations into media organisations that are critical of the current Government. However, I do not think that stops the Government expressing a view, as the Minister just did, about the importance of media freedom in relation to the attempts to ban the viewing of the documentary. When we read that a spokesperson for the BJP actually described the BBC as the “most corrupt” organisation in the world, is it not incumbent upon the Government to stand up for the BBC and its integrity?

David Rutley: We stand up for the BBC. We fund the BBC. We think the BBC World Service is vital. We want the BBC to have that editorial freedom. It criticises us, it criticises the Labour party, and it has that freedom that we believe is so important. That freedom is key, and we want to be able to communicate its importance to our friends across the world, including the Government in India.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Plymouth Shootings

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before we come to the statement, I wish to make it clear that, given the issues of national importance raised by the wider implications of the case before us, I am waiving the sub judice resolution regarding any outstanding proceedings.

2.9 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement about the shootings in Plymouth in August 2021.

On 12 August 2021 in Keyham, Plymouth, Jake Davison shot and killed five people, wounded two others and took his own life. The deceased victims were the perpetrator's mother, Maxine Davison, 51; three-year-old Sophie Martyn and her father Lee Martyn, 43; Stephen Washington, 59; and Kate Shepherd, 66. This was a truly horrific incident and a tragic loss of life.

The jury to the inquest into those deaths returned their findings of unlawful killings yesterday afternoon. Our thoughts and prayers go out once again to the families and friends of the victims, and to the whole community in Keyham. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his tireless campaigning since the tragedy on behalf of the Keyham community and the families.

It is anticipated that the coroner will shortly issue a prevention of future deaths report in which further recommendations are likely to be made. If, as expected, the Home Office receives such a report, we will substantively respond to it—as well as to the recommendations made by the Independent Office for Police Conduct, which has conducted an investigation into the shootings, and to a separate inquiry by the Scottish Affairs Committee—within 60 days of receiving it.

The Government keep firearms licensing under review to safeguard against abuse and prevent risk to public safety. In the immediate aftermath of the shootings in Plymouth, the then Home Secretary asked all police forces to urgently review their firearms licensing practices. The review found that, collectively, a total of 6,434 firearms and shotgun licences were surrendered, seized, revoked or refused over the previous 12-month period across England, Wales and Scotland. Of those licences, a total of 908 were subsequently returned or reissued following further checks or appeals decided by the courts. As a result of the review of returned licences, the original decision was overturned in eight cases and the licences have been re-surrendered or revoked. I hope that those findings provide reassurance that the police have put in place robust processes for issuing and reviewing firearms and shotgun licences.

That does not mean that there is any complacency following those awful events. Strengthened controls were subsequently issued through statutory guidance in October 2021—a few months after this awful incident—so that the police make sure that people are medically fit to receive a licence and that full medical checks have been undertaken, which, of course, did not happen in this case. A new digital marker system to flag firearms owners to GPs is also currently being introduced.

The statutory guidance draws on previous lessons learned and will ensure better consistency across police firearms licensing departments. It means that no one will be given a firearms licence unless their doctor has expressly confirmed to the police whether they have any relevant medical conditions, including in relation to their mental health. The statutory guidance makes it clear that police can now undertake a wide range of checks to assess a person's suitability depending on the individual case, including social media checks, financial checks, interviews with and background checks on relatives or associates, and checks relating to domestic violence or public protection units.

The College of Policing has refreshed its authorised professional practice on firearms licensing. A consultation was launched about a month ago, on 12 January, and it will conclude on 10 March. I encourage Members to respond to that consultation. His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire & rescue services has announced that it will be undertaking a thematic review of forces' arrangements in respect of firearms licensing in 2024-25.

Devon and Cornwall police have assured the IOPC that changes have been made following its recent recommendations, but depending on what the coroner recommends shortly, I am currently minded to ask the inspectorate to look specifically at the arrangements that Devon and Cornwall have in place for firearms licensing and to confirm their suitability. The Home Office is also currently taking forward a review of fees that can be charged for firearms licences or certificates by police forces—we expect to consult later this year—to make sure that forces have enough resources to conduct those important checks.

We must ensure that our controls on firearms are as robust as possible, and that we learn the lessons from the tragic deaths in Keyham and in Scotland. We therefore await with keen interest the coroner's anticipated prevention of future deaths report. As I have said, we will respond to that report, to the recent report by the Scottish Affairs Committee following the shootings in Skye, and to the IOPC report within 60 days of receiving the last of those three reports, which will be the coroner's report. We will respond substantively to the recommendations in all three.

I commit today that any further changes needed to protect the public will be made. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.16 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

Today we mourn Sophie Martyn, who was only three, Lee Martyn, Stephen Washington, Kate Shepherd and Maxine Davison. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his work. I know that he has been affected very deeply, as has his community.

The juror's conclusions are searing and the IOPC report damning. There was "catastrophic failure" at Devon and Cornwall police in the individual decisions taken, in the appalling lack of supervision, training and oversight, and in the rules themselves. There is no automatic right to bear arms in this country; there is no right to be given the benefit of the doubt.

After Dunblane, firearms units were to be given as much training and guidance as possible, yet Devon and Cornwall police had no formal training for two decades. The firearms licensing supervisor told the court that he had done a two-day training course in 1998 but nothing else until 2020. How could it possibly be that the person in charge of deciding whether someone was safe with a gun was not even trained on how to use the risk manual? That casual approach to risk was dangerous and proved to be fatally flawed.

The last HMIC inspection on firearms was eight years ago in 2015. I am glad that the Minister has told us that the next one will be completed in 2024-25, but why do we need to wait a year? Can it not be brought forward? The 2015 inspection raised concerns that police force practice on licensing was inconsistent, but the public consultation on statutory guidance started only in 2019. The Government failed to respond to the consultation. Jake Davison used his licensed weapon to kill five people in 2021. Since the Keyham shooting, Devon and Cornwall police now reject 6% of gun applications, but the national average across England is only 3%. It is terrifying to think that other pump-action shotguns could be in the wrong hands.

Jake Davison's child and teenage history should have triggered far more questions and expert advice. There was information about him that was never revealed. The mental health marker is finally being introduced, but it is in statutory guidance rather than a legal duty, and experts have raised concerns about the new system. Is the Minister aware of those concerns, and is he satisfied with the new marker? What are the Government's plans to ensure that there is a proactive approach to risk management on firearms licensing? How will the Minister ensure that statutory guidance is followed by police forces and that they are held to account on it?

Jake Davison was an incel. The online radicalisation of young men has been overlooked for far too long. In the past year, there were 77 referrals to Prevent for incel, and 154 referrals for potentially planning or thinking about a school massacre. Will the Minister explain whether there is a flag on Prevent systems to notify the police if someone referred to Prevent has a gun licence? What action are the Government taking to tackle misogynist extremism, because their watering down of the Online Safety Bill means that misogynists and incel gangs will continue to proliferate online? The current counter-extremism strategy is eight years out of date. When will the Government update the strategy? Why does the Minister not accept the IOPC's recommendations in full? I understand he is waiting 60 days for other pieces of work to be concluded, but he could accept the IOPC's sensible recommendations in full today.

The new chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police has called for legislation on firearms licensing. Does the Minister agree? We are alert to concerns about pump-action shotguns in homes. What is the Home Office view on that? Labour in government will initiate a review of gun licensing laws. We must learn the lessons so that what happened in Keyham can never happen again. Nothing else will do.

Chris Philp: I thank the shadow Minister for her comments and her questions. I will try and answer as many as I can, but I am sure we will discuss this again in the future.

On the HMICFRS thematic inspection, that is programmed as I set out. The point I made about Devon and Cornwall specifically is that, subject to the coroner's recommendations, I will be asking them to do that inspection a lot sooner—essentially I will be asking whether they are willing to do it immediately—to make sure of the assurances that Devon and Cornwall have given to the IOPC that they have indeed already implemented all the recommendations. That is something that needs to happen straight away and, subject to the coroner's report and what that might have to say about it, I will be writing to HMICFRS on that basis shortly.

On concerns about the new markers being placed on files, I commit that our response to the three reports will address the need for a proactive approach to risk management and for legislation in this area. It is important to respond to all three together, rather than piecemeal, and I do not think 60 days is too long to wait for that. I have been clear with colleagues that we need to respond substantively within 60 days of the coroner's report, which is expected shortly.

I completely agree with the shadow Minister's point that people with Davison's background should not receive firearms licences. Indeed, under the laws in place at the time, he should not have received a firearms licence. The IOPC in its recent report identified two or three individuals within the Devon and Cornwall force who the IOPC considered guilty of misconduct by wrongly authorising the issue of that licence, which Davison should never have received, even under the regulations as they stood in 2018 and in 2020.

In relation to the question about radicalisation, if someone has been referred into Prevent, and there is any substantive evidence of radicalisation, it is reasonable that that should be known to the police in making decisions about firearms licences. I will undertake to confirm that that is the case. If it is not the case, I will see what steps can be taken to ensure there is a link between the Prevent database and checks performed by firearms officers.

There is a lot of material to cover. The substantive response that the Government will bring forward in approximately two months' time will answer all the questions and more, and no doubt there will be a statement to the House on the occasion of presenting that.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): May I welcome the Minister's suggestion that there be an IOPC investigation of Devon and Cornwall's operation of firearm regulations? I think I am right in saying that they have the largest number of licences within their territory. If they have not been getting it right, we need some reassurance that they are. I also welcome the Minister's underlining of the fact that this particular person should not have received his firearms back even under the existing regulations. It was a misapplication of those regulations that resulted in the situation we find ourselves in.

Having said that, I am sure the Minister will accept—he will have had the same experience as me—that firearms legislation is in fact an accretion of policies over the years, and it has become a bit of a thicket for us all to navigate. We should have a look at some kind of review overall, and in particular at the critical role the medical profession play in general community safety. What more

[Kit Malthouse]

does the Minister think we can do to impress upon that profession the duty they have, not just to the community more widely, but to the wider body of those who shoot and operate firearms for work purposes or leisure purposes? The profession should not stand in the way of that process. We often found medics who would refuse to issue certification to people or would charge excessive fees for certification, and who were therefore not fully participating in the system. Given that this case proves the crucial nature of their assessment to all our safety, what more does the Minister think we can do to impress that on the medical profession?

Chris Philp: When my right hon. Friend was in this role, I know he met the families of the victims. I completely agree with his points about the medical profession. I echo his call for the medical profession to be proactive when approached by the police in relation to firearms licences and to make full disclosures in consultation with their patients. Where they see a flag that is of concern to them, they should proactively contact the police. As this tragic case shows, there can be devastating consequences for the public where somebody who should not have a gun has one. There is an ethical and moral duty on the medical profession that they owe to society as a whole, as well as to their patient as an individual. I strongly urge GPs and other medical professionals to keep that wider moral duty firmly in mind and to co-operate with the police on these issues.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am angry and our community is angry. We are still hurting and grieving for those we lost, but also feeling for those who were shot and survived. Confidence in Devon and Cornwall police has been badly shaken by the catalogue of catastrophic failures that led up to this tragedy. We have been failed locally by our police, but nationally we are also being failed by gun laws that need to be brought up to date. The families of the victims and those who survived want to see changes: a review of gun laws to bring them up to date and to make them 21st-century; an urgent review of gun licensing, which has failed us badly, and not just in Devon and Cornwall but for every gun licensing authority in the country; a ban on keeping pump-action weapons in someone's home with exceptions for farmers and pest controllers; a national incel strategy to deal with this growing toxic problem; training for firearms officers nationwide; and, importantly, full cost recovery, so that the police have the resources to process applications properly. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the families so that they can impress upon him the strength of their loss, but also the strength and determination in Plymouth to make sure there will be comprehensive changes to our gun laws to ensure that no other community anywhere in the country will have to go through what we have in Plymouth?

Chris Philp: I will meet the hon. Member and the families of the victims, as I think my predecessor has done, to listen to their concerns directly and to make sure their voice is heard in government. He raised a number of points in his question. As I said to the shadow Minister, the response we intend to produce shortly should address the points that he outlined. Clearly the families may have points that they would like to add that we can take into account, so I suggest

we have that meeting in the next month or so, so that their views can feed in to the comprehensive response I have described. We intend to consult on the specific question of fees and ensuring full cost recovery so that police forces get the money it costs them to run these licensing arrangements over the summer or early autumn as quickly as possible. I can make that commitment now.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I pay my own tribute to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has done outstanding work on this issue since this appalling event in 2021. I thank the Minister for his statement, and for the support that the Home Office has given to the people of Plymouth in the aftermath of this tragedy. I welcome the review that the Minister has talked about today, but I ask him not to close his mind to a thorough review of the law in relation to firearms. I take the point that some of that law is quite ancient, and needs to be brought together and looked at in the light of internet influences, as well as medical conditions.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker—thank you for being kind to me—can I ask whether the Minister has seen the excellent report produced by Plymouth's violence against women and girls commission, which tries to tackle some of these wider cultural issues from the bottom up? Has he seen it, and will he commend Plymouth City Council on continuing to take that work forward?

Chris Philp: I echo my hon. Friend's tribute to the families of the victims, who have shown extraordinary bravery in the way they have handled this situation and advocated for change during what have obviously been very difficult circumstances for them. We will obviously consider any recommended changes to the law that may follow from the three reports we are going to be considering.

I am aware of the excellent work led by Plymouth City Councillor Rebecca Smith on a VAWG strategy designed to combat these kinds of issues. When my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) was Minister for Safeguarding, she visited Plymouth together with Councillor Smith to discuss her excellent report, and I commend the approach that Councillor Smith has developed in Plymouth to other local authorities around the country.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My thoughts, of course, are with the families and the victims, and I commend the sterling work that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) has done on this issue.

I wrote to one of the Minister's predecessors, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), in 2020, asking for medical markers to be put on records and for there to be a review of fees, both the fees that GPs were charging and those that police forces were able to charge. The correspondence I got back said that work was being done on the issue, but clearly work was not done on it quick enough. What is important is not just the 60 days in which the Minister will respond but having some indication of a timetable of implementation for some of these changes, particularly a statutory footing for that medical marker. I am worried that, unless that marker is statutory and it is part of the NHS contract that GPs have to report it, enforcement will be weak.

Chris Philp: I cannot speak for my predecessor, but on the point about urgency, a number of steps have already been taken. The updated authorised professional practice guidance from the College of Policing is out for consultation now; that consultation started in January, and will close in March. Updated statutory guidance was issued in October 2021 ensuring that there must be medical checks in every single case.

On the point about medical markers, those markers are being fully rolled out as we speak, so that is in hand. As I said, I can commit to a consultation on the question of fees over the summer or in early autumn, with the objective of ensuring full cost recovery. Regarding the response to the recommendations, I think that 60 days following the coroner's report is a good timetable for a response. That will obviously contain a proposed implementation timetable, but the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and others can be assured that I want to get any changes needed—I am sure there will be changes—implemented as a matter of urgency, for obvious reasons.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): As my right hon. Friend looks to review the licensing arrangements for Devon and Cornwall police, can he ensure that those arrangements accurately reflect the vast rural area that the force covers? We have already heard that the area has a high level of gun ownership, linked to those remote farms that require them for work, and there is concern that there is already a backlog in the renewals system and that the area's rurality is not adequately reflected in the resources that the force receives.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Obviously, Devon and Cornwall is a large geographical area. I understand that more resources are now being deployed into firearms licensing by Devon and Cornwall police, partly following this awful incident, but partly because there are quite large backlogs in Devon and Cornwall specifically for firearms licensing. However, notwithstanding the rurality of Devon and Cornwall, or indeed many other parts of the country, we cannot have different or lower standards anywhere. I know that that was not what my hon. Friend was suggesting, but we need to make sure that standards are high everywhere across the country.

In relation to the resource question more generally, there is an intention to consult shortly on the police funding formula. One of the inputs into that consultation will be rurality, so that adequate resources are given to more rural forces to reflect the additional costs that they very often face.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The inquest concluded that the shootings in Plymouth resulted from a "catastrophic failure". The responsibility lies entirely with the murderer—I do not want to repeat his name—but the firearms licensing department was not given the resources that it needed. The police and crime commissioner in Devon and Cornwall has admitted as much, and has said that

"I have made significant funding available to improve the Devon and Cornwall Police's firearms licensing department"

—this, obviously, since the inquest. What conversations has the Minister had with the police and crime commissioner in Devon and Cornwall about those findings,

and what additional changes would he like to see in the oversight of Devon and Cornwall police?

Chris Philp: I have had extensive discussions on the question of firearms licensing, both inside the Home Office and with policing, including PCCs. As I said in answer to the previous question, following this awful incident, extra resources have now been dedicated to firearms licensing inside Devon and Cornwall, and of course, police forces up and down the country will have record numbers of police officers by the end of next month.

As for changes to practice, I would like to receive the third of those three reports—the first being the Scottish Affairs Committee report, the second being the IOPC report, and the third being the anticipated coroner's prevention of future deaths report—and respond to their recommendations in the round within 60 days, as I have committed to already. I would expect a number of changes to be proposed in response to those recommendations, applying not just to Devon and Cornwall but to policing more widely. As I also said earlier, the IOPC has already made specific recommendations directed at Devon and Cornwall. Devon and Cornwall police have assured the IOPC that those proposed changes have been implemented, but I am minded to ask HMIC to check up specifically on that shortly.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I pay tribute to the whole community of Keyham, and particularly to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on his work on this since it happened. There are three Cornish MPs in the Chamber today, but I know that I speak for all six of us and for everybody west of the Tamar. He will know that we stand shoulder to shoulder with his community, throughout this ordeal and going forward.

It was good to see the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police, Will Kerr—although recently appointed—apologise for the force's failings and take accountability for what has happened. He has called for legislation in this area. I echo what everybody has said about the medical markers and making sure that we have the right balance in legislation, but is there an opportunity to consider a national unit to standardise licensing, processing and decision making, in order to help local police forces with their resources?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Nationally consistent standards are extremely important: we need to make sure that standards are equally high across the entire country. That is part of the reason why the College of Policing is currently consulting on updated authorised professional practice to make sure those standards are clear, and if further changes are necessary, they will obviously be introduced.

The other point that is very important is to make sure that the College of Policing also introduces standardised training—I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), referred to that point in her questions—and that is also in hand, in order to make sure that everybody up and down the country has received proper training. That was clearly a failing in Devon and Cornwall, and we need to make sure it does not happen again anywhere.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today will be a difficult day for the community in Keyham, and my thoughts are with them, but I am not reassured by the Government's response, particularly around mental health but also for victims of domestic violence and their former partners. I have a constituent who is in hiding right now because her former partner has had his firearms returned to him. What reassurance can the Minister give that this incident will be the last, and that my constituent will also be safe?

Chris Philp: Everyone's constituents, including the hon. Lady's, are entitled to feel safe. As the shadow Minister said, firearms licences are not a right, and it is important that we think very carefully before issuing anyone with such a licence. As I said, we will respond comprehensively to the recommendations in these three reports. I know that that will include consideration of domestic abuse and domestic violence, which are clearly indicators of substantially increased risk, and I would be happy to discuss those recommendations as soon as they come out with the hon. Lady and her constituent if she would like to do so.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is it correct, as has been reported, that in this tragic case, the murderer's mother appealed to the police to remove the returned firearm from him and was ignored? If that is true, is it not also the case that no change in any licensing system will be able to compensate for that level of bungling incompetence?

Chris Philp: I am afraid to say that very bad decisions—in fact, wrong decisions—were made in this case. As the former policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said, the wrong decisions were taken under the guidance in force both in 2018, when the licence was first granted, and two or three years later, when the gun was confiscated and then returned. The IOPC has said that very clearly, and it has said that two or three officers of Devon and Cornwall police made the wrong decision at the time. My right hon. Friend is right to say that a change of guidance would not have helped, because the wrong decisions were made under the guidance at the time. However, we need to make sure that the guidance is robust and comprehensive and that training is comprehensive. It is with those purposes in mind that we will respond to the three reports in 60 days or so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for the statement.

Sun Protection Products (Value Added Tax)

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

2.42 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to exempt sun protection products from VAT; and for connected purposes.

I declare from the outset a deeply personal interest in the area in which I am trying to legislate; in fact, it is a deeply personal interest for myself and two of the co-sponsors of the Bill. The point is simply this: if sunscreen products are more affordable, our constituents will be more likely to buy them, use them and protect their skin. We know from market research that our constituents and families across our constituencies are being priced out of buying sunscreen products—a point explained to me just on Friday past, when I visited two primary schools in East Dunbartonshire. One of the headteachers told me with exasperation that after long weekends off towards the summer, her pupils—my constituents—are returning with sunburn. The Government will inevitably bring this down to money, especially if the Bill passes to the next stage, but the facts are undeniable. Less than half a percent of revenue generated by the Treasury from value added tax comes from sunscreen products—£40 million out of £256 billion.

I would caution the Government not to ignore the serious risk that skin cancer poses, but I would also ask them to consider whether they want to go down the dangerous path of ignoring the voice of survivors, particularly when the survivors are Members of this House trying to create a positive change when it comes to how the wider population view skin cancer. It is life-threatening, not something to belittle, and the UK Government should and could be leading the way on this.

We know that unprotected sun exposure causes skin cancer, and we know that sunscreen is an essential part of protecting us from this exposure, so it should be uncontroversial to state that these products must be made as accessible and affordable as possible. Armed with this information, we have a responsibility to ensure that our constituents are aware of the risks of unprotected sun exposure and the necessity of sunscreen to prevent cancer. This should not be a controversial idea, and for the most part it is not. The Bill has received support from several organisations, retailers and Members across the House, so I have been surprised at the Government's resistance to it thus far, although I am sure they will not deny an opportunity to see a Bill with significant benefits to our constituents pass in this House.

Every year, 16,000 people across the UK are diagnosed with melanoma and it kills 2,300 people, making it the fifth most common cancer across these isles. Cancer Research UK has found that getting sunburn just once every two years can triple someone's risk of melanoma. Sunscreen can help to prevent these melanomas—that is a fact—yet skin cancer is too often forgotten about in political conversation. This lack of conversation is dangerous, as 90% of melanoma cases are preventable with adequate sun protection, meaning that we could save 2,000 lives a year if we were to successfully introduce measures that encouraged widespread sunscreen use.

To clarify, VAT Burn seeks a VAT exemption for sunscreen products that are factor 30 or above, with a four-star UVA—ultraviolet A—protection rating, and marketed exclusively as sun protection products. The Bill does not encompass cosmetic or make-up products that may contain a sun protection factor. It is only effective and necessary sunscreen products that I and my co-sponsors seek to make VAT-exempt. It is a relatively narrow selection of products that accounts for only 0.03% of VAT revenue, so this proposal barely makes a dent in Government revenue, especially when compared with the massive benefits that could come from it.

As I said, skin cancer prevention is often overlooked. It is a known fact that smoking greatly increases the risk of lung cancer, and we can compare that with skin cancer and unprotected sun exposure. Across these four nations, we have taken significant steps to prevent smoking by banning it in restaurants and bars and, most relevantly, reducing the VAT on smoking cessation products to 5%. That includes over-the-counter products such as nicotine patches and gum. No similar steps have been taken to encourage the prevention of melanoma. Surely the Government cannot argue that smoking cessation products are more necessary to public health than sunscreen. Both serve very similar functions of preventing cancer, and sunscreen products are necessary for the whole family, making the extra financial burden of VAT that bit more damaging.

The VAT Burn Bill is not an assault on Government income from value added tax; it is but a tiny sacrifice in VAT revenue that could save lives and save money down the line. The saving of lives is very possible, given that 90% of cases are preventable. If we make prevention that much more accessible and affordable, and make people that much more aware, we can prevent many of these cases, which will save lives, most importantly, and save the NHS time, effort and money in diagnosis and treatment.

I acknowledge that in the past, VAT exemptions have not always produced savings for consumers—our constituents. That is why I have built in a pledge for retailers and producers to ensure that the VAT exemption translates directly into savings for our constituents when they buy sunscreen products. I can confirm that Morrisons has already agreed to the pledge, and Tesco already absorbs the VAT on sunscreen products, so I feel confident that if the Government accept the proposal behind the Bill, it will result in sunscreen becoming far more affordable for our constituents.

Many occupations across the UK require prolonged exposure to the sun, so we must acknowledge that this is also a workers issue. Too many people are exposed to

the sun for prolonged periods as a result of their work, greatly increasing their risk of melanoma. Organisations such as Police Scotland provide sunscreen for officers who face this exposure at work. If we were to make sunscreen that bit more affordable, more organisations and businesses could take that step towards protecting their workers outside.

A successful awareness campaign matters, too—one that puts the risks of sun exposure at the forefront of public health conversations, so that more employers are encouraged to consider providing better sun protection for their workers. I am proposing that, hand in hand with this VAT reduction, the Government launch a skin protection awareness campaign akin to Australia's "Slip, Slop, Slap" campaign, because combining greater accessibility of sun protection products with greater awareness is the best chance we have of reducing melanomas and saving lives. Just 0.03% of VAT income is not worth the human cost of melanoma, and if we make sunscreen more affordable and widely discussed, we can save some of the 2,000 lives that are lost each year.

We are in not only a cost of living crisis but a climate crisis, which means that sun protection products are becoming less affordable but more necessary. I hope that, having raised this issue, the Minister will not only be sympathetic to my aims, but responsive. Knowing the importance of VAT burn yet refusing to take action is something that I cannot accept and that the public should not have to accept. I call on the Government to listen carefully to the points I have raised and to consider them not as a political or economic issue, but as an essential public health policy. I am sure that the Minister will say that I am talking to the wrong Department, but this issue is intrinsically linked to the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care.

We must give skin cancer prevention the attention it deserves because that can make a difference. The battle against melanoma is not futile; in 90% of cases it is one we can win. We know how to win, so we need to do everything we can to equip the public with the essential protections that they need so that we can win this battle.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Amy Callaghan, Sir Chris Bryant, Maggie Throup, Jim Shannon, Ian Blackford, Caroline Lucas, Charlotte Nichols, Mrs Pauline Latham, Mhairi Black, David Linden, Patricia Gibson and Dr Philippa Whitford present the Bill.

Amy Callaghan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 248).

Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

2.52 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

A hallmark of a civilised society is that it looks after the most vulnerable and those who are most in need. That lies at the centre of this Bill. The House will be aware of the challenges that inflation has presented to millions of our fellow citizens up and down the country— inflation that was there before the Ukraine-Russia conflict but that has been substantially exacerbated by it.

As a newly appointed Secretary of State, some of the first actions that I took were to increase and uprate pensions by 10.1%, to respect and uphold the triple lock, to increase benefits by 10.1% and to increase the benefit cap by the same percentage. Those actions, along with measures such as the increase in the national living wage by more than 9%, which will come into effect in April, have done a great deal to underscore this Government's approach to looking after those who are most in need.

In 2022 alone, 30 million support payments were made by my Department. Eight million low-income households received £650. Eight million pensioners received a £300 payment along with their winter fuel payment, and 6 million disabled people received a payment of £150. That was alongside various other measures from the recent past, such as the reduction in the taper rate for universal credit, which provided 1.7 million families with, on average, an additional £1,000 per year.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): There is a substantial lag between the announcement of the uprating and April when it will be brought in. What steps can be taken to reduce that lag so that people benefit earlier?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a series of payments were made last year right up until the autumn. The energy price guarantee and various other payments of which he will be aware will help millions of our fellow citizens come through what is a difficult period. The household support fund administered by local authorities is available, particularly for those who have not benefited from the assistance that I am setting out.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The third iteration of the household support fund has come through. I went down to the Hinckley hub to see how people there were getting on. They expressed their thanks to the Government for this important fund. They have the accountability to be able to give funding to people in extreme circumstances when they need it. It is not heavily red-taped and regulated, so they can use it how they see best to help their clients. Is that something that the Department for Work and Pensions will take forward?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I am pleased to hear his personal experience of the measure. He is right to point out that there is great flexibility in how it can be administered by local authorities. We

place a particular emphasis on making sure that that assistance goes to those who may not have benefited from the measures I am outlining, but who are still in need.

In addition to the taper, we recognise that pensioners need additional support where it is appropriate. My Department has thrown itself into promoting the uptake of pension credit. The Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), did such sterling work as the Pensions Minister and, more recently, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), has promoted pension credit with such vigour on social media and radio that there has been a 73% increase in applications for pension credit compared with this time last year.

My Department has an excellent record on unemployment. Disabled employment is up by 1.3 million since 2017. We have arrived at our target for the employment of disabled people a full five years earlier than originally planned.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I just wonder whether the Secretary of State would like to comment on the disability employment gap.

Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady will know, the disability employment gap is a key measure on which we are focused. It has more recently increased a little, which I think is the point that she is alluding to, but generally, prior to that it was on a downward trend. The Department is very focused on making sure that we get it as low as we possibly can.

In the last year we also had the energy price guarantee, which ensured that average energy bills came in at £2,500 on average, and £400 off energy bills directly paid to bill payers. In England, we had the council tax discounts for bands A to D. We had two further extensions to the household support fund, as was just referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). For the devolved Administrations, there have been Barnett consequential of £1.5 billion since October 2021. I am very proud of our record and the wide package that has already been deployed, which is valued at £37 billion.

That brings me to this year, when we intend to go still further. As the Prime Minister has stated, one of our key aims as a Government is to reduce inflation by 50% by the end of this year. I am confident that we will achieve that, but we recognise that, despite the relief that that will provide to millions up and down the country, we need to provide further support payments. There will be three payments totalling £900 for around 8 million low-income households. Like last year, there will be a £300 payment alongside the winter fuel payment of £300 to pensioners, and a £150 payment to disabled people. The delivery of the support for pensioners will be via regulation and is not the subject of the Bill, but the other payments will be delivered through this legislation.

The Bill sets out the basis of qualification for the payments and who makes the payments, whether that is me and the DWP or His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in the case of, for example, tax credits. It makes provision as to how the timing of the payments will be set out and it exempts the payments from charges to taxation. It sets out the arrangements that will ensure that data can

be transferred and shared between my Department and HMRC, so that all the payments run smoothly and we avoid duplication and minimise fraud.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mel Stride: I give way to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Sir Stephen Timms: As I understand it, the eligibility for the payments is based on being in receipt of benefit—at least 1p—in a specific month. There will be people who, for example, are paid every four weeks instead of every month and may get two payments in a particular month, so they do not get any benefit in that month. Would it not work better to base eligibility on a two-month period to reduce the likelihood of that problem arising?

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman raises a valid point and we looked at instances where anomalies can occur in what is known in the legislation as the “qualifying period”. The reality is that we cannot iron out all the possible hard edges, but we did break the payments into three for this financial year, rather than the two that we had last year, so that in the event that the circumstances he described were to occur, there would at least be other periods in which someone could qualify. There is also the household support fund, which has already been referred to and is for just the kind of circumstances that he described.

Dr Luke Evans: I am glad that the Secretary of State has looked at how to break up the payments. Will he ensure that people who find themselves with an anomaly can swiftly speak to someone to make sure that such issues are resolved quickly? When someone is struggling with their finances, one of the biggest sources of heartache and stress can be trying to get some of these payments.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically excellent point. Anybody will be able to go on to the gov.uk website for further information, and we will have additional resources in place to ensure that people are manning telephones to answer the type of queries that he and the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), have raised.

The Government are on the side of the most needy. We demonstrated that first in the pandemic, through the furlough scheme and the support that we provided for businesses; and secondly, as I have outlined, with the £36 billion of direct payments last year to support those most in need. As I have set out, this Bill will bring forward yet further support in the coming year to help millions.

The Government will always stand alongside those most in need; the Bill is yet another example of just that. Let the record show that this Government, more than any other, understand that the hallmark of a civilised society is that it looks after those most in need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.3 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): We will not divide the House this afternoon, because it is clear that our constituents need extra support. Families, poorer people and pensioners in our communities need help and support not simply because of the inflationary impact of the world unlocking from covid and the spikes in wholesale gas prices on the back of Putin's heinous invasion of Ukraine, but because for 12 years—coming up to 13 years—we have seen mediocre economic growth under Conservative Governments and a failure to make our economy more productive or sustainably raise living standards.

After five Conservative Prime Ministers, six Conservative Chancellors and nine Conservative Work and Pensions Secretaries, families have been asked to endure the most brutal cuts and freezes to social security that have rendered out-of-work benefits at their lowest level for 30 years. Children have been punished by the pernicious two-child limit and there has been a 25% cut in the value of child benefit. Of course, universal credit was cut by £20—

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): No, it was not!

Jonathan Ashworth: Mr Bumptious needs to calm down. That is the reality of the policies that he supports, which have put more children into poverty on his watch as a Work and Pensions Minister.

Those policies meant that poorer working families entered the crisis with less resilience, less protection and less to fall back on than they otherwise would have. Before the pandemic, the lowest-income households were four times as likely to have no savings as the highest-income households. Today, we face a situation where not only child poverty has increased in relative terms under the Government, but child destitution—where children's families do not have the means to properly heat their homes, put food on the table, buy toiletries or even provide a decent bed to sleep in at night—is now at half a million. In all our constituencies, demand for food banks has exploded, and there are now also bedding banks, baby banks and even 13,000 so-called warm banks where the vulnerable gather so they do not need to shiver in their homes.

We have all heard stories from our constituencies, such as at the Wesley Hall food bank in my constituency, of fresh food being turned down because mothers in work cannot afford the electricity bill associated with keeping the fridge running. We have heard stories of families saying no to fresh vegetables, because they cannot afford to boil them on the cooker hob. We have heard stories of pensioners using tea lights to try in vain to heat tins of beans.

None of that, by the way, is because people cannot add up or run a household budget, as some headline-chasing Tory MPs lecture us—not the Secretary of State, I concede, but some of his colleagues. In my constituency, the poorest people are some of the best at arithmetic. They go up and down the supermarket aisles, constantly adding up the cost of everything and taking items out of their basket to avoid the indignity of having insufficient funds available when they get to the checkout.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

People are turning to food banks because, after 13 years, wages have become so inadequate, housing costs so severe, childcare bills so impossible, social security cuts so deep, and debts chased by the DWP so crushing that, combined with the price of shopping and energy bills going up, families simply cannot afford to survive on the income that they have. The safety net is now so threadbare that in food bank Britain, hunger, the cold and the constant dread of the bailiffs have become a way of life. That should not be a way to live.

Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics reported that 21.9 million people are spending less on food and essentials because of the increase in the cost of living. It said that 50% of disabled people and 50% of parents with a dependent child are cutting back. That is reality of the crisis and of the dismal, devastating poverty that many of our constituents face.

Let me deal with the specific measures that the Government are proposing. First, the Secretary of State rightly mentioned the inflation-proofing of benefits this year, although it is not in the Bill. We welcome that and we pushed him on it—as did, in fairness, many hon. Members on both sides of the House. To be frank, to have done anything else would have been unconscionable. He did not outline, however, that the Government are again freezing the housing allowance rates and the cap on childcare allowances in universal credit. We will see whether that changes in the Budget; I understand that the Government may be looking at that. If they make that change, we will welcome it as another example of them pinching one of our policies—I look forward to it. However, the impact of not inflation-proofing some of these allowances will be to hold families further in poverty.

Secondly—though not in the Bill, but again connected to it and mentioned by the Secretary of State—there are the energy price cap and the universal energy bills support scheme. However, the £400 discount on energy bills of course ends from April, and the Government are reducing the generosity of the energy cap from April, costing the average household an extra £500 on their energy bills. So there we have £900 extra on energy bills that households will have to find. Talk about giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Of course, not every household has been covered by the energy cap—

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

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me just finish this point.

Not every household has been covered by the energy cap because, for example, the thousands of people who live in social housing with district heating schemes were not covered by the energy cap. That means that some of the very poorest people, social tenants and private renters, many of whom are on the means-tested benefits that are the subject of this debate, are facing increases in their energy bills this April of sometimes even as high as 400%. It means that residents on the St Matthews estate, the St Peters estate and the St Marks estate in Leicester—places where there is already deep hardship and deprivation—could see huge increases in their gas bills, because the Conservative Government refused to

include district heating in the energy price cap. That omission will push many more children into poverty in Leicester, London and across the country.

I give way to my fellow Leicestershire MP.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to my near constituency neighbour. On his point about the changing of the dates, could I ask what Labour's plan is? Would it therefore keep the cap in place, and if so, how much would that cost and for how long would they do so?

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has outlined how we would impose a windfall tax to maintain an energy price cap in place, and the hon. Member knows that full well.

The Government's answer to rising energy bills, rising food prices and inflation outstripping wages is the Bill before us. Of course, the £900 in itself is welcome, and we concede that it is more than last year, but it is again a flat payment for disabled people and pensioners at a time when inflation has been running at 10%, so in real terms the payments this year are worth less than last year's for pensioners and disabled people.

The point about this being a flat payment was put to the Secretary of State's predecessor last year, and there are still a number of problems that we raised last year and that we hoped would have been rectified this year. The point is that the cost of living payment does not distinguish between large families and single-person households. The payment is the same regardless of household size, even though we know that larger households have higher spending needs—particularly those with children—which is why universal credit payments are higher for couples than for single people, and children are recognised in that system. In fact, larger households with children are likely to have 50% higher energy costs. All in all, that means that a couple with children will be £400 worse off, even after the cost of living payment.

There are also cliff edges involved with the cost of living payment being tied to receipt of means-tested benefits, meaning that somebody who earns just £1 above the limit could lose out on £900. This is at a time when the Government are saying they want to incentivise people to increase their hours or move into well-paid work to lift them off receiving universal credit, yet they have built into the system for next year a disincentive, even though they are telling people they will have to go for more interviews with their work coaches or face their benefits being cut. That is why the Treasury Committee recommended that to reduce the cliff edge, the DWP should consider spreading out the payments into more than the three payments and looking to look at a tapering scheme if they do this again. Perhaps the Minister, in summing up, could offer us her opinions on that Treasury Committee report.

Thirdly, and this is again related to the interaction of means-tested benefits, there is the point made by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms). Households with a nil award for their UC could, because of the way in which UC is calculated, lose out. The Secretary of State said that the Government have tried to iron out some of these harder edges, but they could not iron out all of them. Is he really telling us, "Computer says no"? Surely, he can look at that

again. This problem impacted about a million households last year with the cost of living payment, 7,000 of which were impacted because they were sanctioned at the time. Are we really saying that many families could be impoverished because of the cold bureaucracy of the universal credit IT system?

Again, as with last year, not all low-income households will be eligible. Resolution Foundation analysis has found that four in 10 of the poorest fifth of households—2.4 million households—do not receive means-tested benefits, so they are ineligible for the cost of living payment. Very similar points were made in the relevant debate last year, and it is disappointing that many of the points that were put from across the House have not been rectified in this Bill. The justification from the then Secretary of State last year was that the Government needed to get on with it quickly, and we accepted that justification, so it is just a shame that they have not been able to find solutions this year.

None the less, we are not going to divide the House. The cost of living payments are welcome as far as they go, but let us be clear that they are not a long-term solution to years of social security freezes and cuts or to a systematic failure to grow our economy inclusively, make our economy more productive and sustainably raise living standards. They are not a solution for the thousands of families who rely on district heating schemes in many cities, such as London or my own Leicester constituency. Today, we are living in food bank Britain, with more children in poverty. Tory politicians can tell Britain's families just to live on 30p dinners, but this is set to be the worst Parliament on record for living standards and all of our constituents know it.

3.17 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I think I agree with nearly everything in the two Front-Bench speeches. There is not a lot to add, except really to welcome the Bill and welcome the additional support that the Government have provided. I think it was absolutely the right thing to do, and it is essential for people with the least that they get these extra supports while energy bills and other inflationary costs remain as high as they are. I have a few observations to make on the Bill, but that should not really take away from the fact that the Government have actually come to the right conclusion. Making this support available is by far the most important decision, and everything else is probably nit-picking around the detail.

However, I would agree with some of the observations of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). Perhaps it would be helpful if the Minister, when she sums up, explained whether the Government did look at temporarily increasing universal credit, rather than rerunning the new benefit three times again this year. That would have allowed for a higher basic payment, which would then taper off for households on a higher income, so those with the very least would have got more than £900 and those with the most would have got a bit less than £900. That would probably have given more help to those households that are going to struggle most with the fact that they are going to get £300 less support this year—if we take into account the energy bills support and the reverse running of council tax we had last year—and be

faced with, on average, £500 higher energy bills. It would be useful to know if that was considered, if it was not technically possible and the system could not cope with it, or if there were other good reasons why we preferred the three roughly £300 payments rather than having smoothed that over the year and used the tapering system.

Those of us who did—and do—support universal credit, did so on the basis that having a tapering benefit linked to income is the best way of doing it, because it avoids cliff edges. It stops people having unfortunate behavioural ideas, such as, “If I take the extra hours this month, I’ll lose my £300, so I’d best not do that; I might wait till next month,” or, “Ought I to drop out of a job, or try to somehow reduce my income to get that payment.” I accept that having three payments of £300 is better than a one-off payment of £900, but if we really believe in all the advances of universal credit being linked to income with tapering to avoid cliff edges, we should use it in a time of crisis as well as in a normal situation.

We know from the pandemic that we can very quickly flex the amount of UC, because we did it in about five weeks, so I cannot see a problem with that. That might not be so easy for tax credits and other benefits and we might have wanted one system that works for everything here. If the Minister says that is the reason, perhaps we can understand it, but now that we have had some time—we have had a year of this crisis—we might have produced a slightly more effective solution.

We also know that for the households with the least, getting lump-sum payments is not always best, because if they struggle with budgeting, they might not understand that they have £300 more this month that they will not have next month or for winter. Smoothing those payments through every month might help them ensure they have the money in place for when energy bills will be highest, which I suspect will not be when they get their April payment this year. I accept, however, that there is no perfect solution and that this solution is better than doing nothing.

I also want to reiterate a point made by the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), and the shadow spokesman, the right hon. Member for Leicester South. They said—in the debate last year, I think—that needing to have received a UC sum in the assessment month before the payment prevented a large amount of people from getting a payment, not through any fault of their own or because they have got more money, but just because the way they receive their payments from their employer accidentally dropped them out.

A relatively simple solution would be to tweak two words in the Bill and say that if someone has received 1p in either of the two assessment periods before each staging point then they get the £300. That would add one word and one letter to the Bill and would fix the problem for the vast majority of cases. If someone happens to be paid four-weekly and they have two payments in one period, that would fix it; if they happened to have had a bonus once and it hit in one period, that would fix it because presumably they would not have had it for two successive months—and if they did have it for two successive months it is probably fair enough to assume they are now earning more than we thought they would be. That would be a simple change

[Nigel Mills]

to consider in Committee, which I think will be on the Floor of the House so perhaps we can all get to vote on it—I suspect relatively shortly. I urge the Government to seriously think about making a simple change such as that, which would smooth out one of the rough edges quite easily.

The Secretary of State said that there will be a helpline, but this is primary legislation, and if someone has not received a penny in that month, there is no discretion for the Department to give them the £300, or the £301 or £299; it cannot do so because the Bill says it cannot—they have not received a penny, so they cannot have it. So there is no way of fixing that retrospectively; it needs to be fixed at this stage.

With those observations, I sincerely welcome the Bill, which will provide significant support for people in Amber Valley, who are struggling with high inflation and high energy bills. I repeat my request from the uprating debate, however: I urge the Government to keep the situation under review so that if it worsens and we need to help people more during the year we can come back and do that. It would not be too hard to add a fourth payment if we needed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

3.22 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to outline my party's position on this Bill and express our support for the broad thrust of what it seeks to achieve. To that end, as with His Majesty's official Opposition, we will not oppose it on Second Reading, but I do believe that the Bill before the House today gives us an opportunity to consider some of the wider issues relating to our social security net and the desperately needed repairs which should be undertaken, but which, sadly, this Bill fails to address.

As I have said countless times before, Members on the Government Benches, and indeed all of us in this place, talk about the cost of living crisis as a recent phenomenon, or a new thing which happens to impede the lives of our constituents, but actually it is not. The cost of living crisis is the cumulative impact of 12 years of austerity policies, mixed with a cocktail of economic scarring from covid-19, and compounded yet further by Russia's outrageous invasion of Ukraine. But that is precisely why I wish this Bill went further: to support better those who are the most vulnerable financially, the kind of folks I see at my Friday surgeries at Baillieston, Easterhouse, Parkhead and Cranhill.

The harsh yet inescapable reality is that many of the structural problems that the very poorest in our society face are the result of a policy framework put in place by this British Government: policies like the benefit cap, the two-child policy and cuts to universal credit, to name just a few. It is not good enough for Ministers to bring forward substandard legislation to the House which merely tinkers around the edges but will not deal with the source of the poverty that hinders so many of the poorest people who I represent.

We know how dire things are not because of anecdotes and the odd horrifying surgery testimony, but because of indisputable research from the likes of the Joseph

Rowntree Foundation and the Resolution Foundation. The Resolution Foundation has made it clear that the poorest 10th of households experienced an inflation rate of 11.7%, and Office for National Statistics data shows that food and drink inflation is running at some of the highest rates since the 1970s, with the price of bread, milk and basic essentials soaring up in price by almost 17% in a year. Data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that more than 7 million households on these islands have been going without essentials such as meals, heating and showers this winter. This is the sixth richest economy in the world and on these islands people are going without meals, heating and showers—just let that sink in, and think about how that compares with our chat about global Britain. These eye-wateringly high levels of inflation are disproportionately hurting the poorest in our constituencies, which in turn puts yet more pressure on public and third sector agencies which are already at breaking point; I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a director of Cranhill Development Trust.

We can and must do more to protect the most vulnerable. That is why the one-off cost of living payments are only a temporary fix and it is clear that permanent solutions are desperately needed. That is why when this Bill goes into Committee next Monday, I will be seeking to bring forward amendments to improve it—for example to the punitive sanctions regime, which currently means cost of living payments cannot be paid to those who are sanctioned. I have to tell the Secretary of State that those who are sanctioned are not immune to the cost of living crisis, and yet currently under the Bill those who have been sanctioned will not get the cost of living payment.

It is deeply concerning to see the DWP announcing that more people are going to risk having their vital universal credit payments sanctioned. For example, the average earnings threshold for UC rose and will affect up to 120,000 more folks. A further 600,000 people who are already working for up to 35 hours each week will be targeted later this year. There is clear and indisputable evidence that sanctions do not work either in getting people into sustainable work or in getting them to increase their hours or earnings; we heard about that recently at the Work and Pensions Committee. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently reported, these types of policy produce

“fiscal savings indistinguishable from zero”,

yet conditionality subjects people to untold anxiety and harm. Rather than offering one-off payments to shore up the incomes of struggling families, the British Government should focus on reversing the damaging policies that are impacting on the most vulnerable.

My party stands by our calls to Ministers to reinstate the uplift to universal credit, and indeed to increase it by £25 a week and extend it to all means-tested legacy benefits, as well as ending the benefit cap and the two-child limit. We know, for example, that disabled people are far more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled people, and are particularly vulnerable to the rising cost of living—a point that Ministers have repeatedly ignored to the detriment of my disabled constituents. Likewise, 86% of households trapped by the benefit cap are families, often headed by single mothers. It is the job of Government to support families, not subject them to further hardship. I completely agree with John Dickie

of Child Poverty Action Group Scotland who calls for this “cruel and irrational” benefit cap to be scrapped at source by the UK Government as a matter of utmost urgency

The continued refusal by Ministers to fix the extensive and well documented problems with universal credit is unacceptable and it is unequivocally subjecting vulnerable people to additional unnecessary hardship. A recent report from the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe found that the level of support provided under universal credit was a key contributing factor to child poverty. The report stated that policies such as the two-child limit and benefit cap

“restrict the amount of benefits a household can receive, regardless of their specific needs, and thereby continue to exacerbate child poverty.”

That is the Council of Europe saying that the UK Government’s policies exacerbate child poverty, and that is the fundamental problem here. The Bill tinkers around the edges with temporary fixes, however welcome, but it fails to deal with the root causes of the poverty that the Government are inflicting on their own citizens.

Meanwhile, in Scotland my colleagues in the SNP Scottish Government continue to do everything within their limited powers and fixed budgets to ensure Scottish people and communities are supported through this crisis as far as possible. In line with the Scottish Fiscal Commission’s forecasts, Scotland’s Government are set to invest £5.2 billion in benefits expenditure in 2023-24, providing support to more than 1 million people. Indeed, in 2027-28, that is forecast to increase to £7.3 billion—money that will go directly to people who need it most and to support people to live independent lives. But the Scottish Government are doing all this with both hands tied behind their back, because every additional £1 that my colleagues in Holyrood spend on measures to help with rising costs and the mitigation of Tory cuts must be funded from reductions elsewhere, given their largely fixed budget and limited fiscal powers. We do not have the bedroom tax in Scotland because we spend huge amounts of money on discretionary housing payments to try to nullify the impact of that tax, but that comes at the expense of the education budget, the health budget, the transport budget, the justice budget and so on. Members in this House have failed to confront the fact that devolution was never meant to be a sticking plaster for detrimental decisions made here.

Despite repeated requests, the Chancellor has thus far failed to provide any extra assistance to help Scotland’s Government manage this year’s budget. With every passing day that the British Government fail to use their reserved powers to adequately tackle the cost of living and its long-term impact, they demonstrate that independence is the only way for Scotland to boost incomes and build the fairer society that so many people in my community strive to see. The simple truth is that Westminster is not working and it is time for Scottish independence.

3.33 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I rise to support this enabling Bill, which will enable the payment of additional cost of living support for many millions of the poorest in society. Before I go into the detail of the proposals, it will be useful to set the debate into context, which is of course that the best welfare, where it is

accessible, is access to a job. We know the obvious financial implications of being in employment, but there are equally important mental health benefits.

Debbie Abrahams: Can the hon. Gentleman explain then why 4.2 million people in work are in poverty and six out of 10 people in a low-paid job will still be in a low-paid job 10 years later?

Jerome Mayhew: I am not saying that employment of any description is the silver bullet. We have phased movement under universal credit, because it is a tapering benefit from unemployment through additional support from Government that diminishes as pay rates increase. Most hon. Members would accept that that is the right approach, but I also accept that the hon. Lady rightly drew attention earlier to the disability employment gap. Although I recognise the recent unwelcome upward tick in that, the direction of travel and the long-term trend is downward, which I wholeheartedly welcome.

In my constituency of Broadland, the universal credit claimant rate is only 2%. Bearing in mind that a percentage of those will be in employment, in my part of the country at least we benefit from full functional employment. It is a feather in the Government’s cap that the national average universal credit claimant rate is just 3.6%; we see that in particular when we look at youth unemployment. In Broadland, the rate among the 18 to 24-year-old cohort—who are often hard to employ and most quickly affected by economic downturn—is just 3.6%, whereas nationally it is 4.6%. It is worth taking a moment to make some international comparisons. In France, the rate of unemployment among 16 to 24-year-olds is more than 20%, and the equivalent figure for Spain is about 35%. Something is happening in the United Kingdom that is not happening on the European mainland. My submission is that it is because Conservative policies are leading to fuller employment, particularly in those cohorts that have traditionally found it harder to gain and retain employment. That is down to the brave decisions of this and former Conservative Administrations in creating a dynamic labour market that has allowed and encouraged employment and, yes, the ability to reduce the employment count for employers. That has led to fuller employment in this country than there has been in areas that are perhaps more unionised, where once someone is in the club their job is protected but that comes at the cost of the young and the poorest.

The Government have been right to focus on a dynamic labour market, in addition to direct Government support in schemes such as the £2 billion kickstart scheme, which worked so well in the aftermath of the pandemic, and the restart scheme. It cost an eye-watering £2.9 billion, but UC claimants of nine months or more got additional focus from their Jobcentre Plus work coaches to help them step back into employment, countering the terrible drain on the country and the individual cost to people’s lives of long-term unemployment.

On work coaches, this Government have doubled their number in 2021, increasing it by 13,500. I have seen these work coaches at work in my constituency, at the Jobcentre Plus in Fakenham. I pay particular tribute to all the staff members there, who have a huge amount of enthusiasm and expertise, and are going the extra mile day in, day out to get the long-term unemployed in my area into jobs. The total number of UC claimants in Broadland is 1,130. They are not all long-term unemployed,

[Jerome Mayhew]

but, in a period of full employment, we just need an extra bit of help to get that hardcore group into the jobs, which are available. The additional work coaches are exactly the right way to go, which is bearing fruit.

The apprenticeship schemes are also being supported and encouraged by the Government. Members from around the House will recall that two weeks ago it was National Apprenticeship Week. To celebrate that and encourage its further uptake, I visited a business in my constituency, Ben Burgess, which many in the east will recognise as agricultural machinery suppliers of great repute. At any one time, the company has about 30 apprenticeships, which, typically, start at the age of 16. The apprentices get taken through training both on the job and at a national training facility in the midlands, where they have university-style education as well as on-the-job training in their place of employment. They come out of that scheme with a machinery technician qualification, a job and a career, leading to a really fulfilling lifestyle. That is exactly the kind of thing that the Government should be and are supporting.

I cannot move on from this area of my speech without a little plug for my jobs fair, which is taking place at Taverham High School on 10 March. It is one of a series that I have been holding and will continue to hold. My first one was in Fakenham, in the aftermath of the covid pandemic, when my assumption was that we would have a tidal wave of unemployment. The estimate at the time was that we would have 12% unemployment. I set in place a jobs fair to try to solve that problem, but because of the incredible intervention of the then Chancellor, now Prime Minister, we did not have 12% unemployment. The Government put their arms around the economy, supported people in their jobs and the potential crisis did not materialise.

On the detail of the proposed legislation, I fully support the uplift in the national living wage by 9.7%, taking it to £10.42 an hour, and not just for those whose employment is at the national living wage. As a former employer, I know very well that the national living wage is the base upon which many, many layers of employment judge their own job offers. We have created the conditions where there is full functional employment in the vast majority of the country, so employers are having to compete for staff. One way—it is not the only way—to compete is on pay. As the national living wage base rises, the graduated competition in pay rises as well, and that has a really beneficial effect.

David Linden: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has seen the Budget submissions from both the CBI and the TUC. It is not often that they both sing from the same hymn sheet, but one key theme they complain and raise concerns about is staffing shortages. I accept that the national living wage is one factor, but does he also accept the concerns of both the CBI and the TUC that the Government have a problem with staffing issues, which cannot necessarily be helped by something like Brexit?

Jerome Mayhew: I am really grateful to the hon. Member for making that intervention, because we had a similar discussion in an earlier debate and he gives me the opportunity to say what I kicked myself for not saying last time. As a former employer, if one has access

to—let us call it this—unlimited cheap labour then there is no incentive to increase productivity or invest in further plant and machinery. As a result, we have what he was also complaining about, which is the low productivity conundrum. On access to labour, I recall him saying in an earlier intervention a couple of weeks ago that in Scotland the problem is not having too many people, but an exodus of people from Scotland. I just wonder what is the difference between Conservative-run England, where people in their hundreds of thousands are seeking to come into this country, and SNP-run Scotland, where they are leaving in their tens of thousands?

David Linden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am hopefully allowing him to sit down and think about that just a little bit more. That might help him.

The reality is that immigration policy is controlled by the United Kingdom Government. The Scottish Government and huge swathes of civic society have said that our problem has never been emigration, but immigration. We are looking to get more people to come to live and work in Scotland. It is the UK Government and the Home Office who make that more difficult. On Friday, I had an asylum seeker at my surgery, somebody who is incredibly well qualified and who has something he wants to offer this country, but because of a decision taken in 2002 by the Labour Government he is restricted from working here. He wants to work in Scotland, but he cannot do so because of an intransigent UK immigration policy. That is the reality of our immigration problems. It is not some mini-tartan issue that he might want to dress it up as.

Jerome Mayhew: This probably strays a little far from the topic of the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, which is not about immigration policy, but I note in passing that if the hon. Gentleman wants to encourage people to work in his country, having a supertax on employment is probably not the best way to go about it.

Cost of living inflation hits working families too, so I welcome the £900 cost of living payments that will benefit fully 8 million families, as well as the disability payment of £150 to help with the higher cost of equipment needs. That will also benefit some 6 million people. If a job is the best form of welfare, then reducing inflation is the best way to tackle the cost of living crisis. My commendation to the Minister is that we should stick to our guns that reducing inflation during the course of this year, halving it as the Prime Minister has promised to do, is absolutely the right way to do it. The Bank of England currently predicts that inflation will dip below 4% by the end of this year, so that, overwhelmingly, is the best way to deal with these longer-term problems—not one-off payments which seek to address a symptom rather than dealing with the cause. While it is necessary to address the symptoms in the way the Bill does, I am grateful to the Government for also dealing with the cause of the cost of living crisis—inflation resulting from Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine—because that is the long-term solution to these problems.

3.45 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Although no one will oppose the Bill today, it is important to put it in the context of what many of our constituents are experiencing at the moment, because it does mean that they will bear a significantly greater burden.

Last year the household energy cap was £2,500, and people on means-tested benefits received £650 plus the £400 universal payment. This year the cap will be £3,000, and yes, people on means-tested benefits will receive £900, but the universal payment is not being renewed, which means that they will suffer a 45% increase in their cost burden. For households that are not entitled to means-tested support, the average household energy bill will rise again by at least 43%. So although we will not be voting against the Bill today and will support the benefits to be distributed by the Government, there will, as I have said, be a significant increase in the burden for many of our constituents.

According to National Energy Action, in October 2021 there were 4.5 million households in fuel poverty, in October 2022 the figure was 6.7 million, and by April 2023 it will have risen to 8.4 million, which means that about one in three households will be in fuel poverty. The Bill will not relieve that fuel poverty. Of those 8.4 million households, 1.8 million will be carers, 5.9 million will be low-income and financially vulnerable households, 3.6 million will be people with a disability, and 1.6 million will be households in off-gas homes—as some Conservative Members have mentioned in other debates. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), this poverty is due to the fact that, for a considerable time, social security support has not kept up with either the cost of living or the rise in earnings.

I am pleased that some benefits will rise by 10.1%, but in recent decades they have fallen in real terms. I supported the triple lock, which I considered to be an excellent policy, but that was in the context of the breaking of the earnings link by Mrs Thatcher, which I opposed in the 1980s. If the earnings link had been retained, pensions would be £50 a week higher. However, it did not apply only to the state pension; it also applied to carer's allowance. A group of carers whom I have been meeting over the last year have explained their own financial plight. If the earnings link had been retained, carer's allowance would be almost double what it is today. With those protections, there would be fewer households in poverty and fewer dependent on the benefits that the Bill will provide. The time has come, I think, when we need to consider the advantages of applying the triple lock to all benefits in future, thus protecting people from poverty and hopefully lifting some of them out of poverty as well.

However, the origins of the current fuel poverty are not just our immediate problems with the Ukrainian war and what has happened post covid. It stemmed from the policies of Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s and the asset-stripping of our country, particularly in respect of energy and the subsequent introduction of a weak market-protecting form of regulation. Today we have Ofgem, a regulator that I and many others believe serves the interests of the companies, not the consumers. The energy companies have made excess profits, and I fully support the call from the Labour Front Bench to extend the welfare tax, because it cannot be right that we have an energy system in which companies are raking in massive profits and another 1.7 million households will be condemned to fuel poverty from April.

In addition to supporting the £900 proposed today, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) suggested that he would be tabling amendments in

Committee. I would suggest that he table an amendment that doubles the scale of support that is being provided today. The cost of providing the £900 is £7.2 billion, but the Chancellor has today been given an extra £30 billion in headroom from the outturn with regard to debt, so doubling the support provided as an emergency measure to lift people out of poverty could easily be accommodated.

I would also like to back the proposal from the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who said last August in the negotiations with the energy companies for lower prices that those companies that could not meet the lower prices would be given equity loans up to and including taking them into full public ownership if necessary. In that way, we would protect consumers facing fuel poverty as well as protecting them by operating energy companies in the public interest, not in the interest of their shareholders.

We are spending billions of pounds on bailing out families who are being ripped off while protecting the profits of the companies that are ripping them off, and I think there is a better way. The better way is to support the extension of the windfall tax, to ensure that we cap prices at a rate that is affordable to people, to provide greater assistance to those most in need and to provide equity loans for those companies that cannot deliver. In that way, we might be able to lay the foundations for a fuller debate about how we reform our social security system.

I agree with the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), in that I have consistently argued that we should tackle poverty by enabling people to go to work, but that work must be paid at a level that will lift people out of poverty. The tragedy for me is that I did not believe we would reach this era and have 4 million children in poverty, with two thirds of those children in families where someone is at work. I think that says something about the way in which we distribute the rewards of work in our society. Some of the people who work the hardest in some of the most difficult jobs have tragic levels of low pay. We will be voting to enable this Bill to go through, but so much more has to be done to tackle poverty in our society, and there is an opportunity to improve this legislation in the coming weeks to enable at least some people to heat their homes in this coming period.

3.53 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): I rise to speak in support of this legislation. I warmly welcome the extra cost of living measures that it provides, which will benefit my constituents in Guildford and Cranleigh and in our villages. Colleagues across the House have mentioned the context in which we are debating these necessary measures, which is that we are facing tough economic headwinds because of global energy and food supply shocks resulting from the appalling Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Chancellor was right to take tough but necessary decisions in the autumn statement and subsequently, in order to put our public finances on a sustainable path while ensuring that those in need are supported. An inflation rate not seen since the early 1980s, fuelled by the rise in energy and food prices, has had a disproportionate impact on lower income households across the country, and I know that the Chancellor will do all he can to ensure that they are supported through this challenging period until inflation is back at a sustainable

[Angela Richardson]

level. This Government understand the current pressure and are taking unprecedented steps to protect households from the rising cost of living, spending almost £70 billion to help households through to 2024.

Although my Guildford constituency is thought of as an affluent area, I know from my surgeries, from my inbox and from speaking to residents on the doorstep that there are many who, over the past few months, have faced rising bills with great anxiety. However, they are always incredibly grateful for the important financial help provided by this Government.

As this Government and Prime Minister work diligently to halve inflation by the end of this year and to ease the pressure of price rises on families, we must support those facing challenges in the here and now, but we also know that economic growth is what gives people financial security. The Prime Minister is right to make growth one of his five key priorities.

This Bill will support more than 8 million families across the country, including almost 7,000 families in Guildford, with at least £900-worth of cost of living payments split into three instalments. These payments, the first of which will be received at the end of April, followed by payments in October 2023 and February 2024, will go to households on means-tested benefits.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the hon. Lady comment on the adequacy of social security, including the additional payments in this Bill, given that 4.2 million people in work, many of whom receive support, are still in poverty?

Angela Richardson: The hon. Lady is right to ask that question, but across these many measures, the Government are having to work within quite constrained parameters. I know that the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will be looking at it as we head into the next fiscal event. It is right that we are providing this extensive support, but we also have the equal challenge of making sure we get inflation down so that people are able to use their funds more effectively, rather than being hit by the very high food and energy prices we have discussed.

In addition to the 8 million families supported with further payments, more than 6.5 million people in receipt of disability payments, including 6,300 in Guildford, will receive £150 to help tackle the rising cost of equipment. I urge struggling households and families in my constituency to check the Government's website to see what support they are able to access. My office is always on hand to guide constituents towards the appropriate support channels.

This Bill is part of the Government's wider package of measures to ease the cost of living, which will be worth £26 billion in 2023-24. I welcome the fact that pensioners who are entitled to the winter fuel payment will receive an extra £300 this winter, providing certainty to many households through to spring 2024. I urge all pensioners to check their eligibility for pension credit so that they can unlock these cost of living payments.

I also welcome the announcement of an extension to the household support fund, including more than £10 million of extra funding for Surrey, which will help local authorities to support the most vulnerable households. In the period from October 2022 to March 2023, Surrey

County Council used its allocated funding from the household support fund to enable the continued provision of food vouchers during the October, December and February school holidays; to provide energy support to care leavers; to place additional funding into the Surrey crisis fund; to give money to food banks and community fridges; to provide payments to families with disabled children; and to give funds to charities that work with vulnerable and less well served communities. The remaining funds will be distributed by borough councils to households identified as financially struggling.

It is important to think back to covid and this past winter, to understand that it was right that the Government gave money directly to councils that know which are their most vulnerable families and can get support directly to them.

In recent months, the Government have: put in place the largest cash increase in the national living wage, to £10.42 an hour, benefiting 2 million workers; announced the uprating of benefits, with the state pension and the benefit cap increasing by 10.1% from April; and delivered the energy price guarantee, protecting households from sky-high energy bills caused by Putin's barbaric war in Ukraine, which represents one of the largest support packages in Europe.

The cost of living payments being introduced today will go some way in easing the rising costs facing families and those on disability benefits, but, in the longer term, we must combat the challenge of inflation. This Government's plan to halve inflation by the end of 2023 will benefit everyone across the country, including my constituents in Guildford, Cranleigh and our villages. I am confident that this Government will continue to support those who are in need, and I welcome the steps that are being taken here today.

4 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): These continue to be some of the hardest times in recent living memory for so many of our fellow citizens. Few have been entirely immune. Millions are struggling, but for far too many, these hard times have brought them close to, or even into, destitution.

Given the importance of energy prices to the cost of living crisis, the fall in the price of wholesale gas futures over recent months is immensely welcome, but let us not imagine that this crisis is about to come to an end. Forecasts consistently suggest that this is, at best, the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end, not least as consumers face a rise in their costs as the energy price guarantee gap is raised this year, with no continuing energy bills support scheme to cushion the blow.

The Resolution Foundation estimates that working-age household incomes have fallen by an average of 3% this year, but will fall by an average of 4% next year—the biggest single fall since 1975. As food inflation hits 16.7%, food banks, such as those run by the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network, are overwhelmed by demand. This week, IFAN said:

“Our fastest growing client group are working people on low wages who cannot make ends meet.”

We have had references today from several Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), about the rise of in-work poverty. IFAN went on to say:

“The majority have always managed on a low income.”

It said that they

“know how to budget and to live frugally, but, with costs rising, there simply isn’t enough money in their pockets. It’s soul destroying.”

This weekend, we heard that the Co-op store group has resorted to putting packets of formula milk behind the counter as a security measure, as though they were precious stones in a Mayfair jeweller’s. We have seen the impact of these price rises devastating families and pensioners. We have seen that a quarter of people on means tested benefits now report food insecurity, even with the special payments that were made last year—that compares with just 4% in food insecurity before covid. We have seen how costs have risen this year, driven by energy costs, but we have seen them being felt in the weekly food shop just as acutely.

We understand how much of this is attributable to factors beyond our control. We know that the catastrophic shocks that the economy experienced, first from covid and then from the energy price spike, were felt most severely by those least able to withstand them. As we debated just two weeks ago in this House, most working age benefits where uprating was not fixed by statute were not fully uprated over a period of seven years from 2013 to 2020, with nominal increases limited to 1% or with rates frozen altogether.

Child benefit, which was uprated only once between 2010 and 2019, lost a fifth of its value between 2010 and 2022. The value of jobseeker’s allowance and employment and support allowance fell by 12.5% in real terms. The value of universal credit, the Government’s flagship benefit, fell by 12% in value between 2013 and 2022.

However, the extreme vulnerability experienced by so many of our fellow citizens is not just because of what has happened within the social security system. It is because of sluggish wage growth and the failure to protect workers in insecure employment. It is because of the failure to prepare this country for energy price rises by investing in home insulation and renewable energy, or by extending the energy price guarantee into the summer when prices may actually be falling. It is because of the failure to build new homes—especially affordable homes—and to protect those who are being hit by spiralling private sector rents. It is because of over a decade’s neglect of the childcare sector, which is seeing providers fold, costs escalate and too many parents forced to consider whether work is even a realistic option in the face of their childcare bills.

Of course, we do not oppose the payments; they are welcome so far as they go, but one-off provision of that kind is not, and can never be, the answer to the deep cost of living crisis stalking the country, with in-work poverty at record levels and destitution wrecking the physical and mental health of far too many people. Emergency responses, inevitably somewhat rough and ready, are never going to be able to take into account the full range of individual circumstances, not least household size, which determines additional need. In this short but important debate, we have also had reference to how people with nil awards are treated, the impact of cliff edges on incomes, and anomalies linked to qualifying periods.

The additional payments policy, a flat-rate payment triggered simply by whether people are in receipt of means-tested benefits, is cruder than it needs to be. When this was discussed last year, it would not have

been beyond the capability of Government to take into account actual household size in setting entitlements, or to sort out some of the other anomalies—all of which were debated when we discussed special payments a few months ago. Let us speed this essential help to households in need, of which there are so many, but let us not pretend that this is the very best that could have been done.

4.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I begin by thanking all those who have contributed to this debate, which has been, as the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, short but important. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has said, the Bill legislates for two key elements of the £26 billion package of further support announced by the Chancellor in November. It builds on last year’s £37 billion package of support to help with the cost of living, and demonstrates our continued commitment to ensuring that people continue to get the help that they need throughout these challenging times.

The Bill plays a vital role in ensuring that, over the next financial year, we can continue to help the most vulnerable to cope with the increased cost of living brought about by global pressures. We look forward to and welcome continued support from hon. Members across the House, including from Front Benchers, to ensure that the legislation progresses quickly. That ensures that we can begin to make the first payments to those people on means-tested benefits in the spring.

The focus of the debate is on the provisions in the Bill that will give additional support of up to £900 to households on means-tested benefits, and on the separate payment of £150 for people on disability extra costs benefits. The Secretary of State already noted that last year we successfully, at unparalleled pace, delivered tens of millions of payments to people across the UK. That was in addition to our normal benefit processing operations. I pay tribute to my officials at the Department for Work and Pensions and all the civil service teams across Government who worked tirelessly to ensure that happened.

We were able to achieve that delivery because we deliberately kept the eligibility criteria for the payments as simple as possible. Let me respond to hon. Members who asked why. We were keen to avoid introducing complexity, which could ultimately lead to delays and unacceptable levels of error or fraud.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I applaud the additional benefits, but how can my constituents in Watford find out about them? Will there be a communications campaign?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend, who is standing up as ever for his constituents. There is a cost of living website, there will be details on gov.uk and of course there is the benefits calculator on gov.uk. Those who are entitled will not need to do anything, because payment will be made to them. I hope that reiterates the point. There will be a rounded communications campaign on that. In fact, I made a video just this morning. I hope that is helpful—I promise the video was on this issue.

The key principle that has guided our approach to the Bill this time is to make those further payments to millions of vulnerable people over the coming year. Keeping the rules simple means that people on a qualifying

[Mims Davies]

benefit will receive the cost of living payment. That is why we are introducing the Bill. I reassure hon. Members across the House, including on the Opposition Benches, that we did take our time to look at addressing some of the hard edges. Ultimately, we concluded that introducing any significant policy changes would risk delaying payments to millions of people and introducing unacceptable levels of fraud and error. I will go into detail on that shortly, if I may.

We will be delivering the means-tested cost of living payments in three separate payments in 2023-24, as discussed, reducing the chances of someone's missing out altogether. For those who miss out on a cost of living payment, and for others who may need further support with the costs of essentials on top of our statutory provision, we are extending the household support fund throughout the next financial year. The details have been confirmed today.

The extension allows local authorities in England to continue to provide discretionary support with the cost of essentials, particularly energy and food. The devolved Administrations will receive consequential funding, as usual, to spend at their discretion and with their expert local knowledge—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, I thought someone was interrupting there. The household support fund guidance and outlines have been released today. It is our expectation that local authorities will prioritise those in particular need and consider supporting those who may, through no fault of their own, have missed out on those cost of living payments but nevertheless are in need.

There have been a number of contributions to the debate and I will try to respond to some of the points made in turn. The right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) talked about the energy price cap. He welcomed our uprating, which is significant. I remind him that childcare on universal credit is more generous than on legacy benefits and the way we have drawn the household support fund will cover many of the points he raised; I hope he will have a chance to look at those interventions. The personalised support with the Help to Claim service, working with the supporting families programme from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, will help the families with complex needs that the right hon. Gentleman spoke about.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) called this “substandard legislation”, which I take severe issue with, but he took the opportunity to make wider points about social security and talked about the “punitive sanctions regime”. I think we will always beg to differ on that. I make the point very strongly that this is a reserved matter. We are delighted to be making the payments for Scotland and today providing the Barnett consequential in relation to the household support fund and further assistance—[*Interruption.*] I am sure he cannot resist intervening, so I will let him.

David Linden: Indeed not. I very much enjoyed being told to eat my cereal today. On the question of sanctions, how many people in Mid Sussex tell the Minister how wonderful the sanctions regime is? It is clearly increasing.

Mims Davies: I will come onto the point about sanctions shortly. I know there is confusion among those on the Opposition Benches about whether they support sanctions,

but this is about a safety net; it is about progressing and supporting people and helping them to go forward. In reality, when people are sanctioned, it does not just happen. There are processes to go through where work coaches try to engage and support people. If people are disconnected and they fail to attend, that is why they are sanctioned, which is often the reason they then re-engage, talk to their work coach and get involved with what is going on. That helps us to get under the skin of what is holding them back, and I think that is important. I assume from his question that there is a fundamental disagreement, but I will not hold it against him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) very kindly turned the focus on to employment. Having been Employment Minister for three years, how can I resist responding to that? A dynamic labour market is important, including the work around furlough, the plan for jobs, and the kickstart and restart schemes—I designed many of those programmes, so it is always nice to have a compliment. In reality, our talented new work coaches—those who we found, recruited and brought into the DWP because of the impact of the pandemic—have been transformational. The other side of this debate is important—it is jobs, it is livelihoods, it is careers, it is opportunities, and it is making sure that people, when at their most vulnerable, know that they have that safety net. I wish my hon. Friend good luck with his jobs fair on 10 March. I have my second in Burgess Hill—this is a great opportunity to mention it.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke up for his constituents and their fuel requirements. Of course, the energy price guarantee will be key to protecting customers and our constituents, and the household support fund will be a key driver as well. It is absolutely right to focus on our constituents. I have worked very strongly on the household support fund to complement this piece of legislation, working with the Local Government Association, to ensure that we support everyone who comes to us in any situation. I was pleased to hear him talk about the rewards of work and why they matter too. We know that it is more than just a pay packet that we are looking for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) spoke about households being squeezed, the cost of living website, and, of course, the fact that the help-to-claim service is there and that all constituencies—no matter how leafy and lovely they may seem—have pockets of challenge. It is absolutely right that we act when we see the impact of a global squeeze. That is absolutely the mark of what we stand for at the DWP. There is the £10 million going to Surrey, and the almost £10 million going to West Sussex just next door to my constituency. What has come out of this and the work that we have done during covid? It is our work with local authorities, which I must commend for stepping up and doing a magnificent job in helping people. They know where those pockets of support are needed. I thank those local offices.

I will quickly whip through some of the challenges made about the legislation. On the adequacy point, inflation is forecast to remain high over the next few months, meaning that many people will need this additional support, but it is important to remember that these

payments are just one element announced by the Chancellor back in November. The broader uprating will make a difference.

On the points about housing support, I am working with colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on quality and provision. My party strongly continues to focus on opening up the benefits and freedom of home ownership and all that it gives. The 2020 local housing allowance rates were raised to the 30th percentile—a significant investment of £30 billion—and we have since maintained that increase.¹ Of course, we know that housing costs are incredibly challenging, particularly for renters. That is something that we are working on and taking forward in through the housing taskforce.

Debbie Abrahams: Can the Minister say to what extent the measures in the Bill will replace or add to the £34 billion that has been taken out of support for working-age people since 2010?

Mims Davies: I understand the hon. Lady's point, but it is not necessarily this Bill that will answer the challenges that some of our constituents face. It deals with issues that they face in skills, progression and other areas that have been holding them back. Tax credits, for example, quite often trap people in 16-hour contracts when they would be much better off moving on to universal credit and taking more hours, training and opportunities. I say to anybody listening: "Take the opportunities to see what is out there."

The hon. Member for Glasgow East talked about the disability cost of living payments in the Bill. They are not disability benefits themselves, but rather payments relating to the cost of living increases that a disabled person may face. I hope that answers his point. I have covered some of the issues regarding Scotland, so I will move on swiftly, if I may.

In regard to the point from my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) about the 1p payment, we successfully delivered tens of millions of payments in 2022 by keeping the rules simple. That included a simple and clear rule that the person must have been entitled to a payment of at least 1p, as he pointed out. That ensures that those with other income sources are not eligible for means-tested benefits and are not included, nor are suspended benefit claims that include risk of fraud.

I reiterate the point around the household support fund and the three payments. They hopefully mean that if people have fluctuating payments, they have a chance to be eligible once again. That was pointed out by the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who is not in his place, in terms of how we address those hard edges. Extending the eligibility dates would involve making more payments to those who had permanently increased their earnings, and that is the challenge. That is not the intention of the cost of living payments, which are deliberately targeted at those on the lowest incomes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley also mentioned making more payments, and I would like to address that these payments are being made outside our usual benefit processing systems, using our ad hoc payment system. That system has a limit on the

number of payments it can make each day, and it can only make one type of payment at one time. That means a team of specialists have to extract and clean the data to make the payments. Having three means-tested cost of living payments and a single disability cost of living payment balances the spread of support throughout the year, but it does not compromise the core benefit delivery, and I hope that answers my hon. Friend's questions.

I will just quickly answer the question on larger families and then conclude. In regard to how we look at supporting larger families, as I hopefully have outlined, families on means-tested benefits will benefit from our planned uprating of 10.1% from April, meaning that families subject to the benefit cap will also see an increase of 10.1%. In reality, for families who need additional help, we are extending the support through the household support fund. Again, that is linked to the issues around the ad hoc payment system.

I think I have covered most of the points in the debate, but I just quickly mention the sanctions point and reiterate my earlier point to the hon. Member for Glasgow East that sanctioned claimants who re-engage will be supported.

I will conclude, because I feel that people are desperate to be in the Lobbies. This Government demonstrate our commitment to supporting those in the greatest need and going through the greatest challenge with the increased cost of living. It is vital that we move ahead quickly with the legislation, so that we can begin to make those first payments in the spring. I look forward to further discussion as the Bill proceeds through its next stages, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SOCIAL SECURITY (ADDITIONAL PAYMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee and any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

**SOCIAL SECURITY (ADDITIONAL PAYMENTS)
(NO. 2) BILL (MONEY)**

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) a sum not exceeding £301 to anyone who is entitled, in respect of a day (the "first qualifying day") not later than 30 April 2023, to—

- (a) universal credit or state pension credit,
- (b) an income-based jobseeker's allowance, an income-related employment and support allowance or income support, or
- (c) working tax credit or child tax credit;

(2) a sum not exceeding £300 to anyone who is entitled, in respect of a day (the "second qualifying day") after the first qualifying day but not later than 31 October 2023, to a benefit mentioned in paragraph (1);

(3) a sum not exceeding £299 to anyone who is entitled, in respect of a day after the second qualifying day but not later than 29 February 2024, to a benefit mentioned in paragraph (1);

(4) a sum not exceeding £150 to anyone who is entitled, in respect of a day not later than 30 June 2023, to—

- (a) a disability living allowance,
- (b) a personal independence payment,
- (c) an attendance allowance or a constant attendance allowance,
- (d) an adult or child disability payment,
- (e) an armed forces independence payment, or
- (f) a mobility supplement.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Alcoholic Beverages (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Government (Structural Changes) (Supplementary Provision and Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 12 December 2022, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

FORENSIC SCIENCE REGULATOR

That the Forensic Science Regulator draft Code of Practice 2023, which was laid before this House on 26 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft International Fund for Agricultural Development (Twelfth Replenishment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Postponement of Local Elections (Northern Ireland) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

Scottish Affairs Committee

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That Liz Twist and Jon Cruddas be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Andrew Western and Christine Jardine be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin.*)

4.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the Chair of the Selection Committee, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin), on moving the motion. In rising to oppose it, there is nothing that is personal towards the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), from the Liberal Democrats. She is hugely talented, and I look forward to her playing a constructive role on behalf of the independence negotiations for a future independent Scotland—I know that, deep down, she is incredibly passionate about that.

Fundamentally, the motion is about the fact that the British Labour party is unable to fulfil its obligations to this House. There are 196 British Labour party MPs in this House of Commons. They have two spaces on the Scottish Affairs Select Committee, and for weeks and months, members of that Committee from the British Labour party have been unable even to attend it. Because Labour has been unable to fulfil its roles on the Scottish Affairs Committee—a Committee, let us not forget, that was used by the previous Member for Glasgow South West, Ian Davidson, to conduct all sorts of sham reports into separation; that Committee was the instrument that Labour used to try to batter the SNP Government—we now find ourselves in a situation where the Labour party is so pathetic, so weak, and so unable to stand up and have any interest in Scotland that it is giving seats away left, right and centre to the Liberal Democrats.

We are often told—indeed, we were told on Sunday, when the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made one of his rare trips north to Scotland—that the path to a Labour Government runs through Scotland. This motion shows that Labour cannot get a path to a Labour Government when it will not even turn up and start laying the path. It is on that basis that I now look forward to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) explaining from the Dispatch Box why, with 196 MPs, Labour cannot find more than one to take part in the Scottish Affairs Select Committee.

4.27 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) for their hard work and dedication on the Scottish Affairs Committee.

The right of political parties to nominate Members for Select Committees is based on the composition of the House. The nominations we are discussing today are Labour's to make, and we are making them: one for my hon. Friend, the brilliant new Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), and the other for the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). It is no secret that we currently only have one Member in Scotland—for now—and he is not able to sit on the Committee due to his role in the shadow Cabinet, so just as the SNP has called for, we have nominated another Scottish Member to serve on the Select Committee.

Just because on this occasion, much to the evident dislike of SNP Members, that Member is a Liberal Democrat and not from the SNP, that does not make it okay for the SNP to start playing parliamentary games, wasting everyone's time. One would think they had something else going on that they want to distract attention from—whatever could that be? From their actions today, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would be surprised to learn this, but I will refresh the memories of SNP Members: we previously gave a place to the SNP.

David Linden: Why don't we make a deal? We could let Labour have the two places; they could even give one to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who is kind of a member of the Labour party. Why don't they give it to him?

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention because it gives me the opportunity to reiterate that they are our places to nominate, and we are nominating the Members we wish to be on the Committee. As I said, we have previously nominated someone from the SNP. Is this not just another case of the SNP focusing on the wrong priorities? [*Interruption.*] With the Scottish NHS on the brink, their country in a cost of living crisis—[*Interruption.*] They are making a lot of noise. There are thousands of people in Scotland forced to choose between heating and eating, yet the SNP is focusing on a row over who sits where down here. The people of Scotland, I presume, would like to see their SNP Government focusing on recovery or growing and strengthening the economy, dealing with the issues in public services and addressing the crisis in our NHS.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): How does the hon. Lady know what the people of Scotland really think, especially when the two Labour members were not even participating in the Scottish Affairs Committee?

Thangam Debbonaire: I have to correct the hon. Gentleman. The Labour party has a lot of Members in the Scottish Parliament. We have more support every day, and we know, from listening to the people of Scotland, that they would like a Government who are listening, dealing with the crisis in the NHS in Scotland, dealing with the public sector and investing to create the green jobs of the future in Scotland. If the SNP will not, Labour will, and I am sure that the people of Scotland watching today can see just what their Westminster representatives are up to.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

David Linden: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I confirm that we have forced this to a Division to allow Labour and Conservative Members to go into the same Lobby together?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): That is not a point of order for the Chair.

The House having divided: Ayes 383, Noes 37.

Division No. 178]

[4.31 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, rh Nigel

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie

Aldous, Peter	Crosbie, Virginia	Green, Chris	Lloyd, Tony (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Amesbury, Mike	Cryer, John	Green, rh Damian	Loder, Chris
Anderson, Lee	Cunningham, Alex	Green, Sarah	Logan, Mark (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Anderson, Stuart	Daby, Janet	Greenwood, Lilian	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Andrew, rh Stuart	Dalton, Ashley	Greenwood, Margaret	Lopez, Julia
Ansell, Caroline	Daly, James	Griffith, Dame Nia	Lopresti, Jack
Argar, rh Edward	Davies, Gareth	Grundy, James	Lord, Mr Jonathan
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Davies, Geraint	Gwynne, Andrew	Loughton, Tim
Atherton, Sarah	Davies, Dr James	Haigh, Louise	Lynch, Holly
Atkins, Victoria	Davies, Mims	Halfon, rh Robert	Mackrory, Cheryllyn
Bacon, Gareth	Davies-Jones, Alex	Hall, Luke	Maclean, Rachel
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davison, Dehenna	Hammond, Stephen	Madders, Justin
Bailey, Shaun	De Cordova, Marsha	Hands, rh Greg	Mak, Alan
Baillie, Siobhan	Debbonaire, Thangam	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Malhotra, Seema
Baker, Duncan	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Harris, Carolyn	Malthouse, rh Kit
Baker, Mr Steve	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Harris, Rebecca	Mangnall, Anthony
Barker, Paula	Dodds, Anneliese	Harrison, Trudy	Mann, Scott
Baynes, Simon	Double, Steve	Heapey, rh James	Marson, Julie
Bell, Aaron	Dowd, Peter	Henderson, Gordon	Maskell, Rachael
Benn, rh Hilary	Doyle-Price, Jackie	Higginbotham, Antony	May, rh Mrs Theresa
Beresford, Sir Paul	Drummond, Mrs Flick	Hillier, Dame Meg	Mayhew, Jerome
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Duddridge, Sir James	Hinds, rh Damian	Maynard, Paul
Betts, Mr Clive	Duffield, Rosie	Hoare, Simon	McCarthy, Kerry
Bhatti, Saqib	Duguid, David	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	McCartney, Karl
Blackman, Bob	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Holden, Mr Richard	McDonald, Andy
Blake, Olivia	Dunne, rh Philip	Hollern, Kate	McDonnell, rh John
Blomfield, Paul	Eagle, Dame Angela	Hollinrake, Kevin	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Blunt, Crispin	Eagle, Maria	Hollobone, Mr Philip	McGinn, Conor
Bowie, Andrew	Eastwood, Mark	Holmes, Paul	McGovern, Alison
Bradley, Ben	Edwards, Ruth	Hopkins, Rachel	Mearns, Ian
Bradley, rh Karen	Efford, Clive	Howarth, rh Sir George	Menzies, Mark
Brady, Sir Graham	Ellis, rh Michael	Howell, John	Merriman, Huw
Brereton, Jack	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Huddleston, Nigel	Metcalfe, Stephen
Bridgen, Andrew	Elmore, Chris	Hudson, Dr Neil	Miliband, rh Edward
Brine, Steve	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Hunt, Jane	Millar, Robin
Bristow, Paul	Eshalomi, Florence	Hunt, Tom	Milling, rh Amanda
Brown, Ms Lyn	Esterson, Bill	Huq, Dr Rupa	Mills, Nigel
Browne, Anthony	Eustice, rh George	Jardine, Christine	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Bruce, Fiona	Evans, Dr Luke	Jarvis, Dan	Moore, Robbie
Buchan, Felicity	Everitt, Ben	Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil	Morden, Jessica
Buck, Ms Karen	Fabricant, Michael	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Morgan, Helen
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Farris, Laura	Jenkinson, Mark	Morgan, Stephen
Burghart, Alex	Farron, Tim	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Morris, Anne Marie
Burgon, Richard	Firth, Anna	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Morris, Grahame
Butler, Rob	Fletcher, Colleen	Johnson, Gareth	Morris, James
Byrne, rh Liam	Fletcher, Katherine	Johnson, Kim	Mortimer, Jill
Cadbury, Ruth	Fletcher, Mark	Johnston, David	Mumby-Croft, Holly
Cairns, rh Alun	Fletcher, Nick	Jones, rh Mr David	Mundell, rh David
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Foord, Richard	Jones, Fay	Murray, Ian
Carter, Andy	Ford, rh Vicky	Jones, Gerald	Murray, James
Cash, Sir William	Fovargue, Yvonne	Jones, Mr Marcus	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Cates, Miriam	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jones, Sarah	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Caulfield, Maria	Foxcroft, Vicky	Jupp, Simon	Neill, Sir Robert
Champion, Sarah	Foy, Mary Kelly	Kearns, Alicia	Nichols, Charlotte
Charalambous, Bambos	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Keegan, rh Gillian	Nokes, rh Caroline
Chishti, Rehman	Freeman, George	Keeley, Barbara	Norman, rh Jesse
Churchill, Jo	Freer, Mike	Khan, Afzal	Norris, Alex
Clark, rh Greg	French, Mr Louie	Kinnock, Stephen	O'Brien, Neil
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Fuller, Richard	Kniveton, Kate	Olney, Sarah
Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Fysh, Mr Marcus	Kruger, Danny	Onwurah, Chi
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Gardiner, Barry	Lamont, John	Opperman, Guy
Clarkson, Chris	Garnier, Mark	Largan, Robert	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Osborne, Kate
Colburn, Elliot	Gideon, Jo	Lavery, Ian	Pawsey, Mark
Colliers, Damian	Gill, Preet Kaur	Leadbeater, Kim	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Cooper, Daisy	Glen, rh John	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea	Pennycook, Matthew
Costa, Alberto	Glindon, Mary	Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Penrose, John
Courts, Robert	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Levy, Ian	Percy, Andrew
Coutinho, Claire	Graham, Richard	Lewer, Andrew	Perkins, Mr Toby
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Gray, James	Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Philp, rh Chris
Crabb, rh Stephen	Grayling, rh Chris (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	
		Lightwood, Simon	

Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian

Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Warman, Matt (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne

Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggin, Sir Bill

Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Jacob Young and
 Joy Morrissey**

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
 cast by Peter Grant*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Crawley, Angela
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
 by Peter Grant*)
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hendry, Drew

Hosie, rh Stewart
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
 cast by Peter Grant*)
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
 cast by Peter Grant*)
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Whitford, Dr Philippa

Tellers for the Noes:

**Steven Bonnar and
 Gavin Newlands**

Question accordingly agreed to.

School Sport Facilities: Reopening

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

4.46 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to bring this issue to the Floor of the House and to be able to discuss opportunities to open up school sports facilities to the wider community. It is an issue very close to my heart as a self-confessed sports fanatic, hockey coach, occasional football referee, parent of kids involved in grassroots football and someone whose original ambition was to be a PE teacher. I cannot overstate how important I think sport, and particularly grassroots and community sport, is to our physical and mental health, to the development and growth of our young people, and to our social fabric and our general wellbeing.

The role sport plays and the value of it in the education and development of the next generation have, quite frankly, always been undervalued by Governments of all stripes. While the health benefits of physical activity are obvious, it also plays a major role in academic achievement and careers. Dundee University has shown an increase in academic performance by students who participated in more exercise than their peers, and this is something that can be scientifically measured: it is a real thing. If I wanted to get technical, I could even talk about how other studies have shown that regular exercise leads to better levels of concentration and better memory, but the real point that sport adds value across the board when it comes to developing young people is an important one. I consistently reiterate in this place that I think it is really important.

We also know that sport not only helps to develop the academic potential of a young person. Sport, particularly team games, helps to encourage the social development of young people and often provides that first instance of teamwork for many kids. All of us who have played sport know about the highs and lows it brings and the character building that comes from those experiences of determination, competitive spirit and overcoming challenges. These experiences help to make our young people more resilient and better able to deal with the rest of their lives.

The most disadvantaged communities also tend to be the least active, and they also tend to have the least access to sports facilities, so this is a levelling-up mission too, which is really important. As I keep saying, this is really important. We need to help more people to access facilities and to access sport. There is a lot to that, and I could bang on for ever. We recently had a debate here, with the Minister for Sport—the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew)—on the Front Bench, about sport in schools and communities, so I am not going to reiterate all of that. However, as we have an Education Minister here, and I am very grateful for her time, I will flag again that the PE and sport premium is really important. I know it is being discussed, because teachers are regularly contacting me to ask if it can be finalised and sorted.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Football Association has raised concerns that school sport premium funding is often announced very late in the academic year, and therefore schools struggle to make plans on how to use that, often laying off staff who they then

have to re-employ. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Department for Education and the Treasury should perhaps agree that settlement for two or three years so that planning, provision and people can be put in place?

Ben Bradley: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We all know about the recent economic challenges around long-term planning, but the sooner we can have longer-term security around staffing the better. I would make the same point about the Department of Health and Social Care funding stream for school games organisers. They are in the same boat; if the funding is not confirmed soon, they will have to lay people off and then start again. The cost of that is unnecessary and burdensome for schools.

This evening I want to focus on school facilities, however. One way to increase access to sports facilities across the country is by ensuring that schools are able to open their sports facilities for public use. We are investing in new sports centres, and lots of levelling-up funds and other funds have recently come forward for new facilities, including Warsop leisure and health centre in my constituency. That is really positive, and means that, thanks to this Government, we will finally replace the old, dilapidated leisure centre that the Mansfield independent-led council closed around four years ago. That is great; I have campaigned on it and have been keen to secure it, and I am really pleased we are going to be able to do it this year. But when I look across the road from the leisure centre, I see a school sports field with football pitches, a multi-use games area, a basketball court, tennis courts and school sports facilities that are already there. It is fortunate that in Warsop some of them—not all—are open to the wider community, but when I first came to Parliament five years ago I was shocked to find that the general public were not able to access 45% of the sports facilities in state-funded schools; almost half provide no public access at all.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that for some of the indoor facilities, particularly swimming pools but also gyms, the problem might be that the exorbitant cost of heating at present prevents the school from doing something, because it will cost them money even if they charge for use of their facilities?

Ben Bradley: I was not planning to go through everything we discussed in the previous sports debate, but we talked at length about that issue, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the cost of running sports facilities, in particular swimming pools, is hugely challenging at present. The business energy support does not tackle that; it does not specifically help or offer that support for leisure facilities, and I have asked Ministers to look at that. I know my right hon. Friend has spoken about that, too. It would be great to see support come forward for such facilities, making them more accessible and affordable.

In light of that, the proportion of facilities that the public cannot access will be even higher than 45% now. I can think of multiple large secondary schools even in my constituency that have recently removed that access to sports facilities for communities because of additional costs post-covid; the commercial viability of running centres reduced because customers disappeared during covid, making them a drain on school budgets.

To give an example, Manor Academy in Mansfield Woodhouse closed its sports centre for community use post-covid. That is understandable; I am not going to point fingers at the school, because I understand why it feels that it should direct its funds towards the academics and the students, and that it is not its job to subsidise community leisure provision—it was losing money on it. I sympathise with that, therefore, and I am not here to assign blame, but we are 18 months on now, and still multiple football pitches, a hockey pitch—the only hockey pitch in Mansfield—an indoor sports hall and other facilities remain inaccessible.

As that hockey pitch remains closed, the hockey club remains effectively homeless. I have been trying to broker a solution between councils, the academy trust and North Notts Hockey Club, but it has been a real slog and has taken 18 months now. I think we are getting there, and I am hopeful that when we meet again in a few weeks we will have a solution to take forward, but, as I will discuss, the challenges and bureaucracy around trying to pull that together have been very difficult, and it should not be so hard when on the surface all partners involved want to make that happen.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech highlighting an important issue. Does he agree that it might be helpful if the Department for Education's model lease for academies included a requirement that, where it can be done at no cost to the school, those taxpayer-funded sports facilities should be available for community use when not in use by the school?

Ben Bradley: That is certainly an option. Where taxpayers are funding those facilities, they should be able to use them. In cases such as Manor Academy, where schools do not feel able to do that, they could give the facilities back. Let the community or the district leisure trust run them—whichever is willing to open them up. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point.

What we have ended up with is, arguably, the best sports facilities in the Woodhouse area, which supported countless grass roots clubs, being there and visible—people know them and used to play on them—but not available. Meanwhile, we are short of hockey pitches—we have none—and of rugby and football pitches. All the major venues are full across the area—across the whole county in fact. I get grassroots clubs coming to me all the time seeking more capacity, particularly for football, although every school has a massive flat field that lots of people could play football on, if they were available.

Although we all think sport is very important, it is rarely the top priority in times of covid, cost of living, health and other crises—everything is a crisis—for any of the organisations such as schools, councils and Government, so it never makes it to the top of the to-do list. That is something that I am trying to shift in my own organisation, to make sure that provision for community sports services is top of its agenda. All the prevention stuff means that the council does not have to step in and sort everybody out later. Sports facilities are a real part of that, and I am asking the Minister to try to help me shift the dial in government. It is an issue that falls across Departments, and is never top of anybody's list. We all talk about it, but we need to shift the dial.

The example at Manor Academy represents a missed opportunity to give a significant boost to grassroots sports, to meet some of that need, and obviously to access all the positive implications that has for the community, such as improved physical and mental health. In many cases, facilities already exist. Surely, common sense dictates that it would be quicker and cheaper to simply open up existing facilities than to build new ones, especially with the rising costs of capital projects. A small amount of infrastructure in terms of admin support for bookings would be enough at some sites; others might need advice on managing liability and insurance, and wading through the bureaucracy, which would allow clubs to take on management of facilities at weekends. Some sites might need a small amount of capital funding for a portacabin for some changing rooms separate to the school buildings, or gates and access arrangements might need to be sorted. Those things are not unachievable, but they can seem very difficult when partners need to be brought together to work towards that goal and wade through the legal stuff and everything else.

When clubs have some certainty for the long term, they can attract the funding for improvements from existing routes, such as Sport England, the Football Foundation or the county council's local community fund. Some of that can be managed locally, and I volunteer my own council to manage it or pilot that administration if we can access support to ensure that we have the staff capacity up front. It does not need Government to do it, in that sense, but the Government's help is needed to set the clear direction of travel. That could be by changing lease agreements to make sure that taxpayer-funded facilities are available to taxpayers, or by offering the capacity to get started—a bit of upfront support, with the proviso that the schemes have to become self-sustaining in the long term. Many of them could be, but they need an initial outlay on making them fit for purpose and managing administration, such as booking systems. In many cases it would be self-funding, but it needs support to get going. Given that it is a levelling-up outcome, as I have said, with disadvantaged communities often having least access, and that levelling up funds may be returned in coming months as rising costs make projects unviable—I have no doubt that we will see councils saying that they can no longer deliver some schemes—perhaps some of those funds could be repurposed to help with this.

Secondly, the Government need to be clear that they expect everyone to facilitate this—as my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) suggested—and be permissive when it comes to navigating the bureaucracy. Even though partners want to work together, the biggest barrier is the system—the perceived safeguarding implications for schools even on a weekend when nobody is there; legal teams stressing about insurance and who has liability if someone falls over; and local planners rejecting permissions for even the simplest things such as using sites for slightly different hours. We need to be clear with schools. Some do not see it as their job, understandably, others do not have capacity and others just will not help to get it going. It requires lots of partners to pull together in the same direction and all prioritise it at the same time, so it sometimes feels as though it is not doable. It should not take two years to sort a solution for Manor sports centre. The Government need to be clear, and to demand

[Ben Bradley]

that taxpayer-funded facilities are available for taxpayers to use and that partners and stakeholders should facilitate that use and not put barriers in the way.

I have heard about an Opening School Facilities programme, but I cannot point to a practical example of where this has happened—I wonder whether the Minister can tell me about that. I have heard of pilot schemes to try to facilitate administration and bookings, as I have described. I spoke to the last but one sports Minister about those pilots, but I have not heard of any outcome or of what the next steps are. If Ministers want to help my council with some initial capacity, I will happily work with Government to get this up and running in Nottinghamshire and prove the case. Officials in the Department will, no doubt, point to some open process of pilot projects or whatever, but I am standing here volunteering, so if someone needs to pick a next step and give it a go, they should tell me what it is and I will work with Government to make that happen.

I hope the Minister can update me on what is happening with these programmes, particularly in the light of the new sports strategy—I know that that is not in her Department, but I understand that it will include plans on accessing facilities for grassroots sport. What is the next step in making this happen and ensuring that the sports facilities in our communities are not mothballed and are not unavailable for use, but are actually there for the community? How can I take that forward and ensure that Mansfield residents have full access to all the wonderful community spaces that they have often previously enjoyed but cannot now as they are locked away? I look forward to her comments.

5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) has secured this debate to cover the important topic of reopening school sports facilities. I know he has been a long-standing, passionate campaigner in this area and has been speaking about it ever since he came into Parliament. The wellbeing of children, both mental and physical, is a priority for this Government, and we know that schools have a critical role to play. Mental health and physical health are inextricably linked, and the value of participating in sport and doing regular exercise is well known—we all see that all the time. It is important that children understand that good physical health contributes to good mental wellbeing. Sport and physical activity are an essential part of a healthy and happy life, which benefits us as individuals and makes sure that we can stay healthy in our older age.

Sport also has the power to bring communities closer together, increasing engagement between different people and helping to tackle issues such as loneliness. I am passionate about community spaces and I welcome my hon. Friend's comments on that. It is wonderful that members of the community can take part in different things on school premises, because we get a general sense of engagement and togetherness.

Sir Robert Goodwill: My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield was talking about state schools, aided schools and academies. Does the Minister recognise that many

independent schools recognise their responsibility to the wider community and have people coming to use their facilities? Does she further agree that Labour's curmudgeonly plan to charge VAT on those schools might jeopardise that very community-minded spirit that many independent schools have?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and he is of course right in what he says; I have seen lots of examples of independent schools being real hubs in their communities and bringing lots of people together. I also have a personal viewpoint on this, because a lot of independent schools are specialist schools and are providing amazing provision to children with special educational needs—I have seen some of them in action.

We know that covid-19 restricted the amount of sport that schools could offer during and after the school day. It is important that we help not just to get things back on track, but to lay the groundwork for going further and increasing physical activity and participation in sport. The chief medical officers recommend that children should take part in 60 minutes of physical activity a day. The latest annual data from the "Active Lives Children and Young People" survey, released in December, has been encouraging. It shows that the proportion of children who are active has increased by 2.6% compared with the previous academic year, bringing activity levels back in line with the pre-pandemic numbers.

Fundamental to an active community is having sufficient sports facilities of the right quality. That is why the Government are investing £230 million between 2022 and 2025 in improving community sports facilities across all four home nations.

Munira Wilson: The Minister was making a point about children's participation in sport, particularly in schools. Does she share my concern that over the past 10 years some 40,000 hours of physical education have been lost in secondary schools? Will she update the House on what her Department's progress is in delivering the commitment the Prime Minister made to the Lionesses last year, after their spectacular win in the Euros, to have two hours of PE per week as a minimum in every school across the country and to involve Ofsted in inspecting sport in schools?

Claire Coutinho: The Prime Minister and many other people in the Government are passionate about children's access to PE. I will come on to some of the sport strategies we are looking at and set them out in further detail.

The Government also support physical activity and sport outside the school term. The £200 million a year we are spending on the holiday activities and food programme, which is delivered by local authorities in England, has been a tremendous way to increase access. Some of the figures I have looked at on children accessing holiday activities who have never done anything like that before are really quite heartwarming.

Alongside community facilities, facilities on school sites represent an important resource for pupils and their families. Although schools may need support with the logistics of opening up their facilities—my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield spoke to some of them—the phase 3 funding we have set out will allow

them to ensure that their facilities are more easily accessible to families, other community users and local clubs, while remaining secure. Since October 2019, the Department for Education has provided £11.7 million to schools to support them to make best use of their sports facilities beyond the core school day and to start to reopen them after the pandemic.

In phase 2 of the Opening School Facilities programme, over 280,000 young people were supported to take part in over 60 types of extracurricular sports and physical activities, including traditional sports such as football and tennis, and new activities such as BMX and skateboarding. The Department will also be providing further investment support to schools to open their sports facilities in the evening, at weekends and during the holidays by funding phase 3 of the programme with up to £57 million over three years. As well as providing practical support and advice, phase 3 will also support schools to create new partnerships with national governing bodies and local sport providers to broaden the extracurricular opportunities available to their pupils, as well as providing a benefit to the wider community.

With that, I would like to thank everyone who has taken part in today's debate, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, who I know will continue to press on this issue.

Ben Bradley: Before the Minister sits down, will she allow me to highlight a point about extracurricular sport? I am really grateful for the update, because I was

not aware of the detail of the Opening School Facilities programme. It sounds really positive. I recently met the Schools Minister to talk about trying to get sportspeople into schools and into teaching. We spoke with my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) about the Professional Footballers Association and trying to get academy footballers into primary teaching. So often, it is the people with that experience who will then stay after school and run sports in communities. My hon. Friend gave examples of people who run the holiday activities fund programme because of their coaching background. I urge the Minister to have a look at that scheme, and to encourage the Department to bring it forward. Opportunities to get sportspeople into schools will really help us to deliver on that kind of provision as well.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend. I would be delighted to look at that scheme and see what more we can do. The teachers I have met who come from a sporting background bring, as he says, so much enthusiasm to their role.

Question put and agreed.

5.7 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 February 2023

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Freeports: Wales

9.30 am

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered freeport proposals for Wales.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. The debate comes at a crucial moment not just for my constituency of Ynys Môn but for north Wales and the whole country. In the coming weeks, we expect a decision on the site of the first freeport in Wales. That will be a monumental moment for Wales, whichever bid is successful, and the potential for boosting the economy of north Wales via a freeport on the Isle of Anglesey is enormous.

It is the privilege of my life to represent the people of Ynys Môn. It is a proud island with a wonderful history, and our ports have long been critical to our success, providing communication and trade links throughout history, from the Roman fort in Holyhead, which was positioned to overlook the port, to Amlwch, whose port and copper trade once made it the second largest town in Wales.

Ynys Môn's relationship with the sea is well documented. Since the 1800s, the port of Holyhead has been a key link in the chain between the UK, Ireland and Europe. It developed as part of the fastest route between London and Dublin, and is still the second busiest roll-on roll-off port in the UK, but time moves on, and Ynys Môn needs to progress to the next step in its journey. The obvious way forward is the freeport programme.

For several years, I have been leading the campaign to secure freeport status for the island, and over the past six months I have been working alongside a consortium of partners led by Stena Line and Isle of Anglesey County Council to deliver a bid that we can be proud of. Colleagues will also be aware of the work I have done with my north Wales Conservative colleagues—particularly my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar)—to raise the prospect of the freeport. Indeed, I have spoken of little else in this place for the past few years, and that is because of the bid's potential to transform Anglesey. That transformation would truly be life changing for so many people and communities across north Wales. Behind the scenes, I have also been corralling others to join the cause, and I am pleased that more than 40 businesses, local councils and education institutions now support the bid, as well as more than 1,500 residents from across north Wales.

Since the UK Government announced in 2020 that they would use our post-Brexit freedoms to establish 10 freeports, I have been unequivocal about the importance of giving freeport status to Ynys Môn. That is because my constituency faces a range of challenges that are holding people back, the root cause of which boils down to a lack of long-term, sustainable investment. In the 21 years since the Senedd was established, and with a Labour Welsh Government in Cardiff, the island has systematically lost major employers, including Anglesey Aluminium, the Wylfa nuclear power station, Octel and

Rehau, which led to huge job losses on the island. That continues to this day with the deeply disappointing anticipated loss of the 2 Sisters poultry plant, and with it around 730 jobs, which was announced in January.

We have seen next to nothing from the Welsh Government to address those issues, and at times it can feel as though there is a reluctance in Cardiff to recognise the urgency of the situation. The damage to the island caused by employers closing their operations does not stop at the tragedy of people losing their jobs; those people have to move away from the island, which in turn means taking their children out of school. The limited availability of jobs means that, for those young people who go through school on the island, there is limited choice, and that choice is often to move away to Cardiff or England. Meanwhile, the island becomes even more dependent on seasonal tourism. No wonder Ynys Môn has one of the lowest gross value added rates in the UK.

Most recently, the announcement that the Welsh Government will not pursue their plans for a third bridge to the island has made our maritime infrastructure even more important. There are two bridges to the island: the Menai suspension bridge is 200 years old and access to it is restricted for safety reasons, and the Britannia bridge is a single carriageway that regularly congests and closes in high winds. Those road infrastructure challenges are a real concern for businesses looking at the island for future operations. They significantly restrict the opportunities for Ynys Môn to achieve its economic potential.

In the light of the decision by the Welsh Government, we have no alternative but to maximise the opportunities offered by our sea routes and maritime infrastructure. I cannot bear to see such wasted potential, and we must do everything we can to ensure there are good-quality, well-paid jobs on Anglesey. That is how we stop our young people leaving, maintain the proud heritage of the Welsh language and preserve our local heritage. The catalyst for bringing those jobs is a freeport. It would give businesses the green light they need: the confirmation that the UK and Welsh Governments are serious about attracting investment to the island.

There is an incredibly strong case for the Governments to make Anglesey the first Welsh freeport, not least because the solution to making serious progress towards meeting the UK's net zero objectives or addressing reduced post-Brexit trade flows is right there on Ynys Môn. Anglesey stands on the brink of becoming a centre of excellence for energy production, and freeport status would only boost its progress towards making that a reality. The waters around Ynys Môn have been identified as some of the best for tidal power projects. Like the Cromarty Firth freeport in Scotland, the island would be a prime location for building, assembling and deploying offshore wind turbines. BP has been given preferred bidder status for its Mona and Morgan offshore wind farms in the Irish sea. It is actively looking for the right location from which to build its base and support operations, and a freeport on Anglesey would be the obvious place.

Companies such as Menter Môn and Minesto are homing in on tidal energy and wave production. Menter Môn owns the lease on the largest consented tidal stream site in the world, which it envisages would generate just under £100 million of inward investment by 2027.

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

Freeport status would enable 60% of that to be retained in the local economy, which would deliver the long-term, high-paid jobs that the people of Anglesey so desperately need.

Then, of course, there is new nuclear at Wylfa, which has been my other main topic over the past few years. Wylfa offers the best new nuclear power site in the UK—possibly the world. It has the potential to power 2 million homes, and it offers to be Wales's biggest single contribution to tackling climate change. Beyond that, the site has the support of local people and would offer 9,000 construction jobs, 900 long-term, permanent, skilled, well-paid careers, and thousands of supply chain roles across north Wales. Companies such as Rolls-Royce SMR, Bechtel, Westinghouse and Last Energy stand ready to turbocharge the nuclear offering on the site.

Home-grown energy will be essential if we are truly to tackle climate change, achieve our 2050 net zero target and protect our energy sovereignty. Anglesey has the ability to upskill the workers of north Wales. Bangor University and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai are working with the bid team to make the most of the opportunities the freeport would bring. Part of that is M-SParc, the first science park in Wales, which focuses on supporting growing local businesses and investing in green energy research and development.

Freeport status would boost our proud trading history. Holyhead port is the second busiest roll-on roll-off port in the UK, which makes it a vital hub for international trade. The freeport would help to increase the activity at the port by revitalising the GB land bridge, whereby goods can move from the island of Ireland to mainland Europe without having to sail around the south coast of Great Britain. In the last few years, the GB land bridge has seen a 20% decline in trade, and a revival of the GB land bridge, ushered in by boosted trade through the freeport, could bring up to £6 billion in trade uplift to the UK economy by 2040. We are working with the likes of Fujitsu on digital trade corridors to ensure the utmost safety and transparency of goods flowing through the port. Analysis by the Centre for Economics and Business Research has shown that the Anglesey freeport could bring up to 13,000 jobs to north Wales over a 15-year period and increase UK GDP by £1 billion by 2030. This Government could provide no clearer signal of their support for the people of north Wales than granting freeport status to Anglesey.

Finally, let me focus on environmental protection and nature restoration.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. In the short time she has been in the House, she has been a very assiduous Member for Ynys Môn and for Wales as a whole. I support her ambition for a freeport in her constituency, and I wish to see similar opportunities for us in Northern Ireland. I know that the debate is about Wales and that the Minister is answering for the Wales Office, and I support the hon. Lady's request for a freeport, but I also request that something similar happens for us in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady agree that, in the levelling-up process, the Government should cast their net wide and ensure that Northern Ireland is part of the freeport strategy?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his support for a freeport. He makes a good point about how important freeports are for levelling up not only Anglesey and Wales but the whole UK. This freeport is significant for what it will do for the GB land bridge and what that will mean for the whole UK.

Finally, I want to focus on environmental protection and nature restoration. The Welsh freeport prospectus includes the condition that any freeports need to meet environmental sustainability objectives. Ynys Môn has a wealth of experience in balancing environmental concerns and economic development. The extensive studies of wildlife in the waters around our island being undertaken by Morlais could be used to establish a detailed baseline for our understanding of the current marine environment so that we can ensure there is no impact on it.

A freeport on Anglesey can be an example of Conservative environmentalism in action: a low-tax, business-focused approach that attracts investment, spurs innovation and promotes growth. It would take full advantage of the benefits Brexit has given us—the Brexit that more than half of my constituents voted for; indeed, more people on Ynys Môn voted for Brexit than for Welsh devolution.

I want to draw my remarks to a close by mentioning the hopeful way in which I have seen political differences put aside to get us where we are today. The Welsh Government have matched the constructive spirit with which the UK Government have brought forward this exciting freeport opportunity for Wales. Members of this House and the Senedd from both sides of the political aisle have come together to show their support for the Anglesey freeport. I am incredibly grateful for that unity, because it shows that what is most important here are the communities of Anglesey and north Wales. In the light of the failure to invest in a third bridge, the future of our communities and children can be secured only through the prosperity that a freeport will bring. *Diolch yn fawr.*

9.41 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers, and to follow the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), who has been making this case very strongly throughout her time in this place.

The decision that the two Governments are set to make on the location of the Welsh freeport is right at the heart of the debate about what a future British economy will look like and of the ambition that the Government have for Britain in the world. It is clear that by backing the Celtic Freeport bid, both Governments would be sending a clear signal that they are not looking backwards or simply managing decline by seeking to make up a bit of missing post-Brexit trade here or restoring a bit of pre-covid demand there; rather, it would show that Britain is truly ready to become a world leader in the green industries of the future.

The Celtic freeport, situated in the ports of Port Talbot and Milford Haven, would bring with it initial business rates exemptions, capital investment exemptions and seed funding that would drive £5.5 billion of inward investment into the local economy. Perhaps even more importantly, it has the potential to bring £54 billion into the supply chain of the vital new renewable technology of floating offshore wind.

The Celtic freeport would sit at the heart of the emerging green ecosystem in south Wales, which is set to play a central part in providing the green, competitive and secure energy supply our country is crying out for. South Wales was the cradle of the first industrial revolution, and we can now be the cradle of the green industrial revolution. The Celtic freeport can drive forward the green technology that will power our domestic, sovereign and sustainable energy supply, drive down household energy bills, support green steel making and, of course, create up to 16,000 new local jobs. The new technology at the heart of this green manufacturing revolution will be floating offshore wind.

The UK has led the world on the mass deployment of offshore wind power generation. Across nearly 50 sites, offshore wind contributes about 13% to the UK electricity mix. No one country—even giants such as China—can touch our footprint, so we have a lot to be proud of. Britain can ill afford to let this new technology of floating offshore turbines pass by, because if we do, we risk falling behind.

Floating offshore wind is a technology whereby wind turbines are attached to floating platforms that are secured by mooring lines and anchored to the seabed to keep them in place. This modern science uses the same technology as wind turbines that are fixed to the seabed to generate electricity, but the floating platforms can be installed in deeper areas of the sea, which frequently have higher wind harvesting potential.

This modern manufacturing renaissance, which will bring a £54 billion supply chain to the heart of Wales's new economy, could drive forward a green ecosystem of sustainable growth and good jobs across Aberavon, Wales and the entire United Kingdom for future generations. Whether people are looking to become welders, electricians, data specialists or marine surveyors, floating offshore wind will create thousands of high-quality, high-skilled jobs right on our doorstep.

The Celtic freeport bid is about prosperity, but it is also about pride. It is, of course, about prosperity for our economy and people, but it is also about pride in our country and community. We can once again lead the world in tackling the major global challenge of the 21st century, namely climate change. For our local communities, it is about taking pride in the fact that their work will contribute to that national and global mission.

The new green ecosystem can also play a critical role in strengthening the backbone of our national economy. The covid pandemic and Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine have turbocharged the need to build resilience into our supply chains. Floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea will be able to generate 24 GW of clean, green, renewable energy by 2045, which is a quarter—an enormous amount—of the UK's total target.

To generate that amount of energy, we will need to build and deploy over 60 turbines a year. Tata Steel estimates that that would require 6 million tonnes of steel between now and 2045. The energy produced through floating offshore wind could then help to produce the green steel that Tata Steel plans to make in its future electric arc furnaces—which will replace the current blast furnace technology—at a lower cost per unit than is possible with the sky-high electricity prices that are currently holding our steel industry back.

The driving purpose of the Celtic freeport bid is to be a force multiplier, catalysing our green economy through floating offshore wind, building our energy security and strengthening our ability to stand on our own two feet by making, buying and selling more in Britain. The Celtic freeport offers one of the biggest opportunities of its type for Wales, which is why I and many hon. Members are backing the bid.

The cross-party support from Members in this place runs broad and deep, from the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb)—my fellow lead on the campaign, to whom I pay tribute—to hon. Members from Plaid Cymru. We also have support from a large number of businesses, ranging from Tata Steel to South Hook, from LanzaTech to SSE Renewables. They can see that the potential for the Celtic freeport bid will be as a platform for floating offshore wind, thus putting Wales at the forefront of the green industrial revolution. They understand that the Celtic freeport is a multi-port solution that builds on the strengths of two of the UK's leading ports—Port Talbot and Milford Haven—to create a green investment corridor.

Combined with the supporting infrastructure, heavy engineering, industrial clusters and skills base along the M4 corridor, as well as the immense connectivity we have along the M4 corridor, our bid has what it takes to be a genuine game changer for our economy and security and in the battle against climate change. The prize is clear: the creation of a new long-term industry, where high-value manufacturing has “Made in Wales” firmly embossed on the tin.

Our ports are playing their part too. Associated British Ports and the Port of Milford Haven have committed to invest £710 million in their green energy-focused ports, while the first phase of construction at Pembroke Dock is already under way, as I am sure the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire will illustrate in his remarks. That port infrastructure will act as a launch pad to help leverage a further £700 million of investment in factories to build the massive renewable sub-structures and turbines.

The decision about the selection of the Celtic freeport is the next vital step to secure this industry for Wales. It will provide the signal to global markets that will be needed if we want to lever in the high-impact private sector investment we need to take us forward. I will continue to make the case, and I hope that local businesses and residents across the Celtic freeport area and beyond will join me in making it. At the stroke of a pen, British and Welsh Ministers can unlock this new industry and repurpose our strengths for a green future. I hope that the UK and Welsh Governments will seize this opportunity. Wales was at the forefront of the first industrial revolution. With the right investment, commitment and decisions, we can put ourselves at the forefront of the net zero revolution.

9.50 am

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). I agreed with pretty much everything he said; thankfully, there is no rule against repetition in this place, so I will proceed with my remarks.

[Stephen Crabb]

First, I would like to put on record my respect and appreciation for my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) for securing this important and timely debate, and for the articulate and energetic way she has championed her constituency and a freeport for Wales. In all seriousness, I do not think Ynys Môn has had a stronger voice in the House of Commons in its history as a constituency. I encourage my hon. Friend in the work she does.

Welsh ports have a long history in helping to shape the economic, social and cultural fabric of Wales, as one would expect from a nation with a coastline in the north, west and south. It is three years since the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs examined the proposal for a freeport in Wales. In our report, we noted the positive response from ports around Wales in the written evidence they gave, often citing the potential role of a freeport in regeneration. However, we argued that to make a lasting contribution to the regeneration of the poorest regions and nations of the UK, including in Wales, freeports should be assessed on the economic and social gains they are forecast to bring to local communities. In our view, freeports could help to revitalise the Welsh economy only when they fit with other policies that help Welsh ports and their local communities to thrive.

We noted that many areas of port policy and supporting infrastructure are either devolved to the Welsh Government or are shared responsibilities between the Welsh and UK Governments. We urge the two Governments to work together constructively, especially if a freeport bid is successful in Wales. Crucially, in our report we urged the UK Government not to cap artificially the number of potential freeport sites in Wales, nor to create a Welsh freeport purely for optical or political purposes.

I am pleased we have got to this hopeful and expectant point to hear the outcome of the bidding process for a freeport in Wales. I congratulate the Wales Office on its role in working with the Welsh Government and Ministers across Whitehall to bring us to the point where there could be agreement. There were moments, certainly three years ago, when some of us on the Welsh Affairs Committee were concerned that we might not get to this point, and that the differences in opinion between Welsh and UK Governments would be so great that the freeport policy would not happen in Wales. I am pleased we are at this point; the role the Wales Office played in that was extremely important.

I obviously have a constituency interest. Pembrokeshire is home to the port of Milford Haven, which is one of the UK's leading energy hubs, hosting a wide range of conventional energy companies such as the Valero oil refinery, the Dragon liquefied natural gas import terminal, South Hook LNG import terminal, the RWE gas-fired power station and the Puma fuel storage site, among others. Those are all located on the Haven waterway. The port of Milford Haven is strategically one of the most important energy hubs in the UK, and the infrastructure it hosts plays a critical role in our national life. Undoubtedly, that port has played an integral role in shaping Pembrokeshire's local economy through the high-quality job opportunities that those energy companies have provided to local people for many generations.

Those industries are changing, and need to change. The hon. Member for Aberavon made the point that recent events have highlighted the need for our energy

mix to diversify, and our demand for home-grown renewable energy has never been greater. Right now we have a unique opportunity to build on that heritage and the excellent skillset in Pembrokeshire to use vacant brownfield sites for the new and exciting energy revolution that is just in front of us.

The port of Milford Haven is in prime position to shift from being one of the UK's leading conventional energy hubs to being one of the UK's leading renewable energy hubs. The decarbonisation of Wales's primary industrial cluster, which stretches from Milford Haven all the way to Port Talbot and further east across the south Wales coast, is the prize in front of us. That decarbonisation has already begun, as we have already heard this morning, and will make a significant contribution to helping the UK meet its net zero targets.

In 2019 the Conservative party stood on a manifesto to deliver at least one freeport in Wales. Fast-forward four years and the necessary steps have been taken to ensure that that ambition becomes a reality. The Welsh and the UK Governments will jointly evaluate bids and select a freeport for Wales in early spring. As we know, for politicians "early spring" can mean anything, but I hope that it means in the days and weeks ahead. We have a prime opportunity, if the Government want to take it with St David's Day just around the corner, for a really significant announcement that would make a difference for people and communities across Wales. We therefore expect to receive confirmation of the winning bid imminently.

I want to briefly put on the record why I think the Celtic freeport bid should be the frontrunner in this race—it is a competitive process. The Celtic freeport bid is a private-public sector partnership led by Associated British Ports, Neath Port Talbot Council, Pembrokeshire County Council, and the port of Milford Haven. The bid has been backed by prominent businesses across Wales as well as numerous MPs from all parties and Members of the Senedd as well, demonstrating the evolution of a collective consensus that is necessary to drive forward the Celtic freeport vision. The bid goes far beyond party political lines, with a broad recognition of the wide-ranging benefits that the Celtic freeport will bring to Pembrokeshire, Port Talbot and the whole of south Wales. That is why I have been working so closely with the hon. Member for Aberavon to help build momentum behind that important bid.

It was encouraging to see so many MP colleagues from across different parties attend our recent drop-in event to hear more about the exciting potential of the bid. I was delighted that so many of my colleagues put pen to paper that day to confirm their backing for it. If we are awarded freeport status, more than £5 billion of new investment will be unlocked, potentially creating more than 16,000 new high-quality green jobs across the south and west Wales economy. Furthermore, securing freeport status across the key sites of Milford Haven and Port Talbot will enable them to begin their journey towards energy diversification through, as we have already heard, the emergence of the new floating offshore wind technology.

As I explained in my debate on floating offshore wind in this Chamber last October, offshore floating wind represents a major, exciting new opportunity for the UK to tackle pressing issues: jobs and skills regeneration, wholesale energy prices, energy security, levelling up

and, as I have said, net zero targets. The UK Government have set ambitious targets to deliver floating offshore wind in the years ahead, and both Milford Haven and Port Talbot have already been identified by leading developers as key locations for the early development of this new industry for Wales. Hopefully Milford Haven will be a hub for operations and maintenance, with Port Talbot at the forefront of assembly and manufacture.

The potential to unlock a UK market in the construction, maintenance and operations of floating offshore wind projects could be worth more than £54 billion in the decades ahead. That is the prize in front of us. It is clear that the establishment of a freeport across the sites at Milford Haven and Port Talbot will enable this exciting renewable vision to flourish. The war in Ukraine, coupled with rising energy prices, has underlined the urgent need for the UK to become less energy dependent. The need to diversify our energy mix has never been more apparent as the dial shifts to the development of green, sustainable energy. Floating offshore wind represents the next big renewable opportunity for Wales. With the expertise and heritage in the Milford Haven waterway, and the skillset and industry in Port Talbot, these two locations at the heart of the Celtic freeport bid are ideally suited to supporting the industrial-scale deployment of floating offshore wind.

Freeport status would be hugely advantageous in that process as it would allow this new green vision to flourish, with the tax breaks, simplified customs procedures and streamlined planning processes helping to ease the transition from conventional to renewable energy. In turn, there is a potentially enormous investment to be unlocked in the supply chain, and that is the prize here. The UK has made enormous progress in the fixed-bottom offshore wind industry and has taken strides in expanding that deployment, but the one thing that did not happen in was we did not create strong domestic content for the UK. We did not capture a bigger share of the full economic value of offshore wind as we should have done. We now have the opportunity with floating offshore wind to get it right and to deploy these structures to give us clean energy in a way that creates long-term jobs and training opportunities in our communities.

Stephen Kinnock: The right hon. Member is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is vital that the Crown Estate sets up a licensing process that guarantees localised supply chains and that there should be penalty clauses in the process, so that developers will be held to account?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point. He is absolutely right that the Crown Estate must ensure those contracts have teeth. That will be crucial to ensuring that developers deliver on their commitments because, as he knows, it is one thing for them to speak to us politicians and tell us about all the good things they will do in our communities, but actually making sure they do them when push comes to shove is another.

The other part of the equation is ensuring that we get the contracts for difference right and ensuring that the financial architecture around floating offshore wind is the right one to enable that investment in the UK and Welsh economies. Of course, there is a potential first-mover advantage waiting for the nation that makes the biggest and earliest strides to deploy floating offshore wind at

an industrial scale. The Welsh Affairs Committee was recently in the US and met with a floating offshore wind developer there who was also looking to develop in the Celtic sea. They have secured seabed leases off the coast of New York and in California. There is a global race to be the first nation to see serious industrial-scale deployment of offshore wind, and I believe it should be Wales and the UK that does that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Wales, indeed. Does the right hon. Gentleman join me in wondering whether Wales would be able to put better procurement requirements in place and ensure that the benefits are accrued more effectively to Wales if the Crown Estate, as in Scotland, was devolved to Wales?

Stephen Crabb: It pains me to disagree with the right hon. Lady, but the debate about devolving the Crown Estate is a red herring. It is a question that I have explored with potential developers and something I have discussed with the Crown Estate and other potential players in this field. That will not be the critical intervention to ensuring this vision is realised in the way that we all hope. I appreciate some of the arguments she is making about the devolution of the Crown Estate, and she has made them articulately before in this Chamber, but, as I say, it is something of a red herring.

The freeport intervention would be a critical intervention in helping to unleash and launch this new, exciting industry for Wales. I hope that when the UK Government and the Welsh Government sit down together to assess the bids, they will look at the strength of the industrial proposition behind the Celtic freeport bid. I grew up in Wales and have been a politician in Wales long enough to have seen a lot of failures of economic development around Wales. So much public money has been thrown at different schemes and interventions over the years—so often they seem to have the word “park” in them: food park, science park, tech park and so on—that never really achieve the vision and potential that politicians hoped for when they were spending taxpayers’ money because very often there is no real substance behind them.

I hope that in making this freeport intervention, the Government recognise that they need to work with the grain of the private sector and industry and recognise where real, substantial projects are already starting to happen—in Port Talbot, the port of Pembroke and Milford Haven—and capture that and work with it. That is what will deliver real economic and social benefits for our communities in the way that freeports are intended to do. If the UK Government want to improve our energy security, help us to take a big step towards meeting our net zero ambitions and invest in creating good-quality jobs and training opportunities in our constituencies—that is the essence of levelling up and rebalancing the economy, as it would mean that young people do not have to leave their communities in Wales to work elsewhere, allowing them to stay and be part of those communities, to build and to raise their children there—they will recognise the strength of the Celtic freeport bid and what it proposes. I really hope that the Government take this opportunity and give us the freeport status that we are looking for to help to create this new industrial revolution.

10.6 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. It is also an honour to follow my friends, the hon. Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). It will probably be noticed that I am the only Member present not representing a constituency that would be directly affected by these freeports, although I have a professional interest in Holyhead, where I used to be a news reporter, and a family interest in Milford Haven, where my daughter works for the tug companies.

I was very interested in what the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire said about the significance of freeports for the economic, social and cultural fabric of Wales. As I have the opportunity now to respond, I must take issue with what he said about the Crown Estates. What we have seen much in Wales is a history of extraction from our resources and infrastructure. If the Crown Estates were devolved to Wales, we in Wales would have far more control over the nature of supply lines and procurement and what we choose to emphasise, in the way that Scotland does in Scotland. The way that something has always been done in the past may not actually reflect the best that we can do in the future. Historically, we have seen that loss. The first places that lose out on economic development in Wales have historically been the furthest west, as well.

Alongside the co-working happening here, there is a different sort of co-working happening already in Wales with the Welsh Government aspect of the freeport programme. I would like to put a couple of things on the record to show how different what is happening in Wales is, because it is important for us to be aware of that. The prospectus that initiated the 12-week bidding process—published back in September—included a commitment that a freeport or freeports in Wales would operate in a manner that aligns with the Welsh Government's policies on fair work and social partnership, where

“workers are fairly rewarded, heard and represented, and can progress in a secure, healthy, and inclusive working environment, where their rights as workers are respected.”

TUC Cymru also welcomes the involvement of trade union representation in the governance of freeports in Wales. Can the Minister say what estimate there is of the impact of national insurance variations within freeport development zones and how that might play out against the Welsh Government's views and stated intentions on how freeports should operate?

The freeport development proposed for Holyhead is also the result of a long-term partnership between Stena, the ferry company, and Cyngor Ynys Môn. Stena, of course, is the harbour authority for Holyhead. The Senedd Member for Ynys Môn, Rhun ap Iorwerth, raised the discrepancy between the initial offer of £8 million in seed funding for the Welsh freeports and the £26 million for freeports in England, which ensured that the funding level was on the Welsh Government's agenda. We now have a commitment that freeports in Wales will be funded to the tune of £26 million.

The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire mentioned that he was concerned that there might be “optical or political purposes” in proposing two freeports for Wales. I think that it is essential to have viable ongoing projects for two freeports in Wales.

Stephen Crabb: Just to clarify, that remark about “optical or political purposes” was a quote from the Welsh Affairs Committee report. It was not just a personal opinion.

Liz Saville Roberts: I stand corrected and welcome that, but I think there is a really important question here for the Minister, and I press him for a response. My understanding is that for Wales to have two freeports, two exceptional cases have to be made. Now that we appear to be approaching the time when announcements are going to be made, it is important to know what constitutes an exceptional case, because we have two communities—three if we include Port Talbot—that have great expectations. Can the Minister clarify whether the bids are being assessed by both the Welsh and UK Governments? Will the Welsh Government have a meaningful say on whether the two bids meet the requirements? I would appreciate a response on that. Given the initial revelation that a lower level of funding was being allocated for a freeport in Wales, if both freeport applications are successful, will they both receive £26 million in initial funding?

Virginia Crosbie: The right hon. Member is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is going to be £25 million, plus the £1 million—not only in Wales, but in Scotland? In addition, there has been a one-year delay while the deliberations have gone on. This means that we have lost out on potential investment and skills that could have been transformational not only to Wales, but to the wider economy.

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree; this is a critical part of levelling up. One of my personal interests in this is support for communities in the far west. Next, I will look at some of the concerns that have been expressed in relation to displacement and freeports per se. The fact that these applications are in the far west is possibly beneficial—as long as we know the details—to other areas around those freeports, so it is important.

There are concerns for north Wales, given that the Liverpool city region has been granted a freeport. I would be interested to know whether the UK Government have made an assessment of the likely impact on the north Wales economy of the possibility of displacement to the east, and the significance of that for decisions on the two freeport bids. Bearing in mind that we have had the terrible news that the 2 Sisters meat processing factory in Llangefni is due to close, with the loss of 700 jobs—I understand that many of those jobs are located in Gwynedd, so they are within my own home county—what assessment has been made of displacement, in favour of or as a risk to other counties that could be affected by development? There are concerns here, and it is due diligence for us to know what assessment has been made of them, particularly in relation to Liverpool but also locally in relation to Anglesey. What pros and cons have been put forward?

Much has been made of the freeport bids in Wales and how they could play a critical role in accelerating the renewables revolution, but we must remember that freeports are not the only aspect. The UK Government should make it clear that energy security is a priority. Can the Minister guarantee that they will work alongside the Welsh Government with areas whose bids have not been successful, to make sure that they receive strategic investment, too? The very fact that a bid has been made shows that a need has been recognised.

My next question is about governance and monitoring. We have heard that the parameters for bids are different in England and Wales, with the emphasis in Wales being on meeting the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 on social partnership and on safeguards for the environment and workers' rights. How will the UK Government work with the Welsh Government to realise that? Those are very worthy goals, and they make it easier for me and for my party to stand here and support the bids, but I want to know how they are going to move ahead.

I have a question on the national grid. In its report on the grid in Wales, the Welsh Affairs Committee warned that we in Wales would be unable to realise our full renewables potential without expanding grid capacity. The Government refused in their response to commit to undertaking an assessment of current grid capacity in Wales. In recognition of the fact that the lack of a fully functioning grid will undermine any freeports in Wales, will the Minister look again at delivering the Welsh Affairs Committee's recommendations on the national grid? It is critical to future developments in both projects.

To close, I will emphasise the bid in Holyhead and Ynys Môn, which is the closest one to my constituency. Great Britain's land bridge has lost 20% of its trade, and that is down to Brexit, which has had a direct effect on the economy of Ynys Môn. It is recognised that that link is important to Holyhead, Ynys Môn, north Wales and the whole United Kingdom. The degree of partnership between the hon. Member for Ynys Môn; the local authority, Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn; the port authority, Stena; and the north Wales Senedd Members—there was cross-party representation in a letter that they wrote yesterday to Vaughan Gething, the Minister for the Economy in Wales—shows that there is co-ordination and a real desire for co-working in these projects. Fundamentally, the Welsh economy, our communities and our young people deserve and need the two projects to move ahead to see the best benefit for Wales.

10.16 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers, and to speak on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. She started the debate with characteristic vigour and passion, which set the tone for a series of excellent contributions from colleagues.

On the hon. Lady's point about Holyhead, we are all aware of its totemic role in north Wales, Wales more generally and the whole of the UK, and we all have concerns about the challenges it faces in relation to trade. She made the case for its exciting future, and that is where we need to move the conversation. She and her colleagues have clearly built a strong coalition at home. Whether through this process or others, they ought to have the power and resources to shape Holyhead's future so it can continue to be a crucial part of the UK.

The hon Lady's point about this being a levelling-up issue was pertinent. Perhaps I would say that as shadow levelling-up Minister; I see levelling up everywhere. However, the test will be whether young people in her community and her part of Wales feel they do not have to move to Cardiff, London or the rest of England.

That will show us whether we have delivered for them through this process and through levelling-up more generally.

The debate became a de facto freeport hustings, and Port Talbot and Milford Haven were also well represented. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) that this is not about single project interventions here and there to add a bit of lost GDP or gross value added in different parts of our nations and regions. It has to be much more fundamental. We need to re-gear our nation's economy around the things that we do well and where we can compete globally, and it is clear that he and his colleagues are using the Celtic freeport bid to do that. I agree with his point that the green industrial revolution is where we need to focus. His community is clearly a long way down the road when it comes to floating offshore wind, and there is real potential in that.

Renewables, including floating offshore wind, are a way to tackle our three domestic crises: the cost of living, regional inequalities and reaching net zero. They will help us to add skilled jobs to our economy so that people have long, viable careers; to spread opportunities more fairly around our nations and regions; and to protect our planet. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon and his colleagues have clearly put a lot of thought into doing that with the Celtic freeport bid. As the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) mentioned, the plans change will that community, which we may associate with energy generation methods from the past, into a place of energy generation for the future.

The exchange between the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on the Crown Estate was important. Having had similar conversations with the right hon. Gentleman, I know that it has levelling up at the forefront of its mind. It is important that we write that into the way in which future transactions are done. Perhaps that is a debate for another day; but I know they will have listened to our debate with interest. That test really must be passed.

The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire alluded to a point raised in the Welsh Affairs Committee about not doing things for "optical or political purposes". That is important, too; it is a challenge to us all. One of the most dangerous arguments in politics is that something must be done. Doing anything is something, but what our constituents want and need is for us to do meaningful things, based on a sober look at the reality and the evidence. In relation to the levelling-up fund, we have had plenty of conversations in the last two weeks about bids and single interventions, where we almost compete with each other. In such situations, some will go away happy because they have won, in the broadest sense, but others will go home disappointed because they have not got anything. I want to move away from that, because levelling up, and our nation's economic future more generally, is for me about the devolution of power and resources to local communities to shape their own places. It is not about feast-or-famine, cup-final individual interventions, which can become a bit optical or a bit political. We need to move beyond that.

I want to make a few points of my own. It is important to state that freeports and the freeports programme are not, in and of themselves, a panacea for tackling the

[Alex Norris]

challenging picture of economic growth across all our nations and regions. Sometimes I wince when I hear freeports mentioned as an example of how communities have been levelled up, as if the mere existence of a freeport has done that. Freeports do not automatically lead to more jobs, better skills and wider prosperity unless—this is what we have heard in both the cases that we have discussed today—they are seen as part of a broader national, regional or sub-regional economic strategy for the area in question. Otherwise, they are just more single interventions.

It will be important and constructive for all of us in this place to have a tight eye on the evidence of the impact of freeports. We know that the risk is that they do not bring additionality but instead result in displacement, as the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd has said. We need to have an honest conversation about that. Nevertheless, such decisions are fundamentally for local communities to make. As has been set out in “Prosperity for All” and by colleagues today, Wales has outstanding economic potential, whether that is in foundation sectors such as food and tourism, or in harnessing our location for import and export, and, in particular, in clean energy. That is a promising economic outlook.

The Welsh Government need to work in concert with local authorities and communities, which are clearly ready, able and waiting to deliver. The question for us in this place is how we get the right powers and resources out of here to them, to allow them to do so. I do not want to dwell too much on the history, but the initial knockings of this debate between the UK and the Welsh Governments did not offer a particularly solid demonstration of the devolution settlement. I think we would all have struggled with the idea that the UK Government could impose a freeport without putting the backing in; that would not have been a good thing. Happily, cooler heads have prevailed, and the two Governments have negotiated two important things: the non-repayable starter funding for the freeports established in Wales on a similar footing to deals in England; and the agreement that both Governments will act as a partnership of equals, and, as the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd said, in a manner that works with the Welsh Government’s policies on fair work and environmental sustainability, including the commitment to net zero. That provides a bedrock of certainty for the people of Wales and their business leaders to allow them to plan for the future.

The Minister has an unenviable job of arbitrating between the multiple bids on offer, or perhaps choosing them all. I suspect that today might not be the day to make that decision. However, I hope to hear from him a commitment that, fundamentally, yes, this is about the UK Government taking a view, but it is also about giving the people of Wales—whether it is north Wales, south Wales or anywhere else—the tools and the resources to decide their economic future, take a hard look at what they are good at and where they are going to be good in the future, and build out from that. We see our role here as enablers of that, rather than deciders. That is hugely important, and I look forward to the Minister’s contribution.

10.25 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to make the winding-up speech in a Westminster Hall debate for the first time.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing the debate—I know how hard she works for the island—and thank other Members for articulating their views. Happily, we have heard a range of opinion, from north Wales and from south Wales, in support of the Anglesey bid and the Celtic freeport bid. For balance, there is a third bid in Wales, centred around Newport.

We have had an excellent debate, and I am pleased to have the chance to set out the opportunities being created by the freeports programme in Wales, as well as how it, along with other UK Government support and investments, will help to level up communities the length and breadth of the UK. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said last month, the Government are committed to ensuring that the benefits of economic development are felt everywhere—not just in London and the south-east, but across the UK. The Government intend to do that by spreading opportunities more equally across the country, empowering local leaders and bringing left-behind communities up to the level of more prosperous areas.

In that regard, freeports are already playing a key role in creating hundreds of thousands of jobs across the UK and helping to drive economic growth by attracting investment to their local areas and regions. Our new freeports programme in Wales, which is being delivered with the Welsh Government and backed by £26 million, of which £25 million is seed capital and £1 million Government support, will help us to make the vision a reality.

The freeports programme is one of the core parts of the Government’s levelling-up agenda, and it will look to incentivise private businesses to invest in new opportunities in Wales. We have worked constructively with the Welsh Government to design a bespoke freeports model that will deliver for Wales. It will make the most of the unique opportunities in Wales, which will ultimately benefit businesses, ports and communities across Wales.

The Wales freeports model is based on three main objectives: promoting regeneration and high-quality job creation, establishing at least one freeport as a hub for global trade and investment across the economy, and fostering an innovative environment. Freeports are magnets for investment, and businesses located in freeports will benefit from a generous package of measures comprising tax reliefs, customs advantages, business rate relief, innovation, and trade and investment support. Those tools, paired with the ambitious £26 million of public investment in seed funding, will unlock much-needed investment and high-quality jobs not just for businesses located in the freeport, but for the surrounding areas and regions.

The freeports programme will drive forward our ambitions for Wales to compete at a global level while creating new high-skill, high-wage and local jobs, putting Welsh communities on the path to long-term growth and prosperity. The freeport programme in Wales will, once the competitive process concludes, join the freeports in England and the green freeports in Scotland to help to deliver the UK Government’s levelling-up ambitions.

The operational freeports in England are already delivering jobs and investment across local areas such as Plymouth, Solent and Teesside. The newest operational freeports—the Liverpool city region freeport and freeport east, announced at the end of last year—will also drive investment and industrial growth to deliver thousands of skilled jobs for local communities and regions.

The process in Wales is well under way and I, like many others, look forward to the benefits the programme can bring to communities in Wales. We and the Welsh Government have committed to delivering at least one freeport in Wales, and we both remain open to considering the designation of an additional freeport if there are sufficient exceptional bids. Unfortunately, as we are still in a competitive process for Wales, I am unable to comment on individual applications. However, I look forward to seeing the outcome of the competition process and thank all those who developed the bids submitted in Wales.

I very much welcome the contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn powerfully articulated her arguments for the Anglesey freeport. She focused on net zero, the need to boost trade flows, energy and, of course, jobs.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about Northern Ireland. He is no longer in his place, but I should say that discussions about extending the freeport programme to Northern Ireland are ongoing.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) spoke about green energy—in particular, his desire to see the success of the floating offshore wind agenda—and energy security. My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) echoed those comments. He particularly wanted to highlight the importance of job opportunities, energy companies in his patch, and the decarbonisation of the industrial cluster in his part of the world. He, too, spoke about floating offshore wind and the importance of the supply chain.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) kindly presented me with a lengthy list of questions, which I will do my best to answer. First, she asked about national insurance. Freeports will introduce secondary class 1 NI contributions relief for eligible employers on the earnings of eligible employees working at a freeport tax site. I am happy to find out further detail for her in due course if she writes or speaks to me.

I welcomed the right hon. Lady's general support for the concept of freeports and having as many as possible in Wales. She highlighted her long-standing view that the Crown Estate should be devolved. Particularly in the Celtic sea, the opportunities for floating offshore wind relate also to south-west England, not just Wales, so my personal view is that breaking up the Crown Estate would not assist in that endeavour.

The right hon. Lady asked what constitutes an exceptional case. Essentially, the process is being judged equally by officials in the Welsh Government and the UK Government, and Ministers in both Governments will have equal decision-making powers. It is for them to judge the exceptionality of the cases based on what is submitted to them, but all will become clear in due course.

The right hon. Lady asked whether, were there to be more than one freeport, there would be two or more allocations of the £26 million. I can tell her that yes,

that is the intention. She asked about the freeport in Liverpool. As she knows, Growth Track 360 held a reception here yesterday. Liverpool is of course an important element of the north-east Wales economy, and success in Liverpool's economy benefits north-east Wales, so I urge her to bear that in mind.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful for the Minister's explanations and responses to my questions. It is worth putting on the record that Liverpool will have an effect on the whole of north Wales, along the A55 and into Ynys Môn. That is another argument for a counterbalance in the north-west for Caerdybi, because that will, I hope, see developments across the north-west of Wales and into other counties, such as Gwynedd and Conwy.

Dr Davies: In many respects, the right hon. Member is making the case for investment across north Wales and into Anglesey. The agenda to upgrade infrastructure to link in with the north-west of England is also important to benefit north Wales. I hope that I covered most of her questions; should she have others, I am happy to answer them.

Liz Saville Roberts: There was one other question about reconsidering grid capacity in Wales. I would be grateful for a response to that.

Dr Davies: The right hon. Member makes a good point. Clearly, the Welsh Affairs Committee has considered these issues in detail. They are important to me, and the role of the Wales Office is to liaise with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, as it is now called, to ensure that grid capacity meets aspirations. I assure her that I hope to have that influence.

Stephen Crabb: I reiterate the point that the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) made about grid capacity. If we read in detail the evidence received by the Welsh Affairs Committee, we see that it is very clear that when it comes to investment in the grid, business as usual is simply not going to cut it. I appreciate that the Government are making efforts to secure more timely investment, but if we are to meet the targets and aspirations we have been talking about, we need to see a sea change.

Dr Davies: I take that point on very much board and thank my right hon. Friend for all his efforts in that regard.

Let me take the opportunity to outline other core elements of the Government's levelling-up agenda. Wales is front and centre of our plans to level up the whole of the UK, and areas across Wales are already benefiting from more than £1.7 billion of local growth funding. From large-scale transport improvements to regenerating town centres and refurbishing cultural assets, the levelling-up fund will deliver lasting improvements in local communities across Wales, giving people renewed pride in their local areas. Ynys Môn alone is receiving £17 million from the levelling-up fund for the cultural regeneration of Holyhead town centre. I was pleased to visit a few weeks ago and see the efforts being made to ensure that people who use the port see all that Holyhead has to offer.

In total, the Government are investing more than £208 million in 11 projects across Wales through the second round of the LUF. That is almost 10% of the total UK allocation and builds on the £120 million that

[*Dr James Davies*]

the Government invested in Wales in the first round of the fund. It is far more than Wales would have received through a Barnettised formula and is testament to the dedicated work of local authorities across Wales, which developed high-quality applications. The Government are also investing more than £790 million in Wales's four city and regional growth deals. The deals are starting to deliver real change on the ground, from the Swansea Arena to investment in the digital signalling processing centre at Bangor University.

Furthermore, £2.6 billion has been allocated to places across the UK through the UK shared prosperity fund. Of that, £585 million has been allocated to Wales, including more than £126 million for north Wales. This trailblazing new approach to investment and the empowerment of local communities to level up and build pride in place will see direct investment in three local priorities: communities and place; support for local businesses; and people and skills. The funding is now in the hands of Wales's four regional partnerships, through which local leaders are empowered to decide how best to invest the funding to better promote local growth, help to regenerate local economies and build a better future.

Stephen Kinnock: We are in danger of going down an SPF rabbit hole rather than discussing freeports, but as the Minister raised the SPF, I cannot resist. May I ring an alarm bell? As we head towards March 2025, when the long tail of European funding will tail off, there is going to be a cliff edge. Organisations that are delivering what is currently a sort of hybrid of EU and SPF funding are terrified that their projects will collapse, and have not had enough lead time to plan. Can I mark the Minister's card in respect of the ticking time bomb with regard to the SPF? If he could look at a more flexible way of conducting the comprehensive spending review that does not have the arbitrary March 2025 deadline, that would salvage the programme. If he does not do that, we are in danger of seeing some difficult decisions having to be made in the very near future.

Dr Davies: I thank the hon. Member for raising his concerns about the shared prosperity fund. He will know that very large sums of money are being allocated

through local authorities, and I hope he is having some input into that process in his own area, as I am in mine, and articulating his concerns, to ensure that projects that he feels are in need of support and protection in that respect get the hearing that they need.

I will move on from the SPF to conclude this excellent debate by again thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn for securing it. She is a champion for Ynys Môn on issues from the freeport bid to nuclear and green energy and transport connectivity. I know how important it is to her to see well-paid jobs on the island and to provide good reasons for young people to stay on Anglesey. I would welcome the opportunity to have further conversations with my hon. Friend about freeports in Wales once the competitive process concludes. Of course, that invitation extends to all right hon. and hon. Members.

10.41 am

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to hold this debate and all those who have spoken. I think we would all agree that we have had some excellent speeches, as well as the Minister's full response.

There are three freeport bids in Wales: two in the south and one in the north. We have heard about two of them this morning—the Celtic freeport and the Anglesey freeport. There are eight freeports in England and two in Scotland, and there is to be at least one in Wales, so it is a really exciting time. A decision is expected early in the spring.

In conclusion, I sincerely hope that we will all be back here in Westminster Hall this time next year speaking in a debate with the title, “Welsh freeports: delivering levelling up, delivering net zero and delivering the green revolution”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freeport proposals for Wales.

10.42 am

Sitting suspended.

Missing Person Case: Cathryn Holdsworth

11 am

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I will call Holly Lynch to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the missing person case of Cathryn Holdsworth.

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. Cathryn was a 72-year-old woman who went missing in September 2017 from the Illingworth area of Halifax. As the investigation into her disappearance is now into its sixth year, I have secured this debate in order to once again raise the profile of her case in the hope that someone somewhere knows something and comes forward to share information. It is difficult to talk today about the case of a missing woman without sending our heartfelt condolences to the family of Nicola Bulley. I cannot begin to imagine what they are going through. I am sure all Members will want to join me in letting her loved ones know that they are very much in our thoughts.

Cathryn Holdsworth lived alone and almost always left the house with the assistance of a walking frame. She had numerous ailments that required her to take regular medication. She is 5 feet 2 inches, of medium build, with what has been described as very short, speckled grey hair. The last confirmed sighting of Cathryn was captured on closed circuit television on Saturday 9 September 2017 as she entered the Tesco store in Halifax town centre. Police know that she used a bus pass to head towards home. CCTV from the bus was unavailable, so could not confirm exactly where Cathryn got off the bus. However, it is assumed that she reached home because her coat, ear muffs and walking frame that she was using in the CCTV footage were found inside her property.

In the following days Cathryn's neighbours were asked to take delivery of a parcel for Cathryn when a delivery driver could not get an answer at her address. The neighbours grew increasingly concerned when they could not reach Cathryn over a number of days. They officially reported her missing to the police on 19 September 2017. That leaves a window of 10 days in which Cathryn could have gone missing. I spoke to Cathryn's neighbours ahead of this debate today and they gave me a strong sense of a woman who was vulnerable. She had had falls in the house previously and often wore an alarm around her neck to alert help if she needed it. They felt it was highly unlikely that she would have left the house without the aid of her walking frame, which was still inside the house.

Police have undertaken extensive work to search her home address and the surrounding area for any signs of Cathryn, but it has not provided any answers. There have been public appeals for information, including social media campaigns, as well as bank, phone and CCTV inquiries, which have generated some lines of inquiry but ultimately no conclusions. Cathryn is understood to have had links to Blackpool and Cornwall,

and appeals for information have been shared in those areas. She also has links to Brighouse in the neighbouring constituency to Halifax, where she lived for a number of years and owns a property.

In May 2020 the appeal to find Cathryn was relaunched. Detective Inspector Clare Turner said:

"Whilst considerable time has passed since Cathryn's disappearance, we are still continuing our efforts to find her. We know Cathryn had previous links to Blackpool in Lancashire and Cornwall. However...I would ask for this appeal to be shared far and wide in order to reach as many people as possible. Our number one priority is Cathryn's welfare; we believe her to be vulnerable and we are continuing to appeal"

for anyone with information to get in contact.

I want to thank those who have worked on the investigation, with special thanks to Detective Chief Inspector Samantha Lindsay, Detective Inspector Jarrod McSharry and Inspector Jim Graham for their assistance in preparing for this speech. I also thank two of Cathryn's neighbours, Muriel and Martina, who spoke to me ahead of today to help me build up a better understanding of Cathryn and the timeline leading up to her disappearance.

The Minister will appreciate that, unlike on other occasions, I am not looking to him for answers in this debate. However, I hope that in advance of today's debate his officials have had the opportunity to speak to West Yorkshire police about the investigation and that he will join me in urging the public to share information about Cathryn and to think back to 2017, and for anyone who might know anything about her disappearance or who is able to offer information that might assist the investigation to come forward so that we might finally be able to find Cathryn.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing a debate on this case. I am aware of it, having done some research before I came down. I commend her determination on behalf this lady. Does she agree that the case of this vulnerable missing lady is not only heartbreaking, but reveals a clear failure in procedures and systems across the board that need to be challenged and, ultimately, changed? Will the hon. Lady urge the Minister to use this opportunity and example to prevent further cases such as this? This case is horrendous and terrible, but it should lead to a change that makes it easier for others in future.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention. He is always so diligent in his participation in these debates. He makes an incredibly important point. I have had the opportunity to speak to police officers and those investigating this case, and have put pressing questions to them. I am satisfied that all lines of inquiry have been and are being investigated.

When researching for this debate, I was struck by how many missing people are still out there. There are still so many investigations without conclusions as to the whereabouts of lots of vulnerable people. It is absolutely right that we continue to ensure that the specialist training and resources are there to support those investigations, so that we can bring closure and place a spotlight on those really difficult cases where we still need to do so much for finances. The hon. Member is right to make that point.

It falls to me to say that, if people have further information they would like to share with the police, I urge them to call 101 and ask to speak to Calderdale

[Holly Lynch]

criminal investigation department, or to email calderdale.npt@westyorkshire.police.uk. I urge everybody to take part in sharing information about this campaign, in the hope that we can finally shed some light on what has happened to Cathryn.

11.7 am

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

It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I start by thanking and congratulating the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on securing this debate on what is, as she said, a particularly poignant topic, given the tragic death of Nicola Bulley. I wish to repeat the hon. Lady's sentiments in sending our sympathies, condolences and thoughts to Nicola's family at what must be an extremely difficult and distressing time.

I also fully echo and endorse the hon. Lady's sentiments in encouraging members of the public who may have information about Cathryn's disappearance to come forward, dial 101 and contact Calderdale CID. If people do not want to contact the police directly, they can contact Crimestoppers and provide information anonymously. I fully echo her plea and appeal to the public to come forward with any information they might have.

In response to the hon. Lady's question, I can confirm that Home Office officials have been in contact with West Yorkshire police about this case relatively recently. As she said, West Yorkshire police have been energetically trying to identify where Cathryn may be, but have so far been unable to locate her, in what is clearly a very distressing case.

Beyond repeating the hon. Lady's plea for the public to come forward with information, it is worth saying, partly in response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that we are concerned to ensure that missing persons in general are found. The police have an important role to play in that, but identifying missing persons, particularly those with vulnerabilities—as they do in many cases, including Cathryn—has to be a multi-agency response. The hon. Lady may have had discussions about this with Catherine Hankinson, the deputy chief constable for West Yorkshire, who happens to be the National Police Chiefs' Council's lead for

missing persons. Deputy Chief Constable Hankinson is clear that close collaboration is critical. Investigating officers will often need input from other agencies, such as health and social care, to build a picture around the missing individual. As part of the work in this area, the National Police Chiefs' Council has published a missing adults framework, which sets out a blueprint for how such multi-agency work should take place.

In her response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford, the hon. Lady rightly talked about the need for proper training for police officers in this specialist area. The Home Office is funding the College of Policing's training for senior officers and staff who work on public protection and safeguarding issues, which include missing persons cases, as well as the vulnerability knowledge and practice programme, which identifies and shares best practice across all forces. Those programmes are designed to help leaders and frontline professionals understand the complexity, sensitivity and risk involved in this area of work.

There has been some recent legislation in this area: the Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017, which gives families and friends the ability to manage and protect a missing person's property, and the Presumption of Death Act 2013, which enables families to have closure in cases of very long-term missing loved ones. There is training and best practice work through the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council to ensure that best practice is being followed.

It remains only for me to repeat the plea that the hon. Member for Halifax made in her excellent speech: if anyone in West Yorkshire, Halifax or anywhere more widely has information about Cathryn or any missing people—the vast majority are found within 28 days, but there are people who are not found and are still missing—they should contact the police or, if they want to do it anonymously, Crimestoppers. The public also have a role to play in helping the authorities to identify missing people, who can then be looked after in the appropriate way. I am grateful for the opportunity to make that point, and I thank the hon. Lady again for raising this extremely distressing and important case.

Question put and agreed to.

11.12 am

Sitting suspended.

Childcare: Affordability and Availability

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Petitions Committee of Session 2021-22, Impact of Covid-19 on new parents: one year on, HC 479, and the Government response, HC 1132; First Report of the Petitions Committee of Session 2019-21, The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave, HC 526, and the Government response, HC 770; e-petition 580137, Offer 15hrs free childcare for multiples under 3 years; e-petition 586700, Commission an independent review of childcare funding and affordability; e-petition 615623, Do not reduce staff-child ratios in early years childcare; e-petition 624461, Fund 30 hours free childcare from age 1 for families where both parents work; and e-petition 628412, Increase funding for early years settings.]

2.36 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the affordability and availability of childcare.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and we hope that Sir Christopher, who was due to chair this debate, is okay. I sought this debate because we face a crisis in childcare. I have heard from nursery providers, parents, national experts and my local council about the scale of the crisis, which I doubt even Government Members will try to deny.

The universal availability of good-quality, affordable childcare really matters: it matters in the early years, it matters at the start and end of the school day, and it matters at half-term and in holidays. Why? It matters to children and to their development, because it helps them to learn social skills and how to interact with those around them. Yet, according to the Sutton Trust, too many children are now starting school without these basic skills, and more of those children are at schools with the most deprived intakes.

Adequate and affordable childcare enables parents—mothers, in particular—to return to work and to work full time, yet many mothers, regardless of what they earn, are deciding to delay going back to work, or have to work part time, because of the affordability crisis or the lack of availability locally.

This crisis must surely also add to the gender pay gap. Groups such as Pregnant Then Screwed have been tireless campaigners on the issue, and over the past week I have heard from many women about it. Sadly, I am not able to quote them all, but I will share some of their experiences. Katerina, a teacher, said:

“As an educator, it’s mind-boggling that my monthly take-home earnings barely meet our childcare costs. We are forgoing many other purchases and necessities, and have no plans for the future.”
Steph said:

“The cost of nursery would be two thirds of my take-home salary. This is not financially sustainable, especially with the increase in bills.”

She also said:

“The possibility of equality is dangled in front of us, only to be systematically taken away.”

Ellie messaged me to say that the cost of childcare is preventing her from working more than three days a week and from having further children.

The unaffordability of childcare is driving a bulldozer through the last 100 years of progress on women playing an equal part in the workplace and in our economy. I want today’s debate to be a chance for the voices of those women to be heard.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate, and I apologise that I cannot be here for the whole of it. In Northern Ireland, a full-time childcare place is £170 a week, which equates to £680 a month or £8,000 a year. For a working family with two children, we are talking about an extortionate amount of money. These families are often forced to rely on grandparents or to cut their hours accordingly. Does the hon. Lady agree it is time for the Government and the Minister to look at the cost of childcare not just in England but across the UK and to take the steps necessary to ensure that working parents can afford childcare without being plunged into poverty?

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that excellent point. This is a universal issue across the UK and affects people at all income levels and in all areas.

I recently spoke to a friend who has a young baby and who is planning her return to work, having struggled to find a nursery place. She told me that Sweden, where her brother lives, pays £100 per month per child for a nursery place. However, across England, childminders are packing up and nurseries are closing or cutting places.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, for giving way, and I congratulate her on securing this extremely important debate. On the supply of childcare, does she share my concern that Ofsted figures show that 10,000 childcare providers closed last year alone and that there was a net reduction of 4,000 overall? Analysis by the London Early Years Foundation shows that many of those providers are in disproportionately poorer areas, where people cannot afford to pay for childcare.

Ruth Cadbury: By highlighting those shocking Ofsted figures my neighbour from Twickenham has powerfully expanded on the point I was making.

The Minister will no doubt describe the various Government support mechanisms for childcare, but they are not working. Government per-place funding for funded places is falling further and further behind the cost to providers. Providers in less well-off areas are struggling because they cannot rely on fees to top up their income. That means that places are hit even harder—yet another example of the Government levelling down.

Then there are the estimated 15% to 20% of children with special educational needs, who face further inequality due to the lack of specialist childcare. As documented by Coram, there is inadequate funding for SEN childcare. A survey by the Early Years Alliance found that 92% of childcare providers have to fund additional support for children with special educational needs and disabilities out of their own pockets.

[YVONNE FOVARGUE *in the Chair*]

On the challenges that childcare providers face, I met local early years leaders in my constituency in November. They told me that, although the pandemic had affected their viability, the cost of living and the funding crisis are having an even bigger impact and are doing even more damage. Their food costs are up 40%, their energy costs have more than doubled, even after Government support, and their business rates are up—a triple whammy. Those cost increases have not been met by an increase in the funding rate for so-called free places. Providers cannot afford to keep passing on the increasing cost of delivering high-quality childcare and education to parents. The Government need to see the huge cost to parents and the huge cost to providers as two sides of the same coin. It is creating a perfect storm, which is causing a crisis.

This crisis is not the fault of the childcare providers, who are working tirelessly up and down the country. It has been fuelled by 13 long years of a Conservative Government who have failed to act.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. I want to pick up her point about covid. Last year, research on the impact of the covid pandemic on early childhood education and care revealed that considerably more children from ethnic minority and disadvantaged backgrounds have missed out on formal early learning. It will surprise no one that, as a result, the inequality gap has widened, and the attainment gap is also likely to widen. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we want this trend to be reversed—and I think everyone across the House does—the Government need to focus on ensuring that disadvantaged children have equity of access to quality early years education?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the inequality in the provision that does exist means there are stark differences within different communities and between families in different situations. The poorest and most disadvantaged children are the ones who need good-quality childcare from day one, as soon as they leave their parents. They need it more than anyone.

In low-income areas, providers are even less able to cross-subsidise free hours with fees, so there is a disproportionate loss of places in those areas. The poorest families are ineligible for the free 30 hours, and those families who are eligible face barriers to participation.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is a hugely important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member on securing it. In Scotland, we have the same issue in deprived areas. Recent figures uncovered by the Liberal Democrats show that only 43% of families who are entitled to the free childcare for two-year-olds are taking it up, specifically because of the problems she mentions. Should we be doing more to make families aware of the support available to them and of how they can get it, as well as improving that support?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Member makes an excellent point and anticipates what I was going to say. The provision for two-year-olds, which is specifically there for the most disadvantaged, is complex and difficult to apply for, so it is underused. The families who need it most are not getting it, so I thank the hon. Member for that point.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): There is a simple problem here. For some families, having childcare is the difference between being able to work or not. What should those families do with a child that is perhaps between the ages of six months and two years when there is no support at all? A six-month-old baby could be left in a cupboard at work, I guess, if that is the logic behind this. By the time they are one year old and they are crawling and walking around, that is not feasible, yet the subsidies kick in only at two years old. It makes no sense at all.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could not take my babies around to meetings and so on after about four months. At that point, I needed either not to attend and not to go to work or to make sure that they had childcare.

Research in this week's *Guardian* shows that there are fewer places in less affluent parts of the country. The settings are also more likely to be lower quality.

If I might add to my hon. Friend's point, one woman wrote to me saying that she is a high earner and that when she got pregnant she worked out she could just about afford to go back to work—until she discovered she was expecting twins. Because of the cost between six months and the two or three years when funded provision comes in, which would help her a bit, she was in a desperate state.

The cost to parents and providers is rising, the funding for the free entitlement does not cover providers' costs, and the current system of Government support is complex and leaves many gaps. There is also a quality gap affecting less well-off areas and poorer families. This crisis has been fuelled by 13 long years of this Government not acting. Before I finish, I want to ask the Minister a few questions.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good speech and some fair points, particularly about the difficulty people from poorer backgrounds have in accessing childcare. If we look at costs internationally, the cost of childcare in the UK is among the highest—if not, the highest—in Europe and by many international comparators. The Government often talk about wanting to get people economically active and back into work, but unless we sort this issue out and people are properly supported to have access to childcare, many people will not be able to afford to work and may have to forgo their careers to take the most economically viable option: looking after their children at home.

Ruth Cadbury: Yes. The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Depending on how it is measured, the UK has the third highest or the highest childcare costs to parents in the OECD countries. I ask the Department and the Treasury to look at how and why different Governments do things differently. In particular, the Canadian Government have recognised the economic benefit of properly organised and funded childcare.

Here are my questions to the Minister. Do the Government understand the importance of good-quality, affordable childcare? Do they know the difference it makes to education outcomes, women remaining in the workforce, inequality, the cost of living and the economy? We are not sure whether the Government are considering

extending the free childcare option to one and two-year-olds, so we look forward to hearing what the Minister says on that. If they do, will that scheme and the current ones be adequately funded to cover the cost of provision? Will any extension include funding the reopening of settings that have closed and reskilling the workforce, as the current staff and managers will have moved on to other jobs, as they are already doing?

In conclusion, it is clear that the childcare system is broken. For many parents, the current provision is neither affordable nor available. The Government do not always like international comparisons, but they have to be made. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who I know will set out in further detail the difference a Labour Government will make. We desperately need a change, because the current system is broken, and parents, providers and children are having to live with the consequences. Back in November, more than 15,000 people took part in the “March of the Mummies”. Surely they should not have to march again this November. Surely we can see some action, rather than yet more dither and delay.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. I call Justin Tomlinson.

2.52 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the latest debate on this subject. This is almost a weekly occurrence, which makes speech writing quite easy—we can just dust off our previous versions.

First, I want to put on record my tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister who, within days of being in post, was willing to visit the fantastic Imagination Childcare nursery to meet Becky Cruise—the owner—and her team, as well as my daughter, who loves every minute she spends there. She also attended a roundtable with a number of nursery providers—experts in the field—who were able to have a frank, candid and wide-ranging discussion. They were extremely grateful for how engaged the Minister was, and Councillor Jo Morris, who runs Playsteps and does a lot of national campaigning, has certainly felt empowered to feed in the challenges. And it is the challenges that I will focus on.

To provide balance to what I thought was a very good opening speech, let me offer a proviso about the 13 years of Conservative Government. During those 13 years we have doubled the money spent on childcare. We brought in and extended the provision of free childcare, which my eldest daughter now benefits from. There is more to do, but we have been transformational in supporting people. What a contrast to the nonsense and bureaucracy of the tax credit system, which was a true blocker to working parents, particularly working mothers, being able to fulfil their potential.

Munira Wilson: The big step forward on childcare provision was in part thanks to the Liberal Democrats in the coalition Government. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, setting core schools funding aside, the Department for Education’s day-to-day spending, which includes early years, is set to be cut by £500 million under last November’s autumn statement? Does he not

agree that, if early years funding sees that day-to-day spending cut, it will be very short-sighted and very damaging for families?

Justin Tomlinson: We are all passionate about early years funding; we would not be here supporting this debate if we were not. I pay tribute to a predecessor in the hon. Lady’s party, David Laws, who was Minister for schools and early years. He also made a productive visit to my constituency. He was meant to be there for about 30 minutes and he stayed for more than three hours; he had to send his officials home. He learned some really good lessons, particularly about the significant difference that childcare can make to development in those early years—a point that was made powerfully in the opening speech. If we are to prioritise an area, those early years make a genuine difference.

As I said, I need to raise the challenges. It is important to keep the Minister absolutely focused, as I know she is. We have lost 500 childcare settings since 2019, with 300 in the last year. The main challenge impacting capacity fundamentally comes down to the fact that the increase in the national living wage, which is above inflation year in, year out, outstrips the set funding given for the 15 and 30 hours, and that makes viability an increasing challenge for nurseries. While we all support the increase in the national living wage, we all want the Minister to be empowered by Treasury to increase the funding provided for the 15 and 30 hours to match the national living wage increase. Then nurseries can worry about whether or not they make a profit on the non-free provision. We have to make it sustainable, because if we continue to lose capacity within the system, that will be an obstacle to people either returning to work or extending their hours.

I know that the Government are looking at different ways to try to provide financial support for nurseries. I know they are looking at ratios. I do not support lowering or changing the ratios because of the impact on quality, and I do not think there is support from parents. From our roundtable, I know that aside from balancing the increases in the national living wage, the other issue is staff retention. If we increase the workload, we will speed up the process of people leaving, which in itself is counterproductive. However, I think we could look at the qualified staff ratios that are needed to be legally compliant with Ofsted. In some cases, people who are in training could be counted for that ratio as well as those who have completed their training, but with Ofsted still keeping an overall view of the quality within the setting. That could be used in either good or outstanding nurseries, which would help.

I know that the Minister is particularly interested in the anomaly around business rates, which we have discussed in previous debates. A nursery within a school setting does not pay business rates, but a stand-alone nursery—like the one the Minister visited, which was about 50 metres away from a school—is subject to business rates, which equate to around £100 a child. If that £100 went back into the childcare provision, it would make a huge difference.

I speak to my final point as a former disability Minister. Society’s awareness of additional needs for young people has increased significantly, which is good and welcome. This was also brought up in the roundtable. Nurseries are about not just putting on fun arts and crafts and

[Justin Tomlinson]

play sessions, but providing social care and support for special educational needs and disabilities, parents, communication and language and mental health. We want them to do well with all those extra responsibilities. It is no easy thing for a Minister—every Minister feels that their area should be looked after by Treasury, but Treasury simply cannot say yes to everything. One thing the Minister could do is to make the case for ringfencing additional premiums for those areas; in some cases, that will mean cash. We also heard at the roundtable about the ability to get quick advice. We had one example where a nursery had to wait six months to get advice—a relatively basic piece of training that ultimately was potentially life-saving—which meant that a child had to miss out for six months, because the nursery could not risk taking that child on until the training had been given. The support is partly around the money, and partly around being able to quickly get the staff.

I would not swap this Minister for any other to lead this fight. I know that she is working extremely hard, and she will have our full support if she can unlock any of those challenges.

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I remind right hon. and hon. Members that a number of people wish to speak. If they could keep within six minutes, that would be very helpful. I call Tim Farron.

2.59 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on introducing a really important debate; it is one that I, like all Members present, am passionate about. The hon. Lady made an excellent speech. I just want to say a few words—I will hopefully take less than six minutes—to contribute to the debate.

The Government's position on childcare is clearly that the best way to tackle poverty is to have people in work, and therefore providing childcare is about making sure that people can work. It is also about the vital importance of early years, and how we develop young people from their earliest point so they can have the advantages that many would like in later life. I do not need to go into it now, but all the evidence suggests that the first two years of education are more important than any other part. Although it is about allowing people to go to work, it is not just that; it is about ensuring that every young person has the same chance in life, whether they are from a difficult background or a privileged one.

Looking at the stated objective of tackling poverty by getting people into work, and therefore allowing parents to work, the extremely high cost and limited availability of childcare is making work unaffordable for many people. I have a few examples from my constituency in the last week. A constituent who contacted me has a five-year-old and an 18-month-old. She is a teaching assistant and wants to return to work, but childcare for the 18-month-old is so expensive that there is simply no point. The childcare cost would be more than her wage. That speaks for many other people and their experiences, too.

Another mum got in touch with me, telling me that she spends more on childcare than she does on her mortgage. She calculated that she will spend about £63,000 on childcare for her two children before they go to school. That includes the 30 free hours and a couple of days a week covered by family. She works for the NHS, but she is considering leaving her job. Another constituent was a nurse at Westmorland General Hospital. She wanted to return to work after having her daughter, but her pay would not be enough to cover the childcare bill. She would earn less money if she returned to work. If we want people to be in work, childcare must be accessible and affordable.

The Government's approach is hugely damaging for the families concerned and for the children who miss out, but their failure to keep up with the necessary funding is also massively damaging the providers. Good people who provide good childcare places are determined to meet all the requirements, ratios and everything else, and yet they are being hit. In a March 2022 survey of early years providers, 88% said that the funding they receive from the Government for free childcare provision does not cover the cost of delivering childcare places.

Thanks to the hard work of the Early Years Alliance, a freedom of information request in 2021 found out that the Department for Education had confessed that a funded place for three and four-year-olds would cost an average of £7.49 per hour. That was two years ago. The actual rate paid to providers was only £4.89. Even the Government know they are massively short-changing our providers, and therefore our children and their parents.

We have seen closures in my constituency and throughout the rest of Cumbria. In the last seven years, six childcare providers have closed down in Kendal alone, and we have a childcare provider suspended in Appleby. The consequences for people who are trying to work and for their children are enormous. The maximum monthly cap for the childcare element of welfare benefits has not risen since April 2016. If it had risen in line with consumer prices index inflation, which is the usual mechanism, the maximum childcare cost cap would be 22% higher than it is currently. That equates to £145 more per month for one child, and £249 more for two children.

I will make a few recommendations for the Government before I shut up and sit down. First, we could increase the child element of universal credit by at least £15 a week and abolish the benefit cap. We could offer free, high-quality childcare for every child aged two to four, and for children aged between nine and 24 months whose parents or guardians are in work 35 hours a week, 48 weeks a year. That will be in the Liberal Democrats' manifesto. We could overhaul the annual uprating of benefit levels so that rates always keep pace with prices and living standards. Childcare support through universal credit needs to be paid up front, because that is what excludes so many people from making use of it.

We have heard that there is a cost incurred in funding childcare provision. Yes, there is, but by not doing so we incur a bigger cost. In my constituency, we have a limited workforce with a high average age, and yet we have huge demand for work, and lots of people are not able to be in the workforce simply because of this issue. For a variety of reasons, including this one, 63% of all employers in hospitality and tourism—the biggest employer in my constituency—were working below capacity last year because they could not find enough staff. There are

other factors behind that, but one factor is that people desperately want to work and cannot afford to. Can we afford to cover the cost of decent childcare? I argue that we cannot afford not to.

3.4 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I have been talking about childcare and coming up with proposals for some time now, but I will try to find new things to talk about because the Minister is probably sick of hearing from me.

The childcare juggle is extremely stressful. It is not just about the day-to-day management of children and organising what is going to happen, but about costs, as we have heard today. We are in second mortgage territory for many families and it is not sustainable. I have not just been gabbing on about this; I have put some effort into trying to provide evidence for the Government to look at and have worked with the fantastic super-brains at Onward to come up with recommendations in a report. The top recommendations are: supporting parents through a new system of childcare credits and providing more flexibility and choice; considering early years, and especially thinking about what the Princess of Wales is so fantastically doing and bringing a focus to; front-loading child benefit payments; expanding family hubs; and introducing some provider-side reforms, including boosting childminder agencies.

It is difficult to try to work through all the complex reasons why we have some of the highest childcare costs in the world—if not the highest, behind only Japan. We have looked into various reasons. First, the level of public subsidy is fairly low. As a share of GDP, the UK spends 0.56% compared with 0.7% across the OECD. Secondly, we have an extremely complex system comprising eight separate schemes. It is confusing for parents, costly to administer and leads to irregular outcomes. Thirdly, the principal offer of 15 to 30 free hours is underfunded, as we have heard, which means either that providers are cross-subsidised by charging parents higher fees for extra hours or that they simply close the doors altogether.

The Government must be given credit for coming up with the scheme for free hours, and it is a tribute to them that people want to extend it into other areas. We can all agree that childcare support should kick in earlier. It is barking mad that parents have to wait until a child is three. The support should be there earlier if that is what the family chooses. I am cautious about expanding free hours schemes without fixing the existing scheme and making sure that the hours are funded properly. Unless the Government do both, I worry about that being sustainable for the childcare sector—we have heard about that from my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson)—or for parents. We need something that they can rely on, and we need to make sure that it is fair for the taxpayer as well.

Together with Onward, I have proposed clear provider-side reforms to stimulate the childcare sector and make sure the early years experts have our full support and can motor ahead. If, as we expect, the UK finances are not exactly as we would want them to be at the spring Budget, I want to make sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer does not feel that childcare can be put in the “too expensive to tackle at all” box. There are options for him.

I am keen, as the Minister knows, to think about lots of different options for parents. It is fair that there is a lot of flexibility in the market, and we need to build in more flexibility and bring down costs. I have not previously raised in a debate the option of home child carers. I have made a strong case for stimulating the childminder market, because we have lost 50% of childminders in the last decade—the Minister knows my arguments on that—but home child carers are an interesting class. We take our children to a childminder’s house, but home child carers can come into our homes. They can work on a part-time basis, and they can do wraparound care. For people such as nurses, who work in shifts, it becomes a really good option.

I want to thank Rachel from Koru Kids, who is the most fantastic entrepreneur and a really great brain. She has recognised that there are Ofsted regulations and barriers to bringing more home child carers into the market, but when she goes out to the market and says, “Would you like to be one of these?” she is flooded with applicants. I believe that, working with Ofsted, we can make changes to the regulations that do not undermine children’s safety and security but that bring more home child carers into the market. I want the Minister to look closely at that, alongside my other proposals, and I am happy to provide her with a note on it.

3.10 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for coming in at short notice to chair this debate, Ms Fovargue. It is hugely appreciated, I suspect, by the thousands, if not millions, of mums who are just fed up. Because we are: we are fed up. For generations, we have debated this issue in Parliament as though people are talking Klingon—as though it is something that is beyond our reach or our capacity to resolve. I think the dads are pretty fed up, too, because they are not getting to be with their kids. Outside this place, that is the norm: parents want to spend time with their children and find ways of working that allow them to do so. Our childcare system, unlike those in many other countries, militates against that.

There is no other area of public policy where we accept—nay, celebrate—the idea that there will be a struggle and a juggle. Nowhere else do we think that if people are not struggling and having a miserable time—unless they are incredibly wealthy and have multiple nannies and people to stay at home with them—they are doing it wrong. Let us change that; let us have a different debate in this place. Let us come together across political parties to say that is it not enough to keep talking about this and worrying about extra hours here and there. I agree with the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) opposite that tinkering around the edges will not do. It is time for a fundamental rethink of how we do childcare in this country, not least because of the impact on children themselves. That was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who secured this debate, for which I thank her.

The very simple question we all need to ask ourselves is: at what age do we think children start learning? When I look at my 18 month-old son and what he can do with an iPad, I know that it is very early on. We invest in children because they are our future, and yet our system does not reflect that thinking. We cannot

[Stella Creasy]

solve the cost of living crisis unless we solve the cost of childcare. As we know, multiple families are now spending more on childcare than on their rent or mortgages. The number of women in this country who are economically inactive because of caring responsibilities is increasing; it has risen by 53,000 in the last year alone. Those women cannot get the decent childcare they need to be able to make it work for their families, and the economic impact of having them out of work is felt by us all.

That is the argument we need to take to the Treasury. With the greatest respect to the Minister, who I have no doubt is doing that, I want to see Treasury Ministers here, explaining why we are not investing in economic infrastructure—because that is what childcare is. Just as good roads get people to work, so too does good childcare. Yet, too often, we act in this country as if the opposite is true; as though we are doing mums a favour by providing childcare, giving them a couple of hours to go to baby yoga, rather than recognising that it is about how families balance their different commitments.

That is why I encourage the Minister to support the amendment that is being supported by Conservative colleagues of hers in the Lords right now, to make sure that we treat childcare as infrastructure and that local authorities are able to invest in it. Over the last five years, only 0.06% of developer contributions have been spent on childcare—that is just £1 in every £1,167 spent—yet we all know that when we build new flats, we are going to bring in new families. What are we supposed to do with them?

I encourage the Minister to take up the point made by the hon. Member for Stroud about the eight separate schemes. Of course, there is money there that could be better spent. I think of the 1.4 million children who are eligible for 20% off their childcare via the tax system but for whom it is not claimed. I do not think that is just because the system itself is completely bonkers; it is because so many families who want the help the most cannot afford to stay in childcare to the point where it is subsidised.

Of course childcare should kick in when a child is born, so we need to reform our maternity provision, but we also need to look at provision for children from six months on. We need the system to be universal, because that is when it pays for itself. The evidence from other countries makes it incredibly clear that it can help more families to stay in work, and it can help more women to keep their career and keep their caring commitments.

Some 85% of providers of childcare in this country are operating at a loss. This is not an industry that needs us to tinker around the edges. It needs investment to get us to a point at which there is a return. There is no area of economic policy in which investing leads to saving so clearly as in childcare, yet in this country we still act as if it were an optional add-on to an economy that is already struggling with productivity issues.

The fact that there are 5,500 fewer providers than a couple of years ago attests to how the system is not working for anybody. It does not work for the industry: these wonderful people caring for our children are professionals, so we should value their professionalism rather than playing it down. It does not work for the mums and dads who are looking at astronomical costs. It does not work for our economy. It certainly does not

work when we tinker around with ratios or when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions sends a letter to women who are out of work, telling them they really ought to think about going back.

What works is investing early. The £2.8 billion that is sitting unused and unclaimed in the Treasury's coffers, just for the tax-free childcare system, could be spent right now on childcare. It could be invested in getting early years right so that in the next five to 10 years we will have a universal system that matches those of our economic competitors.

I say thank you to Pregnant Then Screwed and Mother Pukka—to the people who have refused to let politicians take the issue off the agenda. During the pandemic, when we were patting parents on the back but investing in potholes, the message from those mums was, “Up with this we will no longer put.”

In my final 15 seconds, I want to let Ministers know that “This Mum Votes” is not just the name of a campaign; it is a statement of intent. If we do not get this right, mums and dads around this country will not forgive the political party that has yet again put childcare in the box marked “Too difficult to deal with”. Children who deserve the best future need us now to stop messing around and start investing.

3.16 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. As my parliamentary neighbour in the borough of Wigan, you will be very familiar with some of the issues I will speak about. Some 514 members of the public in my constituency have signed the petition to extend the 30 hours of free childcare to one and two-year-olds. That does not surprise me, but it links to the contributions that a number of colleagues have made.

As some hon. Members may know, Leigh is one of the poorest seats in the country. The average wage is 20% lower than the national average, so for many people in my constituency—and I suspect in yours, Ms Fovargue—the exorbitant childcare costs simply make it sub-economic to go back to work. That leads not just to harm to families, but to economic harm. It should never be sub-economic to go back to work.

I do not have children myself, but I understand how important childcare is. I wish to speak very briefly and personally about my experience. My parents were both working farmers. Animals do not feed themselves, so farmers cannot just not go to work. I was lucky enough to go to a nursery in the village where I grew up; when I was not able to go to the nursery, I stayed with family members, including my grandmother and grandfather and my great-aunt and great-uncle. Those options are obviously not available to everyone.

Having grown up on a farm, I know that my parents often worked incredibly long hours and, at times of economic difficulty, for incredibly low wages. That is important to how we approach provision. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made a salient point about considering childcare as part of infrastructure spending. I have made a broader point to my council about development in the borough: when we put in a large number of houses, we should make sure that provision is there. We do it for schools, so we should do it for nurseries and other childcare providers. Land is in

great demand and property is expensive, so we cannot expect these things to just spring from the ether. We have to make provision, and it would be sensible to do it as we do for schools.

In terms of how we address this issue, there is a strong case for extending provision for low-income households. I am not necessarily convinced of the case for universality—it would be wrong to give a childcare subsidy to people on wages like ours—but we have a number of problems in respect of low-income households, because the current state of affairs means that it is, as I have said before, sub-economic to return to work. I hope the Minister will take a look at this issue and see whether we can find a way forward.

3.20 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for securing this debate. It has been an informative and timely debate that really ticks the boxes of many of our constituents, who want to see real change on this issue. As an active constituency MP, probably one of the issues on which working families lobby me the most is the cost of childcare and how prohibitive it makes it to get back into work, particularly for mums who have just had their baby.

I suppose my mantra for this debate would be that work must always pay. It is important that the Government make it pay for those who want to get back into or continue in the world of work following the birth of a child, yet across the UK people are opting out of work because it does not pay to work. Their monthly childcare bill cancels out their net pay or leaves them with an amount that makes it not really worth the effort to work.

I want to mention a couple of Northern Ireland specifics. In 2021, the average cost of a full-time childcare place was £170 per week, while it was £186 per week for a day nursery and £166 per week for a childminder. Day nursery costs as high as £245 per week were recorded, with a range of childminders costing up to £300 per week. However, the median gross weekly earnings for full-time employees were £575. The Minister will be able to do the maths: for an average family with two kids, what is left is not enough to provide even a basic standard of living for a family.

We all know that the situation has got worse and been made more difficult in the past 18 months because of inflation. Indeed, providers themselves are feeling the pressure because of the increased costs that are in some instances leaving their businesses unviable. The situation is not helped by the bureaucracy and red tape they face on a daily basis.

The figures I have cited come from a local charity that operates in Northern Ireland called Employers For Childcare, which does an immense amount of work lobbying on childcare and supporting us politicians with data to prove that dealing with this issue will help the long-term economics of the country.

The most recent Employers For Childcare report, from 2021, cited some personal examples that speak even more powerfully than the figures. Let me read a couple of short quotes:

“Both my husband and I work full time. My husband is on minimum wage and so his entire wage goes on childcare. It is unaffordable when you have no alternative support. I have sleepless nights worrying about the cost of childcare. It is soul destroying.”

Another respondent said:

“Childcare needs to be more affordable. I’m in a reasonably paid part-time job but I couldn’t afford to go full-time as 90% of my wage would go on child-care costs which is pointless. One parent (usually the mother) of most families has to work part-time as they can’t afford full-time childcare.”

Those testimonies raise serious questions, including about alternative support. Throughout the debate, hon. Members have mentioned the importance of grandparents taking up the mantle in the home and having to step in, as my own grandparents did on many occasions, yet they do not receive a benefit for that. My ask of the Government is to support grandparents in that role, so that they can provide that wraparound service for working parents. Grandparents Plus has some superb ideas about helping grandparents in that way.

In many cases, it is the female in the family unit who sacrifices her career progression to stay at home in order to reduce childcare costs. Is that fair? No, it is not, and it comes back to the key point that work must pay. As we search for equality of opportunity in the workplace, that issue must be addressed.

The Government say they are on the side of working families. The forthcoming Budget offers the Chancellor an opportunity to demonstrate that, and I call on him to increase the tax-free childcare allowance. That would not only make a significant difference to the household finances of families across the United Kingdom, but encourage more people back into the workforce. That would be particularly beneficial to our public services, such as schools and hospitals, where it is simply not affordable for a parent to work. It would be making work pay—and we know that the money is there to do it.

I will finish by saying that our childcare providers are superb. As I stand here today, my son is being looked after by his childminder—she is an absolute star. I am so thankful for the support childcare providers give us as working parents. It is time to make childcare work for working families, and actually make work pay.

3.26 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Fovargue.

It is worth mentioning that many of the MPs here—perhaps all of us—have children. In fact, many of us have quite young children. The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) has had a baby since she became an MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) has had at least two children while being an MP—*[Interruption.]* Of course, I could not forget my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy)—I was just coming to her. I have seen a number of us, at different times, going through the Division Lobby holding small children. I believe that many MPs care about this issue, beyond any slogans or stories they have heard from their constituents; balancing being a good parent and giving your child the best start in life with representing up to 100,000 constituents, who often have far greater problems, is a real concern.

I think everyone in the House would agree that early years education is essential in supporting children’s development and ensuring that every child is given the best start in life. For many children, nursery is the most

[*Sam Tarry*]

important source for learning vital social skills and understanding the world around them for the first time. The benefits for children starting their education of an early introduction to reading practice and letter recognition cannot be overstated. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including many in Ilford South, start falling behind their peers before they can even start school.

A decade of Government austerity and under-investment has allowed early years education and provision to fall by the wayside. Parents and carers of all descriptions have had to pick up the bill. The OECD says the UK now has the second highest childcare costs among leading economies. That is no good. We are also one of the most faltering G7 economies in terms of growth and the state of our economy.

Since 2010, over 1,300 Sure Start centres have been closed. In some areas, those centres have been slashed by 85%. All the while, the Government's so-called free childcare offer is, in my view, desperately underfunded and excludes many of the most disadvantaged children from receiving the support they need. As a result, recent studies have found that parents are putting off having more children due to excessive childcare costs. Put simply, families have been priced out of having children.

Since the Conservatives took office, average nursery costs have increased by 44%. According to Pregnant Then Screwed, the financial burden of childcare has meant that 17% of parents have had to leave their job, and 62% say they work fewer hours because of childcare costs. As many hon. Members have said, it is primarily women who bear the brunt of those costs, which further increases the motherhood penalty and the gender pay gap.

Many parents with pre-school-aged children are now locked into what the TUC refers to as a Catch-22: as a result of the UK's miserable statutory maternity pay, mothers face immense financial pressure to return to work early, leaving them to cope with those sky-high childcare fees. The current basic statutory maternity and parental pay rate equates to 47% of the national living wage. Statutory maternity pay was £151.97 in 2021-22—a £5-a-week real-terms fall since 2010-11. Parents are now forced to choose between staying at home to look after their children or working just to cover the exorbitant childcare costs, and that hits women, in particular, incredibly hard.

The impact on children of this failing system is also immense. Young children with complex needs require one-to-one support when they join settings, but they are often forced to wait months even to meet an occupational therapist, let alone to receive the dedicated support they require. Too often the nurseries I have spoken to have to fund that out of their already stretched budgets so they can put in place childcare for children with special educational needs and disadvantaged children. That poor access to good childcare is clearly a significant driver of inequality throughout a person's life.

I recently spoke to Leah from Barney Bear's Nursery in Ilford. She has three nurseries in my vicinity, and at least one in my constituency, which I have visited on a number of occasions. It is a brilliant childcare provider in my constituency. I talked to her about the current state of play in the sector, and she told me that she

knows of three local nurseries that have been pushed to the brink of closure by the lack of sufficient increases in the hourly funding rate. Those Ilford nurseries cannot come close to covering their overheads or providing the quality of childcare that future generations deserve. She said:

“More and more nurseries are closing; it is a worrying time for nursery owners and staff...Our children are our future, and Early Years development is crucial...This Government need to do more! Help our nurseries thrive, provide free training, increase the funding rates, remove business rates, and bring back sure start centres.”

I hope the Minister will consider those things as we work together to tackle this problem.

The expected announcement on extending free childcare in the upcoming Budget is welcome, but without significant investment it will fail. Joeli Brearley, the CEO of Pregnant Then Screwed, said:

“The 30 hours ‘free’ scheme does not currently work for providers as it is knowingly underfunded by the Government. Providers must make up this shortfall by charging more for younger children.”

The massive staffing vacancies have to be addressed at a national level, and a national pay scale for childcare workers should be introduced. That is not an optional extra, as some in Government would have us believe. It has to be part of our national economic infrastructure.

3.33 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Under the circumstances, it is a relief as well as pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this important debate and on her excellent speech. The availability and affordability of childcare is a pressing issue for families right across our country.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. There has been a great deal of consensus. The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) highlighted the challenges facing families with children with special educational needs and disabilities in accessing childcare that is suitable for their needs. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) highlighted the challenges in rural areas. The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) pointed to the lack of subsidy for childcare for children under the age of two—a critical challenge for many families. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke passionately about the need for fundamental reform of our childcare system.

The hon. Member for Leigh (James Grundy) highlighted the economic harm in his constituency caused by a lack of available affordable childcare. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) highlighted the extortionate costs in her constituency. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) highlighted the importance of high-quality early years education in closing the disadvantage gap for the poorest children.

Childcare is vital social and economic infrastructure. It helps parents to work, it delivers early education to the youngest children and it underpins the growth of our economy. However, under this Government we have seen the cost of childcare rise, increasing numbers of providers closing their doors and an increasingly complex

funding system for parents to navigate, resulting in low take-up of both subsidised places for two-year-olds and tax-free childcare.

The UK has the most expensive childcare in the OECD. The latest release from Coram reports that the average cost of 25 hours a week in a nursery in England for a child under two is over £140. The average cost for the same amount of time with a childminder is over £124. The average cost for a child aged two and above is more than £135 at a nursery and £122 with a childminder. I emphasise that these costs are averages, so actual costs can be significantly higher, particularly in London.

Analysis by the TUC estimates that the cost of childcare for a child under the age of two has increased by £2,000 a year on average since 2010. A survey of 27,000 parents by Pregnant Then Screwed found that three in five reported that their childcare costs are now the same as, or more than, their domestic costs, rising to three in four for lone parents.

A recent survey by Mumsnet illustrates the extraordinary challenges faced by many parents, with almost 20% of respondents saying that they have given up work or are considering giving up work due to the costs of childcare. Also, 38% of respondents said they were working at home or considering working at home without childcare, and 43% said they could not afford the monthly costs of childcare without help from family, taking on debt or dipping into their savings. Finally, one in four resorted to informal arrangements, such as childcare swaps, to save money.

The Women's Budget Group estimates that 1.7 million women are being held back from taking on more hours at work by the cost of childcare, and recent data from the Office for National Statistics has shown that for the first time in decades the number of women leaving the workforce to look after family members is increasing; it was up by 12.6% last year over the previous year. The unaffordability of childcare is also placing strain on grandparents, many more of whom are now giving up work or reducing their hours not simply to enjoy spending time with their grandchildren but effectively to step in to provide formalised childcare. The CBI agrees, stating that childcare in the UK is in crisis, which contributes to labour market shortages, exacerbates the cost of living crisis, dampens economic output, slows down social mobility and increases gender inequality.

The Government's funding model is undoubtedly part of the problem. Parents can access help with childcare costs from a wide range of sources. The subsidy for two-year-olds is means-tested, but some of the subsidy for three and four-year-olds is applicable only to working households. Some funding is provided through the benefit system and some through the tax system. There is significant unclaimed funding for childcare because the system is so complicated and confusing for parents to navigate. The recent report on the issue by the Work and Pensions Committee highlights serious flaws with the universal credit childcare costs element, which in February 2022 was only claimed by 13% of potentially eligible families. The amount of funding claimed through tax-free childcare is far lower than the amount that was previously spent through childcare vouchers.

The system does not work for childcare providers either. The Government have admitted that they do not pay providers what it costs them to provide the so-called "free" two-year-old places and the places for three and

four-year-olds. They have effectively created a cross-subsidy model for childcare, which is driving up the cost for parents of under-twos and leaves childcare providers struggling in areas of deprivation, where parents of very young children simply cannot afford to pay higher rates.

Providers are facing rising energy costs, wage bills and food costs, and many find it hard to recruit the staff they need. That led to a tsunami of nursery closures last year. During the summer term of 2022, from April to July, 65% more nurseries closed than in the same period in 2021. The situation is set to get far worse following the withdrawal of support for energy costs at the end of next month.

I pay tribute to everyone who works in childcare and early years education. They are highly skilled professionals to whom we entrust the most precious people in our lives, yet they are under-recognised for the work they do. Working with very young children should be a rewarding vocation and a lifelong career. It should offer staff the opportunity to develop expertise and specialisms, and to progress accordingly. Yet all too often, there is no opportunity for development or progression, and nurseries report that they end up competing with better-paid roles in retail or distribution.

The lack of workforce development contributes to a situation that is particularly challenging for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities. A recent survey of parents with disabled children found that 87% of mothers could not work as much as they would like to because of a lack of suitable childcare. After nearly 13 years of Conservative Government, our childcare system is failing families, failing children, failing providers and failing our economy. It is holding back parents from succeeding and progressing at work.

What is the Government's response to this situation, which is of such central importance to our economy and family life? Silence. There was not a singular mention in the Chancellor's Budget statement in November of the affordability and availability of childcare. When parents, providers, the TUC and the CBI all agree, yet the Government continue to do nothing, it is the Government who are completely out of touch.

Labour recognises the fundamental importance of childcare to parents, children and our economy. We also recognise that childcare costs do not stop when a child starts school. That is why we have announced our plan to introduce fully funded breakfast clubs for every primary school in the country, supporting parents to work and helping to address food poverty. We will make sure that every child, wherever they are in the country, starts school ready to learn. We will address disadvantage and prevent it from becoming embedded for a lifetime.

Breakfast clubs are just the first step on the road. We are committed to building a childcare system that supports children and families from the end of parental leave until the end of primary school, as part of the vital infrastructure that underpins our economy. The Government must step up and act to deliver childcare that works for children—

Siobhan Baillie: This is a point of genuine interest, not a political point. Has Labour costed those policies? I am having lots of conversations with Ministers about this issue. I am really interested in the points that the hon. Member is putting forward, but I have not seen any costings, such as for full universal childcare from nine months. Have they put any numbers behind that?

Helen Hayes: I am grateful for that intervention in the last sentence of my speech. As I just said clearly, Labour's announcement so far is our fully costed pledge to deliver free breakfast clubs to every primary school child in the country. At the moment, we are working through the substantial, comprehensive reforms that we will bring forward for the childcare system in due course. We are absolutely committed to not making pledges until we have done that work, and that work is ongoing.

As one contributor said this afternoon, this is work that we cannot afford not to do as a nation. Hon. Members can rest assured that Labour will deliver the comprehensive reform that is lacking from this Government.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): It is a pleasure to serve under your very welcome chairmanship, Ms Fovargue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing a debate on this important subject. It is genuinely a pleasure to come to these debates. I see the faces who come here regularly, who bring interesting information, and I genuinely like taking part in these debates.

I know how important the early years are. I have worked on families policy for a long time. Not only are the early years crucial for children's development, we also want families to benefit from the childcare support they are entitled to, both from a cost of living perspective and in enabling parents to work. I spend a lot of my time visiting the sector, and I recognise that it is a challenging time. It has been a privilege to spend so much time there. I am always impressed by the dedication of staff, who work absolutely tirelessly to give our children the best start in life. It is a credit to them and this country that 96% of providers are rated as good or outstanding. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) mentioned Becky at Imagination Nursery. It was just wonderful to see the dedication of Becky and her wider staff, and the brilliant environment that I know his daughter is enjoying.

I will start by talking about funding, which has been mentioned multiple times. It is fair to say that it was a Conservative Government who increased funding. Not only did we expand the offer for three to four-year-olds, we also introduced a specific offer for disadvantaged two-year-olds. We have also looked at other things to give wider support, such as family hubs or holiday activity schemes, which I will talk more about later.

We have invested more than £3.5 billion in each of the last three years on our early education entitlement. We know that the sector, like many sectors in the country, is facing economic challenges. We announced additional funding of £160 million in 2022-23, £180 million in 2023-24 and £170 million in 2024-25, compared with the '21 settlement, for local authorities to increase the hourly rates paid to childcare providers. I want to assure everyone that we continue to look at the matter. How we can improve the cost, choice and availability of childcare is important to me and to the Government.

As well as supporting families, it is also important that we help early years providers continue to do what they do best, which is educating and developing young children. From 2023-24, we are investing an additional £20 million in early years, on top of the £180 million

announced at the spending review, to help with national living wage costs. These funding increases will take place across England, so I am pleased to say that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, the funding rate for two-year-olds will increase by 10% to £6.92, up by 63p per hour. We have also announced an additional £10 million for maintained nursery schools' supplementary funding from 2023-24 and are introducing a minimum and maximum hourly rate that local authorities can receive for their maintained nursery schools to create a fairer distribution of the funding.

I want to talk about families. We know that childcare is a key concern, as ably raised by many hon. Members today. We recognise that cost of living pressures are affecting families across the country and we have been looking at a range of measures to directly support households. One of our key areas of support has been the 30 hours' free childcare entitlement. It was introduced in 2017 and has helped countless working parents. Nearly 350,000 children were registered for a place in January 2022, which saved those families up to £6,000 per child per year. That is making a real difference. Our 2021 childcare and early years survey of parents found that 73% of parents reported having more money to spend since they started using the 30 hours and 38% thought that without those 30 hours, they would be working fewer hours. We also remain committed to that universal 15 hours of free early education, which is helping more than 1 million children this year.

Government support for childcare is not just for three to four-year-olds. In 2013, the coalition Government introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and in January 2022, 72% of eligible two-year-olds were registered for a free early education place and more than 1.2 million children have benefited since its introduction. I think I heard the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) say earlier that the take-up in Scotland was about 46%. Clearly, we want to do more and I urge all hon. Members to encourage all their constituents to take up places where possible. In September 2022, we also extended eligibility for the entitlement to children in households where no recourse to public funds applies.

On the low-income household point mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy), we have introduced two things. The first is the holiday activity fund schemes, and the data that shows children using the scheme for the first time and saying that that is the first time they have accessed some kind of activity scheme in the holidays has been buoying. The second is family hubs, about which I am passionate and on which I worked before becoming a Member of Parliament. We are rolling them out to 75 local authorities in the most disadvantaged parts of the country. I have visited several of them and they are doing very good things.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon and the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth mentioned another matter that is, again, dear to my heart: SEN. I see more of that when I go to nurseries, and when I talk to providers, they are worried about both the aftermath of the pandemic and having the right skillset to make sure they deliver for those children. We are training 5,000 early years staff to be special educational needs co-ordinators and I will also bring forward SEN reforms in the near future that will help with setting out what

people can do. Recently, I was talking to Julian Grenier at Sheringham Nursery School and looking at some of its schemes, such as talking time, which will help with some of the speech and language challenges that have come out in the aftermath of the pandemic. It is an area that is very important to me.

It is crucial that as well as being affordable, childcare is easily accessible. We constantly monitor the sufficiency of childcare places and at the moment, local authorities report that they are fulfilling their duty to ensure sufficient childcare. However, we continue to monitor that carefully. I acknowledge that one of the things I hear a lot when I talk to providers is the challenge around recruitment and retention, and I am keen to focus on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) also mentioned childminders. The majority of people that have come out of the system are childminders. I have been very privileged to shadow childminders and see the work that they do. Often, people do not realise that their outcomes are just as good as those of nurseries. They do a tremendous job and it is important to me to look at the reasons that they are leaving.

The majority of early years childcare places in England are provided by private, voluntary and independent group-based providers. I pay huge tribute to their work. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) gave a very moving tribute to her children's own childcare providers. I can see her smiling now at the work that they do. I reiterate my thanks to those in the sector. They work so hard day in, day out in challenging circumstances to ensure that they provide children with the best start in life.

I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth for securing the debate. The early years sector is an integral part of our economy and education system, so my Department treats any changes to the system carefully. Our childcare offer is co-ordinated with other Departments to give parents a range of options, depending on whether they want to receive childcare in a formal, nursery-style setting or from a childminder in a home.

Stella Creasy: On that point, I think the Minister is starting to talk about one of the challenges: where money has been set aside for childcare, but has not been spent. She spoke earlier about the not-100% take up from those who are entitled. Since the scheme began to give parents 20% off their childcare costs, an average of £2 billion to £3 billion a year has gone unclaimed. Given that it started in 2017, we are talking about a possible £17 billion that could go into tackling these challenges with the cost of childcare. Before she sits down, what conversations has the Minister had with the Treasury about getting our £17 billion of tax that parents have paid into the system back, so we can put it into paying those who care for our children properly?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Lady will know that underspends in government do not sit there and pile up; there is not £17 billion in a pot somewhere that has not been used. It has gone into lots of things, whether that is increasing hourly rates or the massive overall increase to the education budget of £2 billion over the next two years alone.

I talk to the Treasury regularly about tax-free childcare. I agree that it is not used enough. Many parents could be benefiting and we want them to benefit. We started the childcare choices campaign last year. The uptake of

tax-free childcare has actually been quite good. I think it is about 30% from memory, but I will go away and double-check the figures. Of course, we need to do more and, of course, I would love to see more parents use that.

Finally, I reassure all Members present that my Department continues to evaluate what more can be done to help parents access a childcare place that not only suits their working arrangements and family circumstances, but gives their children the best possible start in education. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth in the future to hear her further thoughts about making our childcare system the best it can be.

3.52 pm

Ruth Cadbury: I thank you again, Ms Fovargue, and I appreciate that you and Mr Davies have stepped into the Chair at short notice. We wish all the best to Sir Christopher and hope he is okay. I would like to finish by thanking the many people and organisations that have helped me and others in this debate with facts, research and the views of their members and others, which have contributed to our speeches: the Early Years Alliance, Coram, Women's Budget Group, Pregnant Then Screwed, Marie Curie and Mumsnet. I also appreciate Angela Doidge-Nelson at Hounslow Council and the group of nursery managers in my constituency who have been so supportive of me and who have opened my eyes to the challenges in the sector ever since I was first elected. We have had a great number of excellent, thoughtful, insightful and factual speeches from many Members, many of whom were speaking of their own experiences. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) reminded us, many Members—mothers and fathers—have had children while Members of Parliament. I was a councillor and took my babies to council meetings.

I also want to acknowledge and appreciate childminders, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) did. My childminder is sadly no longer with us, as she died a few years ago. She was a rock to our family—the grandma around the corner, because my son's grandparents were not local. We cannot forget childminders, and it is very worrying to hear that childminders are walking away from the profession at an even greater rate than nurseries are closing.

I still look forward to hearing from the Minister, in more detail, the answers to some of the questions raised today—particularly an acknowledgment that full funding, for any free places, must be there, because, otherwise, the system is imbalanced. We want to hear about what the Department and the Government are doing about the underspend that appears to be there. That is actually there because too many disadvantaged and low-income families are not applying. Why is that? We need to understand why that is, and we need the Government to address the complexity in the system, because otherwise too many children and parents will not benefit from it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the affordability and availability of childcare.

3.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

A14: Kettering

4 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (in the Chair): I will call Mr Philip Hollobone to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered junction 10A on the A14 at Kettering.

I thank you, Ms Fovargue, for chairing this debate, and Mr Speaker for granting permission for it. I welcome my good friend the roads Minister to his place and thank him for his successful visit to Kettering bus station in December to launch the Department for Transport's £2 bus fare scheme, which is already seeing a 7% increase in local bus travel across the country.

Junction 10A on the A14 at Kettering does not yet exist. At the moment, it is just a blob on a DFT map, but it is a junction that local residents very much need if Kettering, Barton Seagrave, Burton Latimer and Cranford are not to grind to a halt because of all the traffic generated by the new house building taking place locally.

Junction 10A is critical infrastructure. It is likely to cost £40 million, with financial contributions split between the Department for Transport and the developer, and is required to deliver phase 2 of the Hanwood Park development, which in Government planning terms is designated as a garden community development of an eventual 5,500 dwellings and employment land covering 328 hectares to the east of Kettering. Local land values will not allow the development of the junction to be funded without Government intervention, so public funding is required.

In line with planning conditions, junction 10A must be in place by the time 2,700 dwellings are occupied. Just over 1,000 dwellings are already occupied, and the developer's current housing trajectory shows that the 2,700 occupied dwellings trigger for junction 10A will be reached in 2026. There is therefore a significant risk that the development will grind to a halt in three years' time without the new junction. Thousands of future local jobs could be at risk, and there will be a further 2,800 new local homes, including 560 affordable homes, that simply cannot be built.

My ask of His Majesty's Government and of the roads Minister today is for a firm commitment to include junction 10A in the DFT's road investment strategy 3, which is the programme for major road programmes in the period from 2025 to 2030. Junction 10A is already in the pipeline for potential inclusion in RIS3, but what we need now is a definite commitment to include it.

If 2026 is to remain the target date for the delivery of junction 10A, it requires detailed planning approval to be achieved in 2023 and it requires the requisite procurement to commence concurrently. That can happen with confidence only if there is a definite Government commitment to junction 10A and a tangible Government commitment to RIS3 funding. What we are talking about is the need for joined-up Government. If His Majesty's Government are to get anywhere near their objective of seeing 300,000 new dwellings built each

year in England, they need to ensure that the requisite roads infrastructure is in place. Funding junction 10A and enabling Hanwood Park to continue being developed beyond 2026 will be a key test of a dovetailed Government housing and roads strategy.

I know that the Department for Transport already recognises the importance of the junction, because funding for the new junction 10A was originally included in RIS1 for the period 2015 to 2020. The slow housing development roll-out amid the national economic conditions at the time meant that the programme was not activated, but housing development on site is now proceeding apace and the funding is now required.

The Hanwood Park development is the fourth largest sustainable urban extension in the country. It is one of the nation's flagship housing extensions and sits within the strategic Oxford-to-Cambridge planning arc. For local people, the Hanwood Park development is the equivalent of bolting on to the town of Kettering itself another town the size of Desborough. We have to ensure that the homes built on the development form a vital, liveable community and do not simply become one big, soulless housing estate. To make that happen, we must ensure not only that the infrastructure is in place to serve those new dwellings, but that there is no adverse impact on the quality of life of existing residents of other parts of Kettering, Barton Seagrave, Burton Latimer and Cranford.

Fortunately, the local planning design code is set at a high standard, and there is set to be good internal and town centre connectivity with access to trunk roads, including the A6, A43 and most importantly the A14. Hanwood Park forms a key component of housing to be delivered in North Northamptonshire and Kettering, in the adopted North Northamptonshire joint core strategy for 2011 to 2031, and in the site-specific part 2 local plan, which was adopted in December 2021.

Housing growth is being planned in parallel to the delivery of employment land and other uses. Including estimated construction jobs, the development could provide more than 8,000 new jobs, with 4,300 jobs directly within the development itself. Outline planning permission for Hanwood Park was originally granted in the last days of the last Labour Government in April 2010—13 years ago—for 5,500 houses, 20% of which were to be affordable. It included a range of employment uses; a mixed-use district centre, including shops, local services and a health clinic; three local centres; a secondary school; four primary schools; a hotel and leisure development; and extensive formal and informal open spaces.

Work is well under way to deliver development in the first phase of Hanwood Park, with 1,921 new homes having received consent and a further 193 currently going through the planning process, together with internal roads, green spaces, a sustainable urban drainage system and utilities infrastructure. Hayfield Cross Church of England primary school, the first school on the site, is already fully operational. A free school bid has been successful for the delivery of the secondary school, and an ongoing public consultation is currently being conducted by Orbis Education Trust regarding whether the school should be boys-only or mixed entry.

Despite the challenges of the covid pandemic and the associated economic downturn, high quality housing delivery continues across the scheme, with David Wilson

Homes, Barratt, Bellway, Orbit, Persimmon, Avant and Taylor Wimpey all progressing. Grace Homes, a local small and medium-sized house builder, is looking to commence this year, subject to planning approval. A new outline planning application has been submitted for the remaining 3,386 dwellings, as well as the remaining schools, formal and informal open spaces, district and local centres, a hotel and employment. The application is currently pending and has reached an advanced stage.

There has been clear Government support for the Hanwood Park development to date, including Homes England granting £60 million of loan funding to the developer and delivery partners. That funding partnership with Homes England has resulted in the development now having a primary school, surface water attenuation, adopted foul sewers, three principal access roads, and junction improvements on town roads in Kettering itself. Funding has also been secured by North Northamptonshire Council from the new garden communities initiative and the Homes England large sites capacity fund, to help support the project and others across North Northamptonshire.

The developer of Hanwood Park has signed a memorandum of understanding with National Highways, setting out the project control framework approach for junction 10A. To maintain the programme, the developer is carrying out, at its own risk, a range of technical and environmental surveys, including a utilities survey, a wintering bird survey and topographical and archaeological investigations, in anticipation of submitting a detailed application for junction 10A.

Confirmation of Department for Transport funding for junction 10A is now imperative to ensuring continued housing delivery at Hanwood Park beyond 2026, including badly needed affordable housing, along with significant employment opportunities and local economic growth, and to giving the market the confidence it needs that housing delivery will not be stifled beyond that date. In addition to continued housing delivery, the new junction 10A will unlock employment land, which is key for local sustainable economic growth. Junction 10A is essential to the delivery of some 10 hectares of employment land at Hanwood Park in the south-eastern quadrant of the development adjacent to the A14. Without the new junction 10A, the market delivery of these employment areas would be extremely challenging and might not even be possible.

For local people, the tragedy is that we could have had as many as 2,700 new homes already built by 2026 without the necessary road infrastructure to take us beyond that level. That presents the real risk of gridlock in the town of Kettering, with initial houses already provided but with the Government not coming up with their share of the funding for the new junction 10A. My plea to the roads Minister today, on behalf of local people in Kettering, is that he recognise the fundamental importance of the new junction to people in the local area and that the Government make the commitment to fund it that we badly need.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): I am delighted to respond to the important points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), who is a diligent Member and a great representative of the people and businesses

of Kettering. I had the pleasure of visiting Kettering back in December to launch the £2 bus fare cap, which has now been extended all the way to 30 June. It is clear that where Kettering leads, the rest of the country follows. He has consistently championed the proposed improvements on the A14 on behalf of his constituents, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

The A14 is one of the country's most important east-west arteries on the strategic road network, stretching for 127 miles and connecting Felixstowe in the east to Rugby and the logistics hub at the heart of the midlands at the other end, where it meets the M1 and the M6. The importance of this corridor in connecting the country and providing access to some of the nation's key international gateways cannot be overstated. That is why we have invested heavily in the route since 2015.

In 2017, we completed the £190 million remodelling and capacity improvements to the Catthorpe interchange, where the A14 intersects with the M1. In 2020, the 12-mile, £1.5 billion Cambridge-to-Huntingdon improvement scheme was completed, providing much-needed added capacity for commuters and long-distance traffic. We are considering further improvements to the A14 where it meets the A12 west of Ipswich, as part of the pipeline of schemes being addressed in the road investment strategy.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I am grateful for the Minister's confirmation that the Copdock interchange is being looked at. Further to the important point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), every Member who has a constituency that crosses the A14 would agree that investment in all aspects of the road, including junction 10A, is vital. It is a key gateway from the midlands to Felixstowe. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are looking not just at the projects that he has outlined, but at additional future projects? This is about supporting British manufacturing, house building growth and the British economy. Many of us who represent A14 constituencies do not feel that the road has had the focus that it deserves.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend makes some excellent points. I am trying to highlight the strategic national importance of the route. I know that my hon. Friend and MPs from across the region have been campaigning on this issue. There are definitely further schemes in the pipeline that are currently being looked at, and I would be delighted to discuss them with him further at a later date.

Although the strategic national case for this vital road transport corridor between the north, the midlands and the east of England is clear, its role in the places and communities it passes through along its length is also vital, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering recognises. Kettering, Barton Seagrave, Cranford and Burton Latimer are all important towns along the route that all deserve to be properly served. That is exactly what the proposed A14 junction 10A would help to achieve, making lives in the communities served by the A14 better.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, it would also support the development of approximately 5,500 much-needed homes and associated infrastructure to the east of Kettering, with new schools, shops, community buildings and, importantly, jobs, unlocking investment into this stretch

[Mr Holden]

of the important strategic road network. I am pleased to hear that this is a sustainable, mixed-used development, with new schools, shops and leisure facilities that are easily accessible for new residents, and that it is tied into the historic town of Kettering.

Successful development depends on a network that makes connections to destinations, places and communities that are further afield. Alongside rail and the local road network, the strategic road network provides critical links between our cities and other urban areas, connecting our communities and families, providing job opportunities, and binding and strengthening our Union, as well as driving productivity and prosperity by unlocking growth, encouraging trade, attracting investment and playing a vital role in levelling up across the country. That is why the A14 is so important.

We all agree that a reliable and resilient transport network is a catalyst for growth. However, making transformative investments in the fabric of our transport network requires long-term thinking and planning, as has certainly been the case with this piece of development. That rationale underpins RIS2, which we are currently in and which has delivered record levels of investment in the motorways and trunk networks of England. In the first RIS strategy, £17.6 billion was committed; since then, we have gone even further and are now investing £24 billion between 2024 and 2025 as part of RIS2. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering to use his good offices to lobby the Treasury to ensure we can increase the level of investment into RIS3 for his scheme, and many others across the country.

Our first priority is the safe operation, maintenance and renewal of the existing network, including by beginning multi-road period programmes of structural renewals where the network is reaching the end of its design life. Even so, in the current period more than £10 billion is being spent on significant improvements to the performance and safety of the network, through enhancements that support the Government's levelling-up agenda and underpin national and regional growth. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering that there is clearly a strong economic case for junction 10A of the A14 and, from what I have seen, it presents a good cost-benefit ratio and value for money for the taxpayer.

As my hon. Friend is well aware, preparations for the third road investment strategy—RIS3—are well under way, with the A14 junction 10A scheme forming part of the pipeline of more than 30 major projects that are currently being considered for possible construction beyond 2025. The decisions on which pipeline schemes to progress will need to be taken in the round as part of the wider development of RIS3 funding, in the light of the funding headroom available.

In respect of my hon. Friend's local project, it is important that, unlike many other projects throughout the country, half the cost is due to be met by local developers. That further strengthens the case for the junction. The case for the project is clear, and Hanwood Park and National Highways have been working closely to build a robust business case for the proposals. The key objectives of the project are to support the sustainable development of much-needed homes in the area and to facilitate economic growth in the region. In achieving that, the safety and performance of the existing network

needs to be maintained, mindful of the route's key national strategic role, and negative impacts on users, communities and the environment must be kept to a minimum during construction.

Considerable effort and work is required to develop major projects from the ground up and, as I have said previously, when dealing with the significant sums involved, investment decisions cannot be taken in isolation. Ultimately, decisions on the balance of RIS3, and possible enhancement schemes to be included in it, will sadly not be finalised until the strategy is published in 2024. We are hoping to open that up to bids in the coming months. The core principle of our strategy is to create a safe, accessible and reliable road network that meets the needs of all road users and drives important economic growth across the country.

Mr Hollobone: I am listening to the Minister's remarks with great interest and appreciate the attention to detail he is applying to junction 10A. Is he aware of perhaps the most important point of all? On its present trajectory, Hanwood Park will reach its ceiling of 2,700 houses in 2026. Not one further home will be built after that date, unless funding for junction 10A comes from the Government. Unless the Government come up with the cash, no more than 2,700 homes will be built on that estate in Kettering. That will make it far more difficult for the Government to achieve their housing objectives.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend made that point clearly in his speech and I will take it away. There is a timescale for the RIS3 projects. Given the level of development that has already gone into the scheme, as part of the investment strategy through the five-year period, the requirements will put it clearly towards the front if funding is made available.

I thank my hon. Friend again for securing this debate and for his exemplary efforts to support the proposals on behalf of his constituents. I also take the opportunity to be clear that I recognise the strong case for the proposals and the many benefits they will unlock for Kettering and the surrounding area. I will ensure that my officials and National Highways work closely with Hanwood Park as the case for the scheme is developed further, and that my hon. Friend is fully engaged in that process. I also encourage him to meet further with the project teams for the scheme at National Highways for a more detailed briefing in future months. I will happily facilitate that.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to press the case for the scheme on behalf of his constituents and the businesses that he serves in his constituency. Although I cannot give him the firm commitment that he is naturally after today, given the unique funding nature of the project, the strong local and national economic significance of the A14 and the good benefit-to-cost ratio, the people of Kettering can be assured that it will be looked at very favourably in the funding rounds to come. The people of Kettering could not have a better champion, and I look forward to working closely with my hon. Friend as the investment plan for RIS3 is developed over the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Performance-enhancing Drugs and Body Image

4.30 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of steroid and image and performance enhancing drug use.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Fovargue.

We need to talk about steroids in the UK. I am talking about not just any steroids but anabolic steroids and image and performance-enhancing drugs—or IPEDs. There are an estimated 500,000 to 1 million users in the UK, but no one is talking about it. The closest we get is the “natty or not?” discussions on social media about naturally built men and women versus people who are enhanced. There is particular discussion about Hollywood actors.

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

I will not cast any aspersions about who does or does not use steroids and performance-enhancing drugs, but it is fair to say that the debate is becoming bigger and louder, not only in this country but in America and throughout the western world. The Priory Group did some research about 10 years ago and estimated that around 50,000 people were using steroids; its estimate now is that 500,000 people are using them. It says that “we are sleepwalking into a health crisis”.

I know from my time as a GP that when it comes to—[*Interruption.*]

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.39 pm

On resuming—

David Mundell (in the Chair): The debate can continue to 5.38 pm.

Dr Evans: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

Until we were rudely interrupted by that vote, I was saying that we need to talk about steroids in the UK because, as the Priory Group has said:

“we are sleepwalking into a...crisis.”

As a GP, I know that the obesity epidemic has been a real problem, but part of the nation is actually getting fitter while part of it is getting fatter. I will concentrate on the part that is getting fitter, because of those who go the gym—mainly men—we know that one in 10 suffer from bigorexia. What am I talking about? Bigorexia is body dysmorphia—the idea that someone’s muscles are not big enough, no matter how much they eat or train. It is important to understand that this is a growing epidemic in our country; even more importantly, it is quite prolific in the gay community. I will break the issue down into three sections. I will talk a little bit about how I came to this topic, the drivers behind it, and, most importantly, what needs to be done.

Growing up, I was a fairly normal kid. At the age of 14 or 15, I was playing sport and was reasonably academic, but I was an outlier, because for my 15th birthday I had saved up £500 to buy a multigym. In my head, I wanted to improve my rugby, get girls, fight off bullies and improve my body image. Surprisingly, I was the under-16s first-team captain, but the other three aims fell to one side. Looking back, I think, “How many other young men feel like this?” That was 25 years ago. I think the points I mentioned are the driving forces behind why men want to go to the gym and improve their body image. Society says to them, “We need to be perfect”, but what is that perfect image?

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Social media and reality TV have played a huge part in promoting unrealistic body ideals, which we often do not think about when it comes to men’s self-esteem. Does the hon. Member agree that there should be some greater controls around edited, unrealistic imagery?

Dr Evans: The hon. Member is spot on. The advent of social media over the last 20 years has really brought home that idea of body image. With the likes of Instagram, if a man is interested in using a gym, they are sent hundreds of images in 30, 40 or 50 seconds. Each individual image in itself is not the issue, but the cumulative effect of repeatedly being sent such images is a problem.

I would argue that the way to solve the problem is through the social media companies’ algorithms, to ensure that there is transparency about what people are being sent. Facebook talked about diet pills aimed at young girls being a real problem. If we do not deal with male body image and body dysmorphia, this will be the next iteration of that problem.

As a doctor, over the last 10 to 15 years I have started to see more and more young men coming into my clinics and asking to be prescribed protein powders or creatine, and asking, “How do I bulk up?” I also started to see more and more men in their 20s, 30s and 40s who were using steroids and having side effects, including bad acne, scarring acne, mood problems and depression. I have even seen some men who have had strokes, heart attacks, liver problems, kidney problems and erectile dysfunction, none of which are really talked about when it comes to steroids.

The problem with steroids is that they work, so people use them and see a drastic improvement. People who want to build muscle will see that improvement, take the cycle of whatever substance it happens to be and then plateau, which is very hard for them to deal with because they no longer see the gains they were initially getting under their regime. They say, “Oh, I’ll only use it once”, but once becomes twice, twice becomes thrice, and so on.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): My hon. Friend listed symptoms, but I do not think that he mentioned swelling of the brain. Matt Dear, a 17-year-old from Essex, tried to build himself up by taking bodybuilding pills, because he was committed to a career serving in the armed forces. He took pills that he had bought for £30, his brain swelled up and, tragically, he died. The memory of Matt has helped to educate children in the community. Is my hon. Friend concerned that even taking these things once can be terminal?

Dr Evans: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point—these are dangerous prescription drugs, if they are not used properly. There is a plethora of side effects that are not talked about, from the short-term acute stuff that could mean someone has swelling of the brain or a clot, or is having a heart attack, or the long-term effects, such as depression, scarring acne or erectile dysfunction, which, particularly for young men, can have a huge psychological effect when they are trying to find partners. My hon. Friend is spot on. My heart goes out to Matt’s family; I am pleased there is a memorial for him.

Our role as responsible elected Members is to think about what we can do. The obvious area I get directed to is sport. It is actually quite hard to dope in sport, especially for an elite athlete. It does happen, but the culture is quite strong not to do so. Many athletes who want to be elite have come to me, as their GP, and have refused to take prescriptions because they are not sure whether it will be an exemption or clean, or whether it might get them in trouble with UK Anti-Doping.

Sport is an interesting area. I have met UN Anti-Doping a couple of times, and it is seeing people using these drugs to improve their image, but then finding out that they are quite good at sport and then getting into trouble with the authorities. The classic example is the young Welsh rugby player, who wants to look big on the streets when he is out and about, and wants to look good in Ibiza—and he finds out that having that size and strength is good on the rugby field. He starts playing semi-professionally and then gets picked up by UK Anti-Doping.

At the other end of the spectrum, we see cyclists, particularly affluent middle-aged men, who have the money and wherewithal to train, dedicate their time, buy the equipment they need, and start to see progression through the ranks of cycling. Then they meet the edge and ask, “What’s next? Let’s lose weight. Let’s have a fat burner. Let’s think about steroids or something else, like EPO.” That sees people caught out.

Those are the people going into elite or semi-elite athlete status; we have not even touched on society and the health aspects. We have heard a lot over the past 10 years about women’s health and body image, but less so about men’s. “Love Island” is back on TV at the moment, and we often hear a debate about how the females look: “Is there diversity? What about their shapes?” Very rarely do we hear that about the men. Nine out of 10 of them will have a six-pack, large shoulders and big biceps, and we seem to think that is okay.

Spencer Matthews from “Made in Chelsea” talked about the pressure and the need to use steroids he felt, because of his concern about what he looked like. We only have to look at what is currently in cinemas—the Marvel comic films—to see the aspiration set for young men.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that boys and men are in a unique position in the 21st century? There are all kinds of pressures on boys and men that are often not seen, and which they often do not talk about. Does he agree that one way the Government could help is by putting in place a men’s health strategy? We could look at subjects such as this, and other issues that men are facing, as a whole to help men today.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I commend his work on the men’s health strategy, and on securing the men’s world health debate. He is right that these tend to be pertinent male issues. There is a difference: from my clinical approach, I see men’s health-seeking behaviours. It is apt to say that we should target some of these issues in these ways, particularly steroid abuse and performance-enhancing drugs used for imaging, because men tend to be most affected—not exclusively but mainly. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

That leads to the fitness industry itself, which purports to put out images of the six-pack and shoulders bigger than a fridge. The problem is that those are stationary images of a point in time. Aspiring to live in that point in time is very difficult. Young people may not understand that many people in bodybuilding go through cycles of bulking up and then dropping weight to fit a certain image for their competitions. That is fine for a bodybuilder, but it is not good for a 19 or 20-year-old university student to aspire to that, because they are at a time of meeting other people and creating relationships.

There is a ratchet effect. We see images of very large, muscular men, which people aspire to, and there is a cheap and effective way to get there; that is a real concern. That leads to a wider issue currently faced by societies across the western world: what is masculinity?

We have heard a lot about toxic masculinity, which allows space for the likes of Andrew Tate to step in. Lots of people listen to what he has to say, in part because he is saying, “Be strong, stand up, look after yourself.” On the other hand, he has been found to be completely wanting and is now under investigation. Is that the kind of role model we want in front of our young men? Young men who do not understand what masculinity is because they are not told within society will look for other options—be they the Marvel comics or the likes of Andrew Tate—to tell them what is acceptable to be masculine. That is a dangerous place to settle in.

But we are waking up to the issue; the online culture is starting to move towards calling it out. The likes of James Smith and Ben Carpenter talk openly about the pros and cons of the fitness industry, and how it has been marketed. The Women and Equalities Committee did a report on body image, as did the Health and Social Care Committee. The Advertising Standards Authority produced an interim report that identified the key issue of depictions of muscularity in advertising, and it hopes to have further information about that in quarter four of 2023. Awareness is there and the culture is starting to think about it, but we are still at least 10 years off in comparison to the female idea of body image.

We are not doing enough, which comes out when we speak to the likes of UKAD. I thank Trevor Pearce and Jane Rumble from UKAD for providing me with information when I met them. In 2019, a UKAD survey found that 34% of gym goers are aware of IPEDs being used in their gym. That is certainly my experience as a gym goer. Wherever I have been in the country, I have been aware of such drugs being taken, because I have found syringes and packets in the changing rooms. That is quite a scary thought, from my own anecdotal experience—yet one in three men who use gyms is finding the same.

The Medicecks survey of people who go to the gym found that 61% of men want to be bigger, and that 80% of men are aware of some of the side effects of steroids, yet three out of four of those men would consider using steroids or IPEDs. As I mentioned, one in 10 gym goers has bigorexia—a number that is thought to be increasing. Thinking back to being that young boy with my multigym at the age of 15, if I had had the online ability to get hold of such substances, and an ever-growing social media pressure to conform and have muscles, maybe I would have been tempted? That is a scary thought for the generations coming through.

In 2020, *The Times* reported that users could easily buy steroids through Instagram, even though they are class C drugs. The law says that class C drugs are lawful for personal use with a prescription, but it is illegal to distribute or supply them. In 2021, Border Force seized 1.225 million doses of anabolic steroids, which was down on the number seized a few years before—that does not cover other drugs that are available, such as the fat-stripping drug Clenbuterol—yet there were only 37 convictions for possession or supply last year. The trend has been for between 30 and 40 people to be convicted each year, over the last five years.

The Government have produced an updated drug strategy, called “From harm to hope: A 10-year drugs plan to cut crime and save lives”. The House of Commons Library confirmed to me that there is no mention of the words “steroid” or “IPED” in that report. The start of the report says:

“Over 300,000 people are addicted to heroin and crack cocaine in England. This is the biggest section of the illegal drugs market”.

Is it? Given that we expect 500,000 to 1 million people to have taken steroids, we simply do not know. That is the point I am driving at. The report talks about the principle of

“putting evidence at the heart of this approach”.

When it comes to IPEDs and steroids, we need data and evidence.

That leads me to my asks of the Government. Given that a Health Minister is responding, I think it is fair to concentrate on simply the health aspect of the issue. I ask for three things. First, will he commission the research into steroids and IPEDs suggested in the Health and Social Care Committee report on body image? Secondly, will he pull together the different Departments that the issue crosses over? The issue is not a single departmental issue. It is not covered simply by the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office or the Government Equalities Office; it is all of them—there is a crossover. We need to pull together in roundtables and a taskforce to think about how we deal with this.

My third ask is for education and awareness. We need to think about schools, outside agencies and the NHS—a bit like the Government have done with eating disorders. The number of people suffering eating disorders has skyrocketed, and the Government have responded well by getting the information and support out, and looking at ways to strategise. We are a long way off dealing with eating disorders, but this is the next big, similar crisis. I urge the Government to take that kind of strategy forward.

It would be remiss of me to come to the debate without offering wider solutions and there are some ideas that need to be talked about. They have pros and

cons; I raise them because we need to have the conversation. We could look at compulsory mandatory education for personal trainers, who are the most likely people to come into contact with gym goers. We could change the IPED laws, and make sentencing more severe; or do the opposite, and take them out, and say, “No, this is a health issue that we need to deal with.” The debate needs to happen.

We can look at examples from across the world. Norway has licensing of gyms. If new drugs were being found in a nightclub—with new drugs being found and one in three people being aware of the situation—the authorities would be knocking on the door saying, “Should we be licensing? Should we revoke that licence? What should we do about it?” We are a long way off putting such a scheme in place, but it is not beyond our remit to have a discussion about whether that is something we should do to increase the responsibility of the gym owners. There are pros and cons. Fundamentally, we do not have the data and none of the details has been explored enough. That leads us full circle; we really need to start a conversation—we need to talk about steroids in the UK.

4.57 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) for securing the debate and for his excellent introduction. He spoke passionately and eloquently, from both his personal and professional experience. It would be difficult for me to add very much insight to what he has already provided, and there was very little I could quibble with in what he had to say. I am grateful to him for highlighting the issue’s significance as a public health issue, and as a growing public health problem at that, not just here but internationally. I fully confess that it is an issue of which I was not properly aware.

As the hon. Member pointed out, growing numbers of people are using IPEDs, including anabolic steroids. For various reasons, it is not clear precisely how many people are doing so, but it is clearly a very significant number. The hon. Member said that it is around 500,000, while others say it is more. A variety of sports have been implicated historically, including rugby union, rugby league, athletics and cycling, as we have heard. Other users are now engaging in this practice simply for reasons of image enhancement, including a growing number of gym users.

Studies suggest that young men in their early 20s are the most likely to start down this path, and increased use appears to be assisted by comparatively easy access, particularly through online sales and postal delivery from abroad. Border Force has previously reported annual seizures of millions of steroid doses.

As we have heard, this usage has significant consequences for people’s health. We have heard about problems with kidneys, liver problems, heart attacks and strokes. As the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge) pointed out, there have been tragic cases where people have died from comparatively low amounts of steroid use. There are behavioural and mental health issues, including mood swings, aggression and eating disorders.

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Member mentions aggression. A common side effect of steroids is roid rage, which means that it is not just those who choose to use steroids who are impacted, but everyone around them, too, and that can lead to serious life-ruining consequences all around. Does the hon. Member agree that greater understanding of side effects is an imperative part of tackling the abuse of these drugs?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Member makes a valid point. One report I read suggested that when engaging with people who are already using steroids, sometimes the most persuasive factor in getting them to reconsider and move away from this conduct comes from speaking to them about the consequences for their mental health rather than the physical consequences. That appears to have more influence when it comes to behaviour. The hon. Member makes an interesting point.

Alone, most steroids are taken in pill form. If needle sharing is involved, there are other risks in terms of HIV and hep C. Use of counterfeits also further complicates risk. Of course, another consequence if they are used in sport is that unfairness is created and sporting integrity is undermined. As has been set out, the drugs are regulated under the Medicines Act 1968 and classified as class C under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

The question rightly posed to us today is: what more can we do? I speak from a position of weakness, but I agree that first and foremost, we all need to improve our knowledge of the issue. Evidence has to be at the heart of the approach, as the hon. Member for Bosworth has said, so how better can we understand the scale, incidence and causation of the problems that have been highlighted and thereby better craft a response?

As the hon. Member highlighted, last August the Health and Social Care Committee reported on the impact of body image on mental and physical health and recommended a national review of the growing use of anabolic steroids as it relates to body image. That seems to me to be an essential first step. That research will then shape our response, which will have to use a public health approach and education to tackle demand and to try to close off access as best we can. That, of course, will involve a cross-departmental approach, which was another important point made by the hon. Member.

On education and campaigning, there are two sides to the coin. First, we need to look at the material and propaganda influencing and driving people to a place where they feel it is necessary or desirable to access IPEDs. That includes media and social media, as hon. Members have said, with the all-prevalent perfect body images in the press, on TV and increasingly on social media and in online advertising. If anyone shows a remote interest in trying to keep fit or even just losing a few pounds, they suddenly find themselves bombarded on Instagram or Facebook or whatever else with relentless images of what has been referred to in the past as the “Love Island” look, which to me seems pretty much unachievable for anyone who cannot spend every waking hour in the gym or unless they use IPEDs.

The Health and Social Care Committee dealt with that point in its report, calling on the Government to work with advertisers to feature a wider variety of body

aesthetics and with industry and the Advertising Standards Authority to encourage advertisers and influencers not to doctor their images. The Committee said that

“the Government should introduce legislation that ensures commercial images are labelled with a logo where any part of the body, including its proportions and skin tone, are digitally altered.”

Those seem to be valuable suggestions that are certainly worth considering. The hon. Member for Bosworth pointed out that there has been some progress, but there is further to go.

As well as tackling the images and messages that promote the use of IPEDs, Government also need to raise awareness of the risks and how to minimise harm. Again, various Committee recommendations seem sensible, advocating for a campaign co-ordinated

“through existing steroid user support groups and targeted at areas of highest risk, such as gyms with a high proportion of body builders.”

We need to tackle head on the idea that these things are some sort of equivalent to supplements. They are in a different category altogether. The Committee also heard evidence stressing the importance of education about body image for young people, in terms of both critical thinking and appraising images, as well as self-worth. Again, the Government should strengthen those areas in education settings.

A report by the Scottish Drugs Forum noted the significance of close friends as a source of IPEDs. It suggested that peer education programmes could be an important way of overcoming that, with community members cascading positive health messages. And this is not just about education; mental health strategies need to be revisited as well, and we need to think about how we can support people struggling with self-esteem amid a bombardment of images.

Finally, we also need to consider appropriately targeted harm reduction advice and drugs services. There are many examples of good work out there. Yorkshire and the Humber has a regional steroid and IPED reference group and a workers forum of more than 30 people and with every district represented. In Glasgow, an image and performance enhancing drugs clinic provides testing, needle exchange services, consultation and advice on harm reduction and alternatives. Edinburgh, too, has a steroid clinic based in the harm reduction team of NHS Lothian. It provides advice services, equipment and testing, psychological services, and support to stop with mental and physical assistance. There is good work happening in the different parts of the United Kingdom. We should learn from that, and seek to ensure that more people around the various countries can benefit from it. Those are just a few ideas.

I will close by thanking the hon. Member for Bosworth again for bringing forward this debate. None of us have all the answers; I certainly do not—far from it. He had lots of ideas. He highlighted that there are pros and cons to some of them. Some of them are quite bold or controversial, but they are definitely worth discussing. His central point was that we need to have evidence to make the discussion as fully informed as possible. We should revisit this topic, and ensure that we continue to drive forward as we seek to address what is a growing public health issue.

5.5 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on securing this debate. It is an important topic and he is doing some excellent campaigning. His description of bigorexia, the impact of social media and all the pressures on young men to get the perfect body image was powerful. It is true that we have been talking about these issues when it comes to women for a long time, but we have not been talking about men. I have twin boys who are 12 years old, and they tell me repeatedly that they want a six pack. They do not have one and they will not have one any time soon, but they are already thinking in that way.

The hon. Member for Bosworth mentioned Andrew Tate as a particularly powerful online influencer; they are putting great pressure on our young boys. I took a group of scouts around Parliament last week, and they were all telling me how poor Andrew Tate had been badly done by and locked up in prison for no reason. The hon. Member made the point that sometimes some of these men talk sense and sound like they are all about empowering men, but on the other hand they are being incredibly misogynistic and spreading awful mistruths. That is very true; I see it time and again.

This is an important conversation to have, and there is a wider conversation about the role that we can all play in developing what it means to be a man. I have done lots of debates about knife crime, and we talk endlessly about boys who feel they have to carry knives and be macho in order to be a man. There are boys now who go to the gym and are tempted to take steroids because they feel that is what it is to be a man. There is the growth of the horrific incel movement, with men who define themselves as not being attractive and not able to attract women. The Government need to think about all those important things in the round. It is a wider issue than this debate today.

We have covered a lot of the issues that the Government need to think about. The first thing is the law. As has been said, steroids are a class C drug, so they are illegal to own and sell. Possession is punishable by up to two years in prison or a fine, and people can get 14 years in prison for supply. Other drugs are illegal to ship or sell, but not to buy or possess. An example is the tanning drug melanotan, which I had not heard of until this debate, but it sounds like a strange thing to want to do. As with all classified substances, the Government are responsible for clamping down on the sale and use of those drugs. Although the Opposition said that the 10-year drugs plan did not go far enough, it did contain a lot of good policies. However, the fact that it did not include any of those steroids is amiss, and perhaps the Government should look at that again.

We have already talked about the physical side effects, which go way beyond what people read about when they decide that they want to get steroids. There are the potentially lethal impacts of strokes or heart attacks, as well as erectile dysfunction, sterility and loss of hair. We clearly need more information on all those things to tell people what they are likely to face if they take steroids. The other aspect is mental health. We know that use of these drugs is very high. It seems there is a debate online about the number being between 500,000 and 1 million.

Perhaps 1 million is not quite right, but a large number of people in the UK use steroids; the hon. Member for Bosworth referred to the figures from UK Anti-Doping.

In a 2016 survey, 56% of steroid users said they were motivated by improving their body image, so getting stronger and fitter is not the driver here—it is body image. We all know the pressures to look good and conform to shockingly rigid beauty standards that are presented by the media. “Love Island” is back on television, as the hon. Member for Bosworth said, and there is really powerful pressure that very few of us are able to ignore. I certainly worry about my weight all the time, and why would men not do the same? We do not talk about that as much as we should.

Fads come and go, and new things will come on the market as soon as we tackle some of the older things. Recently I saw reports of a new procedure called buccal fat removal, which takes the fat out of one’s cheek. It is quite extraordinary, but apparently suddenly very popular. Surgeries and techniques and fitness tips change almost daily, but their impact on our mental health, especially that of young people, is relenting.

A study in 2021 found that 54% of men displayed signs of body dysmorphia and said that low body confidence had negative effects on aspects of their lives, while 49% of women admitted to often thinking about being lean and maintaining an extreme exercise programme and feeling anxiety at missing a workout. Over 80% of those aged 18 to 24 showed at least one sign of body dysmorphia. We have heard many more stats. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) talked about lots of the recommendations. The Women and Equalities Committee has heard that over 60% of women feel negatively about their bodies, but the equivalent figure for men does not come to the fore in the way that it should.

It is important to say that there is help out there for people who need it. The eating disorder charity Beat and the Campaign Against Living Miserably offer support to those affected by eating disorders, body dysmorphia and drugs. Help is out there for everyone, including men. Whatever toxic male influencers may say, there is no shame in seeking help for performance-enhancing drug use and body image issues. It is a sign of bravery and strength, not weakness. We should be clear that alongside proper enforcement of the law to tackle the crime, we should also tackle the causes of the crime. The next Labour Government will guarantee mental health treatment within a month for all who need it. That is a wider issue that the Government need to address.

The hon. Member for Bosworth very eloquently asked questions to the Minister. I know he is a Health Minister, so it is hard for him to talk about Home Office issues, but hopefully he can pass on the comments from this debate to his Home Office colleagues. There is a question about what is being done to stop the sale of these steroids. I was able to find a vast number of websites just by looking on Google. The websites ukroids247.com and hench-club.com will sell someone steroids. There is also onlinesteroidsuk.org. There were absolutely loads of them.

Although selling steroids is illegal and the Government say they are acting to stop such websites, there is little evidence that anything much is being done, so I ask the Minister: what will the Home Office do to tackle the sale of controlled IPEDs online? Will he look again at

[Sarah Jones]

the 10-year drug strategy and perhaps expand it into this space? Will the Government commission a national review on steroid use, as has been mentioned, which the Health and Social Care Committee recommended?

The reasons that people use steroids and other image and performance-enhancing drugs are complex, but the drugs are illegal and cause serious harm to physical and mental health. This is an issue of public health as much as one of crime. It is clear from today that the Government must go further. We all need to catch up on the changing nature of the drugs that are available for people to buy. We need to move at the same speed as social media and do what we can to ease the pressure on young men in particular to build their body image by using these kinds of drugs. I am looking forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that he can go to 5.38 pm, while obviously leaving some time for Dr Evans to wind up.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). I knew as soon as he secured the debate that he would bring us something special, and he did not disappoint—it was a fascinating speech. Without wishing to spoil the impact of my response, there were so many good questions and important ideas in it that I will not be able to bottom all of them out this afternoon, but we should see this as the start of a conversation that I am keen to pursue with him. Likewise, there were many important and interesting observations from other hon. Members, including about the issue of roid rage, which was raised by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), and about the position of young men in society, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher). I was sorry to hear about the tragic case of Matt, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge), and I am sure our hearts go out to his parents and family.

I will touch on the positive steps we took last week in the substance misuse and recovery strategy—the 10-year drugs strategy. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth mentioned that the strategy has a heavy focus on alcohol, heroin and crack, and the reasons for that are obvious. Indeed, as part of the launch, I met my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who will appreciate that there is a big focus on those drugs because they drive about half of all acquisitive crime. Alcohol is one of the big killers and addictions that causes so many problems. As part of that 10-year drugs strategy, we have created a ministerial working group across Departments of exactly the kind that my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth talked about creating. There is every reason to look, through that group, at what we can collectively do, particularly on the illegal sale of some of these drugs.

To mention a bit about the strategy, this is a £421 million investment over the next two years to improve the number of recovery and treatment places. Perhaps I can cheekily use this opportunity to thank everyone working

in the drug and alcohol treatment sector for all the fantastic work they are already doing, and there are many other things we want to extend out to, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth has raised today.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I draw Members' attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I am a practising addiction psychiatrist. I thank the Minister for the focus he is bringing to bear on this area and for the fact that the Government have put in place a comprehensive strategy for the next 10 years that focuses on alcohol, crack cocaine and opiate use, which is absolutely the right focus. I also thank him for the fact that the strategy is backed up with substantial investment, which is very much needed and which I am sure will make a big difference over time.

However, we do not have good data collection for steroid misuse. A good way of collecting data about drug use in the general population is through the crime survey for England and Wales. I wonder whether the Minister might be able to take that away from the debate and collect some more robust data to ensure that steroid use is properly captured in that crime survey. Perhaps he might have conversations with colleagues in other Departments because that will give us a much stronger basis to work from, and an evidence base is important in drug and alcohol treatment.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend brings huge expertise to the debate. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth are right that we need better data. Perhaps one route is through the CSEW, as he says. It may be that there are other routes for getting better data on prevalence. There are limits to how much people will report some of these crimes when it is something they are taking, rather than a case of stealing to fund that, but there may be different ways we can get the right data.

In terms of what we know, a small cohort of people—only 0.2% of people aged between 16 and 59—use steroids. However, these individuals, as my hon. Friend and other Members have pointed out, may not be fully aware of the health risks associated with the drug or the impact it can have on their mental or physical health. As Members present certainly know, anabolic steroids are prescription-only medicines that help patients gain weight and rebuild tissues that have become weak because of serious injury or illness—that is their clinical use. These drugs are sometimes taken without medical advice to try to improve muscle mass or athletic performance. Anabolic steroids are a class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Although it is not illegal to possess them for personal use, possession, importation and exportation are illegal if deemed to be with the intent to supply others. So people who are involved in these issues need to be extremely careful.

Lots of work is under way across multiple Departments on this important issue, and I want to talk about just some of the actions the Government are taking, notwithstanding the need to do more on a range of fronts. The Government are committed to stopping the illegal trade in human medicines. The majority of IPEDs are sold online through illegal trading websites based overseas. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency works with private sector partners

to try to reduce the presence of such websites and, with the Home Office Border Force, to intercept and seize medicines entering the UK.

We are also taking action in the Online Safety Bill to prevent criminal activity, including the illegal sale of steroids. The intention is that companies that fail to comply with the Bill when it has been enacted will face stiff financial penalties or, in the most serious cases, have their sites blocked by the independent regulator, Ofcom. I hope that that addresses some of the concerns about the frightening-sounding websites that the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) mentioned.

Of course, we know that preventing the trade in steroids is not enough to tackle the problem. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth rightly said, the wider issue lies with the increased prevalence of body dysmorphia and the societal preference for young men to look a particular way. The rise of social media has undoubtedly increased this pressure in recent years, as young people have greater access to platforms promoting often unrealistic and digitally altered body images.

Schools play a really important role in helping young people to make positive choices about their wellbeing through their compulsory relationships, sex and health education curriculum. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities has worked with the Department for Education to create quality teaching resources for teachers in order to help prevent substance abuse and to address some of the issues with young people feeling that they should look a certain, completely unrealistic. To pick up on some of the horrifying stories that the hon. Member for Croydon Central shared about the young Scouts she met who were all fans of Andrew Tate, that is also something that we need to address in education in schools.

As well as informing students about the risks associated with harmful substances—this goes to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth made about harm reduction as well as prevalence reduction—schools have an important duty to protect pupils from harm and to provide mental and physical health support. Through statutory health education, secondary school pupils are taught about the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world, including how people may curate a particular image of their life online, how information is targeted at them, and how to be a discerning consumer of information online. I am always interested in how we can improve what is taught in schools, because the world facing young people is so different from the world that the generation of people represented here experienced when they were young.

I am proud to highlight that the Government have committed to offer all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025. That will enable schools to introduce effective, whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. Backed by £10 million in 2022-23, over 8,000 schools and colleges have taken up the offer so far.

We are also taking significant steps to tackle body image issues. On 2 February, the Government responded to the Health and Social Care Committee's important report on the impact of body image on mental and physical health. We welcomed the Committee's report and recommendations, and we agree with the Committee that image and performance-enhancing drugs are a significant public health issue. However, we know that

prevention is better than cure, and when it comes to harmful substances, it is crucial that we ensure the public have access to sufficient information to inform them of the harms associated with substances such as steroids. The Government-commissioned website Talk to FRANK provides detailed information on the mental and physical health risks of taking steroids, and it is updated on a regular basis.

Additionally, UK Anti-Doping already has an outreach and communication programme that is run in partnership with ukactive, which has been live since 2018. The partnership aims to improve education and awareness around image and performance-enhancing drugs in gyms and leisure centres because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth rightly pointed out, such places are a focus for these issues. They are the right places to target, and we need to work with sporting bodies, gyms and the like to try to tackle the problems where they are most concentrated.

I draw Members' attention to the investment that we are making in mental health services. The Government will have invested £2.3 billion a year by 2024 in expanding the services available in England, including for people with body dysmorphic disorder. An additional £54 million is being invested in children and young people's community eating disorder services in 2022-23. That investment is alongside the development of a major conditions strategy, which will address prevention and treatment for mental ill health, with an aim of producing an interim report in the summer.

I once again thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on an important issue, and for his many, many ideas. He set out a whole suite of things that we need to be doing. It was a fascinating speech. I commend his work in this area, including his image campaign last year, which achieved national media coverage and will no doubt have had a beneficial impact.

The Government are taking significant steps to protect the mental health of the nation, and particularly young people, and we are ensuring that the right support is in place for those suffering or at risk of body dysmorphic issues. Although a review is not currently planned, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will continue to work closely on tackling the use of anabolic steroids, educating the public on the risks associated with them and ensuring that mental health support is available for all those who need it.

5.26 pm

Dr Evans: Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. Indeed, I thank both the Chairs we have had during this debate, as well as the Clerks for staying late and the officials for being here.

I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for talking about algorithms and body image. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge), who is no longer in his place, raised the sad case of Matt. The constant campaigning of my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for men's health has been fantastic. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) hit the nail on the head: this issue is about how we record data.

[*Dr Luke Evans*]

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for his point about bold ideas. The whole point of this discussion is that no stone should be left unturned. The bold ideas might not be right, but they need to be explored, because that is the key thing to do when trying to deal with this issue.

I am glad to hear about the twins of the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). These are exactly the conversations that people should be having up and down the country. Mothers, fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers should be asking questions about what young people are aware of and what they are seeing.

It is lovely to come into a debate after three years and hear that there is unanimous support across the House on this issue and a desire to fill the void, because there is a worry that the likes of Andrew Tate will step into it. I would love to take the Minister up on his “keen pursuit”—to quote him—of this issue. We are at the start of a road, and this is all about having a conversation about steroids in the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of steroid and image and performance enhancing drug use.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 21 February 2023

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence: Annual Estimate 2023-24

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

The Ministry of Defence Votes A 2023-24 estimate will be laid before the House on 21 February 2023 as HC 1036. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2023-24, including increases for reserve naval and marines forces, and a decrease for Army regulars and Army Reserve (as well as Army Regular Reserve). Full details can be found in the publication.

These numbers do not constitute the strength of the armed forces, which is published separately in the UK armed forces quarterly service personnel statistics.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-02-21/HCWS570/>

[HCWS570]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Hormone Replacement Therapy: Prescriptions

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Around 400,000 women enter the menopause each year in the UK. Around three quarters of women will experience menopause symptoms, and around a quarter of women will experience severe symptoms. Symptoms can affect a person's physical and mental health as well as their participation in the workplace and personal lives.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is the main treatment for menopause symptoms. Around 15% of women aged 45-64 in England are currently prescribed HRT, this has increased rapidly in the last two years from around 11% and continues to increase.

To ensure that women can access the treatment they need, this Government made a commitment to reduce the cost of HRT prescriptions for menopausal women.

I am pleased to announce today that from 1 April 2023 women will be able to apply for a HRT prescription prepayment certificate (HRT PPC).

The HRT PPC will cost the equivalent of two single prescription charges, currently £18.70 and will be valid for 12 months. The HRT PPC can be used against a list of HRT prescription items, and a patient can use this against an unlimited number of HRT items during its validity.

The HRT PPC will offer savings to patients currently paying for their HRT medicines through individual charges, and for many patients the HRT PPC will also be more cost-effective than a three or 12-month PPC if they only require HRT medicines.

It is estimated that the HRT PPC will benefit approximately 400,000 patients who do not qualify for an existing prescription charge exemption.

Menopause is a priority area within the women's health strategy for England. The strategy was published last summer and sets out an ambitious new agenda for improving the health and wellbeing of women and girls and improving how the health and care system listens to women. The introduction of the HRT PPC delivers one of our year one priorities for the women's health strategy for England.

Reducing the cost of HRT medicines is just one part of our ongoing programme of work to improve support for menopause and access to HRT.

The Government have accepted the recommendations of the HRT taskforce, including encouraging and supporting manufacturers to boost supply to meet growing demand and continuing to issue serious shortages protocols when needed. The Department closely monitors the supply of HRT and regularly meets with individual suppliers, as well as hosting quarterly roundtables with industry to ensure a continuous supply of HRT.

The NHS England national menopause care improvement programme is improving clinical care for menopause and training for healthcare professionals, and we are also working across Government and with employers to improve workplace support, and boosting menopause research and evidence.

[HCWS572]

Organ Utilisation Group Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):

The House will remember that, under this Government, Max and Keira's law was introduced—a law that garnered all-party support—changing the legal basis of consent for organ donation to one of deemed consent, commonly referred to as “opt out”. At that time the Government committed to 700 additional transplants per year which reflected the overwhelming support of the population in helping others, after death, through the gift of organ donation. Following this legislation, the Government set up the Organ Utilisation Group (OUG) under the expert chairmanship of Professor Sir Steve Powis to deliver improvements in the number of organs that are accepted and utilised for successful transplant in adult and paediatric patients.

The House can be justly proud of the role that British clinicians and scientists have played in the history of successful transplantation. But not many realise that this leadership continues today, particularly in the field of new methods of organ preservation and perfusion. The OUG heard evidence that described the importance of continued support to maintain that leadership status both for patients in the United Kingdom and across the globe.

The Government also wish to pay tribute to patient groups, individual patients and their carers who gave time and consideration to significant engagement with the work of the OUG. It is clear the output of the report has benefited from this engagement to a significant extent.

The Government welcome the 12 recommendations in the report and note that many of these do not require extra resource; they simply need a different way of working, with increased collaboration across organisations that deliver the service. I am confident that the recommendations will give benefits to those in need of a transplant with the aim that all patients should have fair and equitable access to transplant services regardless of their background or heritage or where they live in the country.

I also wish to recognise the donation and transplant teams across the country for their hard work during the pandemic. Their use of new collaborative processes has enabled people at the end of life who wished to donate to have these wishes honoured, and those patients who desperately needed a transplant to have that procedure performed, often through night-time surgery. Recommendations in the report also address the need for a robust and sustainable service that acknowledges this round-the-clock vital activity.

The OUG heard evidence from national and international stakeholders, which led to the following themes and recommendations. Each recommendation is accompanied by supporting actions to inform implementation.

Theme 1: Placing the patient at the heart of the service

Recommendation 1: Patients who are being considered for transplantation, referral or listing must be supported and have equal access to services irrespective of their personal circumstances including ethnic, geographical, socio-economic status or sex.

Recommendation 2: Transplant services must be run with reference to patient feedback, including frequent opportunities to listen and act on views from less heard voices.

Theme 2: An operational infrastructure that maximises transplant potential

Recommendation 3: Standardised patient pathways must be developed and made available for each organ type, with well-defined timescales for each stage of the pathway. Data available for each stage of the pathway informs monitoring against best practice. Clinical leads for utilisation support the review of the data, to identify and drive local improvement initiatives.

Recommendation 4: Transplant units must build on the lessons learned during the covid-19 pandemic and increase further the collaborative effort across units.

Recommendation 5: NHS England must undertake a comprehensive review of cardiothoracic services to ensure that services in place are sufficiently sustainable and resilient and are able to provide the best possible outcome for patients.

Theme 3: Creating a sustainable workforce that is fit for the future

Recommendation 6: A national transplant workforce template must be developed to provide definitions of the skill mix for an effective, safe and resilient transplant workforce that is fit for current and future demands.

Theme 4: Data provision that informs decisions and drives improvements

Recommendation 7: The provision of data must be transformed, using digital approaches to provide access to complete, accurate and standardised data and information to everyone who needs it at critical decision points throughout the donation to transplantation pathway.

Theme 5: Driving and supporting innovation

Recommendation 8: National multi-organ centres for organ assessment and repair prior to transplantation must be established to provide the optimum practical steps to bring new techniques

into everyday clinical therapy as rapidly as possible, to maximise the number and quality of organs available for transplant and support logistics at transplant units.

Recommendation 9: A national oversight system must be established that makes the best use of the UK's world leading innovation in assessment, perfusion and preservation of donated organs.

Theme 6: Delivering improvements through new strategic and commissioning frameworks

Recommendation 10: All NHS trusts with a transplant programme must have a transplant utilisation strategy to maximise organ utilisation.

Recommendation 11: National measurable outcomes must be defined and agreed in order to prioritise, monitor and evaluate the success of key strategies, tools and processes.

Recommendation 12: Robust commissioning frameworks must be in place, with well-defined roles and responsibilities of the various agencies involved in organ transplantation, particularly focusing on the relationship between NHS Blood and Transport and commissioners. Memorandums of understanding (MoUs) across the agencies must be created to formalise the process for the joint commissioning of transplant services.

The Government are grateful to Professor Sir Steve Powis and all the members and observers of the OUG. We have committed to an implementation oversight group that will be led by the Department of Health and Social Care, working with expert stakeholders in organ utilisation to drive forward implementation of the recommendations.

The House will remember many heartfelt and emotional interventions from members across all parties at the time when Max and Keira's law was passed. The recommendations in this report follow up on that important change in our legislation and, once properly implemented, will increase transplants for patients in desperate need of donated organs and tissues wherever it is safe to do so.

[HCWS569]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Plymouth Shooting

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): On 12 August 2021, Jake Davison shot and killed his mother, Maxine Davison, Lee and Sophie Martyn, Stephen Washington and Kate Shepherd, using his licensed shotgun. He then shot and killed himself.

This was an horrific incident, and as the jury to the inquest into these deaths returned their findings of unlawful killings yesterday afternoon, our thoughts once again go out to the families and friends of the victims, and to the whole of the local community in Keyham.

It is anticipated that the coroner will be issuing prevention of future deaths reports shortly in which recommendations will be made. If, as expected, the Home Office receives a report, we will of course consider the report and recommendations very carefully and respond to the coroner.

[HCWS571]

Petitions

Tuesday 21 February 2023

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Fuel Utility Company Fixed Tariff Cancellations

The petition of Adrian Paul,

Declares that energy companies are able to charge new home owners or renters higher prices by automatically placing them on new standard tariffs compared to their previous fixed tariffs; notes that a home owner may only have insufficient funds for just one monthly Direct Debit payment to be kicked off a fixed tariffs; further notes that direct debits can be cancelled accidentally and that direct debits can be wrongly cancelled or set up incorrectly, causing further issues.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with OFGEM to make sure utility companies are not to be able to end home owners and renters lower fixed tariffs without a two month period of non-payment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002804]

NHS Nurses, Paramedics and Auxiliary Staff Pay Rises

The petition of Adrian Paul,

Declares that millions of employed lower-tier nurses, paramedics and auxiliary staff, who are working directly for the NHS, are already significantly struggling to pay their rent or mortgage payments and pay their bills; notes that with the cost of living increase and inflation the ability for nurses and other NHS workers to pay their bills will become increasingly difficult.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to increase NHS salaries in line with inflation, year on year alongside free hospital parking for all nurses, doctors, paramedics and auxiliary staff.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002805]

Pharmaceutical Consumer Product Labelling in Relation to Animal Safety

The petition of Adrian Paul,

Declares that current pharmaceutical laws do not currently appear to force manufacturers of medicines and medical treatments, in particular creams, to add warnings to their product packaging about their toxicity to pets and other animals; notes that without these warnings pets and animals can be accidentally and unintentionally injured, suffer and die; further declares that the petitioner's own pet cat suffered greatly, and died with four days, as a result of his application of Bayer's Germolene antiseptic cream to wounds of his cat's face, further declares that warnings on products should clearly and emphatically state, in sufficiently large capital letters, that their products are 'for human use only' and 'Warning: this product is toxic to pets and animals.'

The Petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently introduce legislation that forces UK pharmaceutical companies, as well as those who import medicinal products to the UK, to clearly label any products which are toxic to pets and animals, with special regard to products which can lead to the death of pets and animals.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002803]

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

End Serco using hotels in Stoke-on-Trent to house migrants

The petition of residents of the constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke,

Declares that Serco and the Home Office end the use of hotels in Stoke-on-Trent for asylum seekers and illegal economic migrants, notes that Stoke-on-Trent has already taken over 800 people as part of the Asylum Dispersal Scheme and further that Stoke-on-Trent has therefore done its bit in housing asylum seekers and illegal economic migrants.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge to the Government to ensure that no more hotels in Stoke-on-Trent are used as part of the UK asylum and immigration system, and that those currently in use are phased out over the next six months.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jonathan Gullis, *Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 1084.]

[P002788]

Observations from the Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):

The Government have a statutory obligation to provide destitute asylum seekers with accommodation and other support while their application for asylum is being considered under the Immigration Act. The increase in dangerous small boat crossings has caused an unprecedented strain on the asylum system. This has necessitated our use of hotels across the UK, as a contingency, including in Stoke-on-Trent.

Use of hotels for accommodation has implications for host communities, respective councils and local public services. The Government are committed to working co-operatively with relevant partners across local communities and the public and private sectors to ensure hotel accommodation is managed well with limited impact on services.

As the Prime Minister outlined in his recent speech on migration, the accommodation portfolio within the Home Office is under significant pressure. As part of this commitment on migration, we are working tirelessly to end the use of hotels and find additional dispersal accommodation across the UK, to provide medium-term accommodation to asylum seekers while their claims are decided. In this way we plan to significantly reduce our reliance on contingency asylum accommodation. But in the meantime, we must take urgent steps to provide accommodation in line with our obligations.

The record number of people that have crossed the Channel in small boats in recent years has placed the Home Office's asylum support infrastructure and accommodation services under immense pressure.

Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a statutory obligation to provide asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute with accommodation and support while their claim is under consideration. Eligible asylum seekers are ordinarily placed in housing accommodation; however, the unprecedented number of small boat arrivals has forced the Home Office to consider alternative accommodation options to ensure that we meet our statutory obligations, which has resulted in the temporary use of hotels across the UK, including in Stoke-on-Trent.

Placing asylum seekers in hotels is burdensome on local communities, expensive for the taxpayer and does not meet the needs of asylum seekers as we would like. The Home Office is working tirelessly, alongside other

Government Departments, to reduce the Government's dependency on hotels for contingency accommodation through a package of long-term and short-term measures.

The enduring solution to this challenge is to stop the illegal, dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings that are overwhelming our asylum system, and to that end the Prime Minister announced a package of robust new measures on 13 December 2022 to crack down on illegal immigration. Meanwhile we are taking a range of steps to reduce our dependency on hotels to support those already in the asylum system, including by tackling the asylum legacy caseload so that people can receive a decision and exit the system, either by returning to their home country or by granting them asylum so they can begin to make a contribution to the UK.

The Home Office maintains regular dialogue with key stakeholders in Stoke-on-Trent, and remains committed to working with local partners to mitigate the impact of hotel accommodation on local communities as much as possible.

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Tuesday 28 February 2023**

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