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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 March 2023

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 19 DECEMBER 2019]

FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 729

SIXTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 6 March 2023

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pension Credit

1. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of eligible people claiming pension credit. [903868]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): My Department has carried out a comprehensive campaign of communication since April 2022 to promote pension credit. I am pleased to inform the House that the average number of pension credit applications is up 73% compared with this time last year.

Simon Baynes: I strongly backed my right hon. Friend's campaign in December last year, particularly in my Clwyd South constituency. Will he give us a further assessment of how effective that campaign has been in Wales and across the rest of the UK?

Mel Stride: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that he has been doing in his constituency on this matter. I can inform him that for the week commencing 12 December, for example, there were 7,200 claims, which is a 177% increase compared with this time last year.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): This is not party political; we all want to make sure that pensioners in need get the help and support that they can get. The Secretary of State will understand, though, that in communities such as mine there are still too many pensioners eligible for pension credit who are not yet accessing it. Given the success of his campaign so far, what further will he do to ensure that the really hard-to-reach pensioners get the support that they deserve and need?

Mel Stride: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's question and the non-partisan way in which he presented it. He is absolutely right; there must be no let-up in this matter. Two thirds of those we believe are eligible for pension credit receive it, but that means that one third do not. We cannot identify them precisely in advance, which is why communication is so important. We will write to 11,000 pensioners soon to tell them about the uprating and to stress the point about pension credit. From today, we are launching television advertisements to further that message.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Government seem to be trying to pat themselves on the back after years of failure on pension credit. As we just heard, hundreds of thousands of pensioners are still missing out on a vital top-up benefit that is needed to get them through the cost of living crisis. Why has the Government's response been so ineffective, and what on earth will the Government do about their dismal failure to help pensioners during their hour of need?

Mel Stride: I am very surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman pose that question, first, because of his party's record on this matter when they were in government;

and secondly, because of the clear progress that I have outlined to the House today and on previous occasions about the increase in take-up that the Government are securing.

Pensioner Poverty: State Pension Age

2. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increasing the state pension age on trends in the level of pensioner poverty. [903869]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): My review of the state pension age is under way. The review will consider a wide range of evidence, including two independent reports, to assess whether the rules on pensionable age remain appropriate.

Patrick Grady: I hope that the evidence that the Secretary of State examines includes analysis by Age UK that 1.5 million pre-state pension age households have no savings at all. Age UK warns that accelerating the rise of the state pension age

“will condemn millions to a miserable and impoverished run up to retirement”.

Instead of risking that increase in pensioner poverty, should he not establish an independent pensions and savings commission to ensure that pension policies are fit for purpose and reflect the demographic needs of different parts of the United Kingdom?

Mel Stride: The two reports to which I have just referred are independent—from the Government Actuary’s Department, on matters such as life expectancy; and from Baroness Neville-Rolfe, on the metrics that should be taken into account in determining when the next increase in the state pension age should occur. We certainly take into account issues such as pensioner poverty, on which we have an excellent record. In fact, relative pensioner poverty before housing has halved since 1999, and there are 400,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty—that is before or after housing—compared with 2009-10.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is it realistic to continue to expect people to spend a third of their lives on a pension?

Mel Stride: I have great respect for my right hon. Friend, but I am afraid that although he tempts me to answer that question, I cannot prejudge the decisions that I will take in the review.

Economic Inactivity: Working-age People

3. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce levels of economic inactivity among working-age people. [903870]

10. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce levels of economic inactivity among working-age people. [903877]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The Prime Minister has asked me to review the matter of economic inactivity, and the results of that review will be shared with the House shortly.

Rob Butler: One of the keys to getting working-age people to return to work is obviously providing the right incentives, such as the training programmes and advice provided by my right hon. Friend’s Department—the likes of Jobcentre Plus—but it is also important to remove disincentives. What discussions is he having with Treasury colleagues about ensuring that tax policy, especially on pensions, does not stand in the way of people who have skills and experience staying in, or returning to, the workplace?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter, which of course is well known to the Chancellor and Treasury colleagues. We have a variety of discussions with the Treasury on those kinds of matters and others. Of course, tax policy is a matter for the Treasury.

Stephen Hammond: I commend my right hon. Friend for the work that the Department is doing to try to reduce economic inactivity. He will know that many of the over-50s moving out of employment and into economic inactivity are concentrated in the self-employed and part-time workforces. Can he confirm that his review will look at measures to bring those people back into the workforce?

Mel Stride: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are most certainly looking carefully at that particular cohort of people who have prematurely retired—if I may use that term—and are over the age of 50. It is one of the biggest cohorts that we are trying to encourage back into the workforce, and I will have more to say on that matter in due course.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The pandemic made a revolutionary change to the way we work. I know the Secretary of State has heard me mention Work Hull: Work Happy before, but research published today by the Phoenix Group on economic inactivity in the over-50s states that “flexible work...support with new technologies...and the opportunity to work from home” are favoured support strands for people returning to work. Will the Secretary of State therefore back Labour’s plan to make flexible working a force for good for all workers?

Mel Stride: I very much welcome the hon. Lady’s question—I certainly enjoyed my time working with her on the Treasury Committee, where she raised these matters with great passion. She is absolutely right that flexible working is the way forward, and not just for the over-50s but often for those who have disabilities. This is a big opportunity that we need to seize.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I understand that the latest figures reveal that there are 788,000 young people not in employment, education or training. Does the Secretary of State regard that as an acceptable figure, and if not, how and when is he going to tackle it?

Mel Stride: Even one person in the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman refers to is one too many. We are going to come forward very shortly with further measures on how we address those particular people, and at the time of the Budget on 15 March—which is very close now—the hon. Gentleman will probably learn more.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I understand that Ministers are struggling to convince the Office for Budget Responsibility that their inactivity plan will get half a million people back to work. One way in which the Secretary of State could hit his target is by encouraging more parents to move into work. Of course, many women, in particular, are blocked from returning to work because of childcare costs. Given that we should be doing more to help parents move into work, why has he now frozen the childcare cost cap in universal credit for the seventh year in a row?

Mel Stride: As to whether the OBR is or is not scoring the various measures that are being presented to it by the Treasury, I am intrigued as to how the right hon. Gentleman seems to know that it is having problems. The OBR operates under conditions of utter confidentiality in these matters, and I would not doubt that that is the way it has proceeded this time around. As for childcare, he is absolutely right. He will have to be a little patient—I know that he sometimes struggles to be patient—and we will then come forward with measures, and no doubt we will have something to say about the matter he has raised.

Jonathan Ashworth: I know that because the Secretary of State's Government sources briefed *The Sunday Times* yesterday on that particular point, but I will wait and see. I will wait for the OBR report next week, and we will see what target for inactivity the Government publish and what the OBR endorses. He will know that many working parents would return to work if they could afford childcare, but many are expected to find hundreds of pounds—sometimes £1,000—to pay for childcare up front. Who has £1,000 down the back of a sofa? Will he make universal credit work by introducing more flexibility in how it operates, or is he prepared to punish hard-working parents by pushing them into more debt?

Mel Stride: I am afraid that I am just going to have to repeat what I have said, which is that the right hon. Gentleman will have to be patient. I am confident that we will have some things to say about the matters he has raised, but he will just have to wait another couple of weeks before he learns what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Post pandemic, and under this uncaring Conservative Government, we have seen sanctions skyrocket, pushing many people into destitution. Can the Secretary of State come to the Dispatch Box and outline how plunging people into poverty helps deal with economic inactivity? Is it not the case that the only activity it stimulates is at local food banks?

Mel Stride: I am surprised, in a way, that the hon. Gentleman raises the issue of poverty, because what we have seen, certainly since 2010 and under this Government, has been absolute levels of poverty declining and fewer children growing up in workless homes, for example, in distinct contrast to Governments prior to my party coming into office.

Economic Inactivity: Towns and Cities

4. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): What estimate he has made of levels of economic inactivity in towns and cities. [903871]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The Office for National Statistics regularly publishes statistics relating to estimates of local inactivity. I have been leading work across Government with a further piece on participation, and the Chancellor and I will shortly be setting out more details of our plans.

Mick Whitley: Some 2.5 million people are economically inactive as a result of long-term illness, and half a million have left the labour market due to ill health since 2019. Does the Secretary of State accept that tackling health inequalities and improving health outcomes in deprived communities such as Birkenhead is essential to achieving equitable economic growth? Can he inform the House what conversations he has had with colleagues across the Cabinet about the need for a holistic economic strategy that recognises that health and wealth are inextricably linked?

Mel Stride: It is important that we take into account the issues of poverty and regional variations to which the hon. Gentleman refers. They lie right at the heart of all the decisions we have taken. We have come forward in recent times with significant cost of living support measures. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) will be taking through the remaining stages of the Social Security (Additional Payments) (No. 2) Bill this very afternoon to address the people to whom the hon. Gentleman refers.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend saw my article in *The Times* a few weeks ago, but it discussed opportunities for towns, such as Mansfield, that have specific local requirements when it comes to tackling economic inactivity, the opportunities of building bespoke local schemes with local employers and training providers, and the opportunities from those relationships on a local level as part of a wider strategy within the region. What is his stance on devolving decision-making powers in this space down to local areas?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises a significant and important point. There are areas, particularly around the Work and Health programme, where we have done exactly that. We are engaged in discussions, contingent upon or subsequent to the White Paper that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities published on levelling up, and in particular with areas such as the west midlands and Greater Manchester, to make sure that we leverage the knowledge, know-how, expertise and all the resources they have at the local level to continue to bring people back into work.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is always a joy at Question Time to hear Labour MPs supporting Labour policy, but even more so to hear Conservative MPs supporting Labour's policy of localising our efforts to get people back to work. On that, may I ask the Secretary of State something? I have been listening to what he has said, and I know that he will not pre-empt

the details of the inactivity review, but can he just confirm that one of its objectives will be to rebalance our economy, particularly in this connection between health and labour supply?

Mel Stride: That is at the heart of our manifesto, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Mr Speaker! Where did I get that from? It is a sign of the times. Right at the heart of our manifesto, and of the Government's *raison d'être*, is the need to make sure that we level up communities across the United Kingdom. Of course, our action will take many forms, but one of them is most certainly the support that we will provide to make sure that, up and down the country, there is equality among those seeking work, and those who are economically inactive, and that they have the same opportunities.

Support into Employment: Over-50s

5. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people aged 50 and over into employment. [903872]

12. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to encourage people aged over 50 to remain in the workforce. [903879]

22. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What help his Department is giving to people aged 50 and over to find employment. [903890]

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): The Government are already providing £20 million for an enhanced offer to help older workers remain in, or return to, work. That includes provision for 37 full-time 50-plus champions, who deliver the midlife MOT, and for older workers jobs fairs. That includes the three 50-plus fairs held in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) in the last few months.

James Sunderland: The over-50s are a massive resource for our workforce, so could the Minister please outline how we might incentivise back into work those who retired during the pandemic, and those aged over 50 who have left the uniformed services and are seeking a second career?

Guy Opperman: My hon. and gallant Friend served with dedication in the armed forces before becoming Bracknell's champion. He will be aware that our armed forces champions go to great lengths to assist ex-servicemen and women in finding second careers after their service keeping us safe. He will also be aware that the Chancellor may have more to say on the issue next week, on the 15th.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The Minister speaks about the ambitions for encouraging the over-50s to remain in the workforce. Will the Minister tear up his prepared answer, and tell the employees at the Department for Work and Pensions Clydebank office—mostly working-class women over the age of 50—how he squares that with his Government's rank hypocrisy, which has left them struggling for work during a cost of living crisis?

Guy Opperman: There are now 10.7 million 50-plus workers—a figure that has gone up by 2 million in the last 10 years. Local DWP jobcentres are constantly engaging with employers to showcase the benefits of hiring older workers. I urge the hon. Gentleman to go to Halfords in St James retail park in Dumbarton in his constituency, because Halfords is one of the employers employing over 100 new over-50s apprentices on an ongoing basis. The hon. Gentleman should visit and learn something.

Michael Fabricant: As you know, Mr Speaker, because of my youth, I do not have to declare an interest. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that, on the whole, older people tend to be more punctual, dedicated and reliable, and able to spell? What is he doing to tell employers that those factors are the reason why they need to employ older people?

Guy Opperman: Of course my hon. Friend, who I am sure is under the age of 50, does not need to declare an interest in the Government's desire to ensure that we have more over-50s in employment. He will be aware, however, that in the past few months there have been four jobs fairs across Staffordshire and Derbyshire open to those from Lichfield who are 50-plus, and planning is under way for another event that will take place shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my voice to the calls for us to use the talents of people who are over 50? I am approaching that stage myself. Some of the best years of my life were after 50, in terms of the number of jobs that I was able to do, and the new schemes and social enterprises that I was involved with. I know many people who are waiting for that second chance to contribute to our economy, and to social enterprises, if the Minister will give them the right incentive.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman is right. I agree with him; there is life in the old dog yet, as they say. It is important that we continue to make the case that employment for the over-50s should be supported by all employers.

Single-parent employment levels

6. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the fall in the level of single-parent employment between 2019 and 2022. [903873]

15. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab):

What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the fall in the level of single-parent employment between 2019 and 2022. [903882]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): We are committed to helping parents to increase their income through work. We have cut the earnings taper on universal credit and increased work allowances, meaning that families are, on average, better off by £1,000 a year. Additionally, eligible parents can claim up to 85% of their childcare costs through UC, and further assistance is available through the flexible support fund, Jobcentre Plus and work coaches.

Cat Smith: On Friday, I visited my local citizens advice bureau at its new offices on George Street in Lancaster, where I heard at first hand of the challenges that single parents are having with the amount of the childcare element of universal credit being capped at the level set in 2005 and with its being paid in arrears. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that benefits go up in line with the cost of childcare and to look at paying this element up front?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. The UC childcare element can be used to top up a claimant's eligible free childcare hours if more hours are worked and more childcare is required. We also use the flexible support fund to support those up-front costs, as we heard earlier. However, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about employers; this is not solely about what the Government can do on our own to help lone parents. Job design, the opportunity to progress and flexible work are really important too, as is the opportunity to return and progress. We cannot do this on our own.

Mr Dhesi: It is alarming that last year the employment rate for single parents had the biggest annual fall on record, and it is all the more worrying because the single parent employment rate has been on an upward long-term trend since the mid-1990s. Surely the Minister would agree that the eligible cost limit on childcare in universal credit needs to be uprated to reflect the ground reality of today's soaring childcare costs.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Under this Government since 2010, we have seen a significant increase in lone parents in work, with the rate going up from 56.1% in 2010 to 65.5% in 2022. However, the reality—and I think he describes it—is that there are too many challenges for lone parents, and it is absolutely right that we look at this. As we have heard from the Secretary of State, we are hoping to hear more: the Chancellor is ever present in our minds. As a lone parent, I again make the plea to employers to help people come back to work, because we know it is more than just a pay packet; it is really important to see the whole of society represented in the labour market.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Figures published today by the Centre for Progressive Policy show that the lack of affordable childcare prevented a quarter of parents of children under 10 from working more hours, with all the implications that has for family finances, but also for economic productivity. In fact, parental underemployment is estimated to cost this country over £20 billion. With expectations having been raised again this afternoon that next week's Budget will do something about the cost of childcare, can the Minister tell us how long it will be before she expects the level of lone parent employment to rise again to where it was three years ago?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I think we have some amazing childcare out there and some brilliant opportunities for lone parents, as I have described. It is important to let people know that, on universal credit, they can claim back 85%. It is better

than legacy benefits, and they should please look at the benefits calculator on gov.uk and use the flexible support fund. We should also recognise that it is not right for everybody to go straight back to work—this needs to be individualised—and that we should support the lone parent and make sure they can get the skills and the opportunity to always be better off in work.

Cost of Living: Pensioner Support

7. Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support pensioners with increases in living costs. [903874]

20. Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help pensioners with increases in living costs. [903888]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): The Government are committed to helping pensioners with the increased costs of living. From April, pensioners will receive the largest ever cash increase in the state pension, and pension credit will also be uprated by 10.1%.

Mr French: I strongly welcome the additional support His Majesty's Government are providing to all households across the country, especially pensioners, with the costs of living. In contrast, many pensioners in Bexley are facing additional concerns because of Labour's outrageous ultra low emission zone tax raid on drivers in Greater London. Will my hon. Friend outline what further support is available to pensioners through the likes of pension credit and join me in Bexley to promote it so that more people sign up for this support?

Laura Trott: The ULEZ is an outrageous attack on pensioners who can least afford it, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the amazing work he is doing to fight it and to help all pensioners in his constituency. I would be delighted to visit him and see that work for myself.

Aaron Bell: I thank the Minister for her answer. With 26,500 pensioners in the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the 10.1% increase in the state pension and pension credit will be very welcome, but what other schemes are the Government putting in place to help people with the cost of living at this time?

Laura Trott: Pensioners will receive a further £300 cost of living payment this winter and all on pension credit will receive a further £900.

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

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The pensions dashboard will provide important support. It was due to be rolled out from August, but last week the Minister, very disappointingly, announced a delay and we do not now know when it will be implemented. Is it a delay of weeks or months, or even longer? Will the Minister give us a full, urgent update before the Easter recess?

Laura Trott: Work is ongoing and I will come back to the House at the earliest available opportunity.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Since 2015, more than 219,000 1950s-born WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—have passed away. What more are Ministers doing to ensure that WASPI women get the pensions they deserve?

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman will know that the new state pension is very beneficial for women. We know that under automatic enrolment, more women than ever have got a private pension. On the specific matter he asked about, he will know that there is ongoing work by the ombudsman, and I cannot comment until that is completed.

Benefit Fraud

8. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): What steps his Department is taking to reduce benefit fraud. [903875]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): We take all fraud very seriously and have a range of measures in place, supported by two tranches of additional investment totalling around £900 million, which will prevent a further £2.4 billion of loss by 2024-25. In May last year, we published “Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System”, which details our proposals for reducing fraud and error, including legislative change and closer working across Government.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I have had numerous reports from constituents of alleged incidents of benefit fraud and what they perceive as a lack of action when they report them to the Department, so will the Minister inform the House by how many his Department plans to increase staff in the counter-fraud teams?

Tom Pursglove: I am very appreciative of my hon. Friend raising this point. It is fair to say that we are coming after those who commit benefit fraud: it is unfair on the taxpayer, it is wrong, and that message must go out in the strongest terms. That is being backed up by action, as we set out in the plan. For example, over the next five years, we will see 2,000 specialists dedicated to getting across 2 million universal credit cases. That is an important contribution to make sure that we bring this money back into the Department where it rightly belongs.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Is Alyn Smith standing up?

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) *indicated dissent*.

Mr Speaker: No, but you did stand at the beginning. In that case, I call somebody who is always going to stand: Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is very important that all benefit fraud is taken on board, but many times in my constituency over the past few years, people have inadvertently filled in forms incorrectly and have found themselves having to pay money back. May I ask that compassion be shown to those who have inadvertently done wrong but realised they have to pay back, to ensure that they can pay back at a level they can afford?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this point, and it is important to note that we work on a case-by-case basis. Of course, where there are instances of error of that kind, we work on an individual basis to work out a repayment plan that is appropriate for those individuals, taking into account any financial vulnerabilities or challenges they might face.

Cost of Living: Support for Vulnerable Households

9. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the most vulnerable households with increases in costs. [903876]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Government recognise the pressures people are facing and have acted, providing cost of living support worth over £37 billion in 2022-23. In April, we are going further by uprating benefits, state pensions and the benefit cap by 10.1%. We are also providing £1 billion for the extension of the household support fund in England, with Barnett consequential for the devolved Administrations. That includes £12.4 million for Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council residents from October 2021 to March next year.

Alexander Stafford: Will my hon. Friend confirm that her Department has changed the way it makes cost of living payments, so that those in the most need continue to benefit, while ensuring that we do not overburden the hard-working majority of my constituents in Rother Valley with ever higher taxes?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. We are legislating this afternoon for the three further cost of living payments for the next financial year, ensuring that more people are eligible for support and that we are reaching the most vulnerable. The payments will be worth up to £900, with a further £300 for pensioners and £150 for those with a disability. In Rother Valley, we estimate that 10,600 households will be eligible for means-tested cost of living payments, and that 11,800 households will be eligible for disability cost of living support.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It has been nearly 12 months since the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued a section 23 notice against the Department for Work and Pensions, following concerns about the deaths of and discrimination against disabled claimants. Has an agreement yet been reached, and, if not, when will it be?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. I am assured by the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work that constructive conversations are ongoing and that this matter is being taken seriously. I am sure that he will have the hon. Lady's question.

Cost of Living: Support for Disabled People

11. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to support disabled people with increases in costs. [903878]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): Six million people receiving an eligible disability benefit received a £150 disability cost of living payment last year, and they will receive a further £150 payment this year. Those on a qualifying means-tested benefit will also receive up to £900 in cost of living payments.

Dr Luke Evans: People in Bosworth will be grateful for the disability support they have, but a key challenge that I saw as a GP was getting people who are disabled back into work. We know that work is good for their welfare and their wallet, so what more can we do to create a conducive environment, from diagnosis all the way through, for those suffering from a disability to get back into the workplace?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue. We are committed to supporting people into work and, importantly, to retain roles once they have them. We recognise, working across Government, that for many disabled people work is a determinant of better health outcomes. No doubt we will continue to take on board feedback about what more we might do in that space, and I would be delighted to have a conversation with my hon. Friend, based on his experiences, about the support we already provide and where we might go from here.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): On benefits, I am delighted to hear that some things are being done, but, from a Scottish perspective, I really do not think that it is enough. 38 Degrees has done polling across all our constituencies, and 70% of respondents in Stirling agreed that this UK Government

“do not understand the impact the cost of living crisis is having on people”.

Do Ministers accept that vote of no confidence?

Tom Pursglove: Certainly not, and I am delighted that I actually have a far more constructive working relationship with the Scottish Minister responsible for these issues than the question from the hon. Member suggests.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Many families with disabled children are struggling with energy costs right now. The £150 for those receiving personal independence payment is clearly welcome, but if someone is dependent on a machine, such as a powered wheelchair, a ventilator, an oxygen concentrator or a ceiling hoist, the cost is more like £150 a month, not £150 a year. What more can the Department, and the Government more widely, do to ensure that those families do not turn their machines off and put their children's health at risk?

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that none of us would want to see people putting their health, or their relatives' health, at risk. We of course have a comprehensive package of support in place, as my hon. Friend is aware. There is also discretionary support provided through the household support fund and administered by local authorities, as well as the energy support that Ministers elsewhere in Government are leading on. However, I am very mindful of the need to future-proof people against those costs, and that is work that I am currently looking at.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): This might help the Minister, who is very aware that disabled people are more likely to live in poverty than non-disabled people and are particularly vulnerable to the cost of living, as has been demonstrated by colleagues. Legacy benefit claimants, many of whom are long-term sick or disabled, have been unjustly denied the additional uplift that universal credit claimants got during the pandemic. Will the Minister commit to remedying that injustice by reintroducing the universal uplift, increasing it to £25 a week and giving it to all legacy benefit claimants?

Tom Pursglove: I thank the hon. Lady for her suggestion of new policy. As a Government Minister, I am not in a position to create new policy on the hoof. What I would say, however, is that there are significant cost of living support measures in place, and individuals will be able to access the support that is appropriate for them.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and I have asked numerous written questions about the shocking 461% increase in the number of personal independence payment claims disallowed for the non-return of the AR1 review form between 2017 and 2021. The Minister, sadly, has no idea why the increase has happened, or by extension whether vulnerable people are being left struggling to manage, as the Department does not collect information on the reasons for the non-return of the AR1 form. So I ask the Minister again today: when will he take action to investigate this issue?

Tom Pursglove: There may be many and varied reasons why individuals choose not to return the forms. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady will allow me to answer the question, that would really benefit the House. The bottom line here is that there may be many and varied reasons why people do not return the forms, including their circumstances changing materially, but I am very happy to take the point away and look at it further.

Pensioner Cost of Living Payment

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** How many people have received the pensioner cost of living payment in (a) Kettering constituency, (b) north Northamptonshire and (c) England. [903880]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): In 2021-22, almost 18,000 pensioners in Kettering, over 60,000 pensioners in north Northamptonshire and more than 9 million pensioners in England received a winter fuel payment. We estimate that similar numbers will have received the £300 pensioner cost of living payment in 2022-23.

Mr Hollobone: Will those 18,000 pensioners in receipt of the pensioner cost of living payment also receive additional support, such as the £400 energy bill discount, the £150 council tax rebate, the £150 disability cost of living payment and the £150 warm home discount? Will they also benefit from the energy price guarantee, saving a typical household £900 a year?

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend is right in this, as in so many things.

Unemployment Levels: Towns and Cities

14. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What estimate he has made of levels of unemployment in towns and cities. [903881]

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): The January Office for National Statistics labour market statistics publication shows that payroll employment reached a new record high of 30 million in January 2023. That is, of course, higher than at any stage under the last, or any, Labour Government.

Kate Hollern: We hear of a record number of vacancies, yet so many who are looking to get into work are out of work. In Blackburn, the claimant count among 18 to 24-year-olds is at 7.9%, against a national rate of 4.6%. What is the Minister doing to bring down barriers to work such as unaffordable childcare, transport, a failed apprenticeship scheme and a levelling-up agenda that is just not meeting the skills agenda?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady should be aware that last Tuesday there was a jobs fair in her constituency. There were 59 exhibitors, and 900 customers attended the event. They provided fantastic feedback on the support and interventions given. If she did not attend that particular jobs fair, she might want to go to “March into manufacturing” on 21 March, an upcoming jobs fair in her patch.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): We started the sitting with a non-party political point, so may I continue in that mode? I absolutely agree that those on the Opposition Benches want to reduce the level of unemployment. Unfortunately, their policies do not follow. Does the Minister agree that every single Labour Government have left unemployment higher than when they came to office?

Guy Opperman: Yes.

Industrial Relations: Department for Work and Pensions

16. **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the state of industrial relations within his Department. [903884]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Constructive discussions take place with the Public and Commercial Services Union, FDA and Prospect unions on a range of topics, as is set out in our employee relations handbook. The PCS and Prospect unions are in dispute with the Department for Work and Pensions, along with a number of other Departments, about various issues. As ever, we will remain positively engaged.

Beth Winter: Is the Secretary of State aware that more than a quarter of DWP staff are paid so little that the national living wage floor increase this April will lift their salaries? Is he aware that thousands of civil servants forced to take strike action are going without food and having to use foodbanks? Will he commit to constructive talks with the PCS union to resolve the dispute, to put a real pay rise on the table and to make ending the scourge of low pay in his Department a priority?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We will continue to have constructive and positive discussions with the PCS and other unions. She raised the national living wage; she will know that it is to rise by 9.7% this April, to its highest level on record.

Topical Questions

T1. [903893] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The Department’s major focus is looking after the vulnerable and those most in need. I am therefore delighted that next month, the basic state pension will increase by 10.1%, as will most benefits. The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), will be taking legislation through the House this afternoon to ensure that we continue substantial cost of living payments for the year ahead.

Bob Blackman: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcements. The extra £842 million for the household support fund, of which Harrow will receive £3 million, is extremely welcome. Could he update the House on what monitoring is taking place so that best practice is followed across the country and that the money that the Government are allocating reaches the most vulnerable?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He is right that almost £3 million from the household support fund will go to his constituency, on top of the £7.4 million that his local authority will receive in total. We monitor very closely how the money is administered to ensure that it has the maximum effect, by liaising closely with the local authorities concerned.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State understand and agree that expediting the rise in the state pension age is less about life expectancy, which, according to the Office for National Statistics is very much arrested, and more about a cost-cutting measure for the Treasury? Can he tell the House what representations he has made to the Chancellor about that in advance of next week’s Budget? Or is it just the UK Government’s policy that people should work until they drop?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is prejudging an awful lot of potential outcomes. He should wait until the Chancellor and I have taken those particular decisions. I am focused on a variety of metrics. Life expectancy is one of them, as is regional impact. The fiscal impact certainly cannot be ignored, and I would be surprised if he suggested otherwise. Fairness between generations and the period of life in which one is expected to be healthy in later years are also important considerations.

T2. [903894] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government’s decision to increase the state pension by more than 10% in April, but does my right hon. Friend agree that we should encourage private provision alongside state provision? Will he say what conversations his Department has had with the Treasury about extending the lifetime allowance or annual allowance for pensions, and anything more on auto-enrolment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): I am delighted that the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) passed Second Reading on Friday, and I look forward to its Committee next week. This excellent piece of legislation will bring 18 to 22-year-olds into automatic enrolment in full for the first time, and will ensure that people are saving from the first pound earned—two vital steps to ensure that people get the retirement that they want.

T4. [903896] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): A constituent recently contacted me about the lack of reasonable adjustments in place at the local jobcentre for those with mental health or cognitive difficulties. How do Ministers plan to improve staff awareness and the reasonable adjustments offering?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue in such constructive terms. I expect teams to be responsive to needs for reasonable adjustments. Perhaps she could share the details of the specific experience so that I can look into it. It is fair to say that staff go through ongoing learning, and we refresh the guidance at regular intervals.

T3. [903895] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): Can my hon. Friend provide an assessment of how personal independence payment appointments are being administered? Many constituents have kindly contacted me to say that they are still having claims processed over the phone rather than at an in-person appointment. I am sure he agrees that in-person appointments are vital to ensuring that our constituents get the right level of support.

Tom Pursglove: Regardless of the form that PIP assessments take, the structure is the same. Evidence suggests that both forms are equally effective, but I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend by saying that if individuals want to have a face-to-face assessment, they absolutely can.

T7. [903899] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): In Bath and North East Somerset, the gap between local housing allowance and rent for the cheapest three-bedroom property is nearly £4,000. My inbox is full of emails from desperate families on low incomes who are being squeezed out of living in Bath. Will the Secretary of State unfreeze the local housing allowance so that benefits are better aligned with rent in the local area?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The Government are projected to spend £30 billion—about 1.3% of GDP—on support for renters. Approximately £100 million has been allocated for the discretionary housing payment in 2023-24 to help local authorities, if necessary, which can top up from their own funding to help the hon. Lady's constituents.

T5. [903897] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): A constituent of mine who has been in full-time work since he was 16 is now in his mid-40s and is unable to work as he awaits major surgery. For people like him, navigating a complex welfare system for the first time is difficult and worrying. Does my hon. Friend agree on the importance of people such as my constituent being able to access clear advice

about the welfare benefits system to remove added financial worries? Will he outline the support available for people in such circumstances to access high-quality occupational health support to help them get back to work?

Tom Pursglove: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend and send my best wishes to his constituent for their surgery. The Department offers support through disability employment advisers who work alongside all work coaches, specialising in finding the right support to help customers who have a disability or health condition into work. I know that the dedicated team in Nottinghamshire would certainly be delighted to engage with my hon. Friend or his constituent and try to help with this issue.

T9. [903901] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): At the end of last year, the National Audit Office found that levels of benefit fraud and error were “unacceptably high”, totalling £8.6 billion for the year. How exactly will the Secretary of State reduce benefit fraud and error and claw back this appalling waste of taxpayers' money?

Tom Pursglove: I would argue that the Public Accounts Committee report does not reflect the steps that we took and that we set out in the plan that was published last May. As I set out to the House earlier, we are taking a tough approach to the issue, and rightly so—this is taxpayers' money. For example, the work of the 2,000 extra officials on targeted case reviews, 2 million of which are in universal credit, is a really important part of getting that money back.

T6. [903898] **Jack Breerton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I know from speaking to staff at Longton jobcentre that additional support has been put in place to help the over-50s back into work. Will the Minister update the House on what more is being done to upskill adults and help more of them to get back into work, especially in Stoke-on-Trent?

The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman): My hon. Friend will be aware of the 50-plus champions, the midlife MOT, the sector-based work academies and the skills bootcamps specifically for over-50s. The mighty Port Vale football club held a fantastic recent jobs fair attended by 1,400 customers, including many over-50s; 600 job offers resulted and there were 100 employers present. That is the sort of thing that the Department is doing.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As the recent Britishvolt investment shows, the north-east has real strengths in growing sectors such as battery technology, green energy and life sciences. Does the Minister agree that it is not possible for nationally controlled training programmes to really support people into employment in these emerging sectors? Will he therefore devolve responsibility to those in local areas who know local skills and local opportunities?

Guy Opperman: Local DWP jobcentres work hand in glove with local employers. It is very different in Banff and in Brixton—it is very different up and down the

country. That is what we do with sector-based work academies, skills bootcamps and innovation pilots on a local basis in each individual jobcentre.

T8. [903900] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): I co-chair the all-party parliamentary engineering group. One of our objectives is to get young people to consider taking up employment in engineering. A number of companies in my area, for example, are short of young people. What more can the Government do to make young people aware of the excellent opportunities that exist in engineering?

Mims Davies: We are focused, across Government, on helping young people to become involved in science, technology, engineering and maths projects and careers. A new science and technology framework was announced today, and will be vital for long-term economic success. DWP Train and Progress helps claimants take advantage of the bootcamps run by the Department for Education, and our partnership with Google is helping to boost digital skills. These activities are flexible in that people of any age and at any stage in their careers can engage in them.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I have a constituent who is facing the consequences of an overpayment in employment and support allowance. She has been able to show that she gave the Department the correct information time and again, but according to the Department, that is not relevant to whether she should pay the full sum. If the Department is not subject to any comeback after making mistakes, how will it ever improve?

Tom Pursglove: It is important to note that official error loss fell from 1.3% in 2019-20 to 0.9% in 2020-21 and to 0.7% in 2021-22. It is of course right for us to work constructively with individuals to identify appropriate repayment plans, ensuring that we live up to our legal obligations to get the money back into the Department, but I expect officials to work constructively with people, taking account of their specific financial circumstances. I should be delighted if the hon. Gentleman shared the details of this case with me so that I can look into it.

T10. [903902] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to raise employers' awareness of the impact of the menopause?

Mims Davies: I know that my hon. Friend takes great interest in supporting women in work, and working with employers is crucial to ensuring that they can both retain and recruit women and that there is no stigma in the workplace for those experiencing the impact of the menopause. I am delighted to announce the appointment of Helen Tomlinson as the DWP menopause employment champion. She will have a key role in driving awareness and promoting the benefits of a fully inclusive workplace to both business and the economy, and I will be sharing further details of her appointment later today.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Ind): Research conducted by the Bevan Foundation has established that local housing allowance is not a solution to the cost of living and housing crises for families on low incomes and for the most vulnerable because it is too low, and has been

frozen since 2020 while private rental costs have soared. Will the UK Government help those in need and uprate the allowance?

Mims Davies: We recognise that rents are increasing, and that a challenging fiscal environment means we need to support people effectively. We have therefore announced a support package for the most vulnerable households, which includes help through the household support fund. Those who are entitled to housing benefit or the housing element of universal credit and who have a shortfall can reach out for discretionary housing payments from local authorities.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): There are some notable and fantastic businesses in my constituency, including Argus Fire and Pegasus, which do a brilliant job in recruiting young adults and providing career opportunities. What more can the Department do to bridge the gap between employers and young adults and create that one-stop opportunity for 16-year-olds to find employment?

Mims Davies: As you know, Mr Speaker, I am very supportive of getting young people into work. The Dudley youth hub is a classic example of the Department's working in partnership locally, providing a single location for employers to engage with the under-25s from Stourbridge and the wider area. Claimants can attend recruitment events and take advantage of a range of on-site services, and I know that they greatly welcome the opportunity to work with Argus Fire and Pegasus.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Public and Commercial Services Union members in Scotland get a raw deal from this Government on pay, with many civil servants themselves using food banks. When will the Government give them a proper pay rise?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady will know and as I explained earlier, we are engaged in positive discussions with the PCS. It has been pointed out that many people working in the DWP are on the national living wage, and that will increase by 9.7% in April.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Working with Disability Action Yorkshire in my constituency, I have observed the important and growing role in the jobs market played by people with disabilities. I have spoken before about the Access to Work programme. Will the Minister update the House on what is being done to promote that excellent scheme among employers?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate for Harrogate generally, but on this issue he is a passionate advocate for Access to Work and Disability Confident. We work to promote those schemes through our social media, through working with stakeholders, through working with local employer partnership teams and employer associations and through the Disability Confident scheme generally. I would certainly welcome the opportunity to look at ways in which we can spread the word further, including on a localised basis. I am about to do that as a constituency MP in Corby, and perhaps my hon. Friend could do the same in Harrogate.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): On Friday night I was given the terrible news that a popular business in my constituency, Mortons Rolls, had ceased

trading, putting at risk 250 jobs. Will the Secretary of State take the time to meet me to discuss what can be done to support that business and the 250 staff who are now threatened with redundancy?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important matter, and she is right to raise it on the Floor of the House. We have a number of measures that we would typically stand up in the circumstances that she describes, including a surge of local support to get jobs going and vacancies matched up with those who are sadly going to lose their jobs. I will certainly ask the Employment Minister to meet her to discuss this as a matter of urgency.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I echo the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) about Access to Work. Can I ask what progress is being made on the disability action plan and how the Minister will ensure effective work across Government?

Tom Pursglove: The disability action plan is a really valuable opportunity to drive forward meaningful progress in a number of areas to help to improve the lives of disabled people. We are in the process of assembling the ministerial disability champions, and I want to see ideas from across Government brought together. We will then hear from disabled people, get out there and consult on the plan, then make sure that we deliver it over the next 18 months to two years. This is about quick wins and getting those off the stocks and delivering for disabled people.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I want to place on record my thanks to the Pensions Minister for her incredible hard work on automatic pension enrolment to get the age and the earnings lowered. Does

she agree that it is a major concern for the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke that 25% of people leave work without a workplace pension in place? That is why the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill is so important and I am grateful to have had support for it from colleagues across the House.

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I congratulate him on his brilliant Bill, which will help women, the lowest paid and part-time workers in Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, and beyond.

Mr Speaker: Before proceedings on the urgent question begin, I want to make it clear that the question is about the proposed appointment of the second permanent secretary to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as chief of staff to the Leader of the Opposition. It is not about the Committee of Privileges inquiry; let me stress that now. The House has charged the Committee with undertaking that inquiry and it must be allowed to complete it without interference. The Committee has been clear that the report issued on Friday does not contain its final conclusions, and that its work continues. It is for the Committee to decide how to weigh up the evidence before it, and any attempt to use this urgent question to prejudice proceedings will be out of order and will not be tolerated. Can I also say that although I was not surprised by the number of requests for this urgent question, I was surprised that they nearly all had the same wording and length of sentences? Whichever side of the House it comes from, I will not be moved by mass lobbying. I was more impressed by the individual ones that took the time to express why this was important than by those that were just a one-line sentence and signed by numerous Members of the House, so please do not try mass lobbying again.

Civil Service Impartiality

3.34 pm

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Paymaster General if he will make a statement on the impartiality of the civil service in the light of the proposed appointment of the second permanent secretary to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as chief of staff to the Leader of the Opposition.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I can confirm that, following a media report the previous day, Sue Gray, formerly second permanent secretary to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and to the Cabinet Office, resigned from the civil service on Thursday 2 March. This resignation was accepted with immediate effect. On Friday 3 March, a statement from the Opposition announced that the Labour party had offered Sue Gray the role of chief of staff to the Leader of the Opposition.

The House will recognise that this is an exceptional situation. It is unprecedented for a serving permanent secretary to resign to seek to take up a senior position working for the Leader of the Opposition. As hon. Members will expect, the Cabinet Office is looking into the circumstances leading up to Sue Gray's resignation in order to update the relevant civil service leadership and Ministers of the facts. Subsequent to that, I will update the House appropriately.

By way of background, to inform hon. Members, there are four pertinent sets of rules and guidance for civil servants relating to this issue. First, under the civil service code, every civil servant is expected to uphold the civil service's core values, which include impartiality. The code states that civil servants must

“act in a way which deserves and retains the confidence of ministers”.

Secondly, rules apply when very senior civil servants wish to leave the service. Permanent secretaries are subject to the business appointments process that, for most senior leavers, is administered by the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments. ACOBA provides advice to the Prime Minister, who is the ultimate decision maker in cases involving the most senior civil servants. Once the Prime Minister agrees the conditions and the appointment is taken up, ACOBA publishes its letter to the applicant on its website.

The business appointment rules form part of a civil servant's contract of employment. The rules state that approval must be obtained prior to a job offer being announced. The Cabinet Office has not, as yet, been informed that the relevant notification to ACOBA has been made.

Thirdly, civil servants must follow guidance on the declaration and management of outside interests. They are required, on an ongoing basis, to declare and manage any outside interests that may give rise to an actual or perceived conflict of interest. Finally, the directory of civil service guidance states:

“Contacts between senior civil servants and leading members of the Opposition parties...should...be cleared with...Ministers.”

Having set out the relevant rules, I finish by saying that, regardless of the details of this specific situation, I understand why Members of this House and eminent

outside commentators have raised concerns. The impartiality and perceived impartiality of the civil service is constitutionally vital to the conduct of government. I am certain that all senior civil servants are acutely aware of the importance of maintaining impartiality. Ministers must be able to speak to their officials from a position of absolute trust, so it is the responsibility of everyone in this House to preserve and support the impartiality of the civil service.

Sir Robert Buckland: To echo my right hon. Friend's comments, many of us are surprised and, frankly, deeply disappointed about the particular circumstances that have emerged. This is not about the character or quality of Sue Gray. Having had the pleasure of working with her over a number of years, I can testify, along with many others, to those qualities.

This is, as my right hon. Friend said, about the fundamental trust that has to exist between impartial civil servants up to the highest level—and here we are dealing with a permanent secretary—and the Ministers they serve. That has been the position since at least the Northcote-Trevelyan report of the mid-19th century, and it must be the position in future, particularly if the Labour party is serious about wishing to achieve power. This Government are prepared to defend that impartiality, but the activities of the Leader of the Opposition might suggest that he is not prepared to defend that impartiality.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for clarifying the position on the application to ACOBA. Will he confirm that this appointment, if it is to be taken up, cannot be taken up before it is formally approved, following advice from that committee? Secondly, is it correct that the prevailing ACOBA advice for civil servants has a potential waiting period of between three months and two years? Thirdly, will a lobbying prohibition be imposed in this case? Finally, will a restriction on the passage of official information to the Labour party be imposed in this instance?

I say again that trust and impartiality are vital if this system of government is to work. I would hope that in this case those issues will be defended.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that. I share his disappointment; whatever the merits of the individual, I stress that it is critical that we all, on both sides of the House, do all we can to support the impartiality of the civil service. He asks about three points in particular. He asks whether there is a three-month to two-year period, and he is right. ACOBA also has the ability to recommend that no such appointment would be appropriate—it can go further—but there is a standard three-month waiting period in the contracts of employment for permanent secretaries. ACOBA generally goes up to two years but it can go further.

There is a lifetime requirement on all civil servants, which I know they take hugely seriously, to respect the confidentiality of the work they do. It is right that that is in place. Lastly, ACOBA is in an advisory position. I have not been impressed by the Labour party over this saga. I trust that the Labour party would indeed follow recommendations from ACOBA—unless Labour is going to cast even more doubt on its credibility.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy leader of the Labour party.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I would like to thank Conservative Members for asking why a senior civil servant famed for their integrity and dedication to public service decided to join the party with a real plan for Britain rather than a tired-out, washed-up, sleaze-addicted Tory Government. This is the exceptional circumstance that the Minister spoke about. We are talking about a party so self-obsessed that it is using parliamentary time to indulge in the conspiracy theories of the former Prime Minister and his gang. What will Conservative Members ask for next? Will it be a Westminster Hall debate on the moon landings, a Bill on dredging Loch Ness or a public inquiry into whether the Earth is flat?

The biggest threat to the impartiality of the civil service is the Conservative party and its decade of debasing and demeaning standards in public life. Conservative Members talk about trust. This debate says more about the delusions of the modern Conservative party than it does about anything else. After this question, I will go back to my office to help people who are struggling with the cost of living crisis, getting an NHS dentist or—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think it was a wise idea to carry on while I am standing up.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con) I am sorry.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. May I just say that I expect everybody to be heard quietly, because I want to hear what is being said? This is too important for me not to be able to hear. When Members keep chuntering on, I cannot hear. I want the same respect to be shown to everybody who wishes to speak.

Angela Rayner: Thank you. Mr Speaker. As I was saying, after this question I will go back to my office to help people who are struggling with the cost of living, with getting an NHS dentist and with paying their energy bills. All of those things are the result of 13 years of this failed Conservative Administration. While they play games, we are getting on with tackling the real issues facing the country. When will they do the same?

Jeremy Quin: Having heard from the right hon. Lady, I see that she has clearly been advised that attack is the best form of defence. I quite understand why the Opposition feel in need of some more advisers and some new advisers, given her tone today.

I understand the dilemma faced by the Leader of the Opposition. Having looked inside his tent, I understand why he is reaching so far outside of it. After so many rebrands, I appreciate why the right hon. Lady and the Leader of the Opposition require someone who can do joined up. However, the Labour party talks about rules, transparency and standards in public life, and given all that constant talk it is time that it walked the walk. I ask the right hon. Lady to go away and think: why are the Opposition refusing to publish when they met with Sue Gray; why are they being evasive; and why can they not tell us what they discussed, where they met, and how often they met? Their refusal to do so prompts the question: exactly what is Labour trying to hide?

Many across the House have noticed that the Leader of the Opposition has a tendency to claim a self-righteous monopoly on morals, but there are now serious questions as to whether Labour, by acting fast and loose, undermined

the rules and the impartiality of the civil service. Labour Members must ask themselves why the Leader of the Opposition covertly met a senior civil servant and why those meetings were not declared. They believe that ACOBA rules should be tightened, but why were the current ones not followed? It is incumbent on everyone across the House to uphold and preserve the integrity and the perceived impartiality of the civil service.

This is about trust, Mr Speaker, and it is the Labour party that risks damaging that trust with an offer of appointment. However, the Opposition can help restore that trust. They can do the right thing: they can publish the list of meetings between themselves and Sue Gray; they can publish who attended those meetings; and they can publish when they started speaking to Sue Gray. There is nothing in the ACOBA rules that stops them doing so today.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May I say how heartened I am to see the Chamber so well-attended for a Cabinet Office urgent question on matters of constitutional propriety? It has not always been like that in here.

On a personal note, may I say that I consider this appointment to be somewhat ill-judged? I think that those who are of reasonable mind on all sides of this argument would accept that. Does my right hon. Friend share my confidence in our noble Friend Lord Pickles and his Committee, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, to discharge their functions correctly? I wonder also whether he has any more thoughts about making ACOBA rulings underpinned in statute. Finally, given the individual at the heart of this, it is important to ask whether he shares my concern that it is wrong to impugn an entire civil service for political bias, and that it is important that he asserts that from the Dispatch Box?

Jeremy Quin: On my hon. Friend's most important point, I absolutely back him up on the standards of the civil service. We are lucky and fortunate to have good people working throughout the civil service. I know that a large number of them will be very concerned by these events, because they know the critical importance of the bond of trust between a Minister and their most senior advisers. I totally respect the work of ACOBA and all members of the committee. I know that they will consider their processes, that they will go through this thoroughly, and that, in due course, the Prime Minister will receive their advice.

On my hon. Friend's wider point, clearly, the Government have received recommendations from his own Committee, PACAC, from Sir Nigel Boardman, and from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. The process of coming up with a Government response is well advanced, and I expect to share that with the House in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am glad to hear the Minister talking about the hard work that the civil service does and being clear, in agreeing with his colleague the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), that Ministers and Secretaries of State would be nowhere

[Kirsty Blackman]

were it not for the constant hard work of impartial civil servants. It is very important that the Minister talks to his Back-Bench colleagues and ensures that, in making statements about individuals, they are not tarring the entire civil service with some of the allegations that they are bringing forward.

I have asked repeatedly about anti-corruption champions, and while we are standing here talking about issues relating to breaches or potential breaches of the ministerial code, it is important that the Government get their house in order and ensure that we have an anti-corruption champion in place. Will the Minister therefore both talk to his Back-Bench colleagues to ensure that their language is moderated when talking about civil servants, and ensure that the ministerial code is adhered to so that we can be viewed in a better light internationally?

Jeremy Quin: The anti-corruption strategy is run by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security; I know he works actively on that, and an anti-corruption champion will be appointed in due course. With deference to the hon. Lady's position, I think that is a very different scenario from what we are talking about today. For a start, we are talking about the civil service code, not the ministerial code. However, I agree that we always need to support and not undermine the impartiality and the perceived impartiality of the civil service. That applies to all of us, including the Leader of the Opposition.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware whether a contract, written or unwritten, has been entered into between the parties concerned? This important question asked by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) raises questions not only of constitutional propriety and impartiality, but of confidentiality between the persons concerned. Furthermore, I would like to know whether there is any question of any involvement of taxpayers' money in these arrangements, as part of the Short money that will be involved in the office of the Leader of the Opposition.

Jeremy Quin: As my hon. Friend will appreciate, I am in no position to know whether there is a contract, either oral or written, between Sue Gray and the Labour party. Nor am I in any position to judge how her putative post, if it were to go through, would be funded. Those are both questions that can only be answered by those on the Opposition side of the House, and it would be in the interest of transparency and clarity if they were to be cleared up, along with a timeline of events on when the meetings started, who took part and where they took place.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On the question of impartiality, Sue Gray has resigned, and I can assure the Minister that she was just as resolute in seeking to protect standards in public life and the ministerial code when I was a Minister as she has tried to be under this Conservative Government. Are not her professionalism and integrity just what Britain needs after the debasement of our standards in public life over the past 13 years?

Jeremy Quin: I am deliberately not getting drawn into matters related to individuals, nor should I. I am happy to be drawn on whether there is a right way of making this kind of appointment. This is a totally unprecedented

offer of appointment; at a permanent secretary level this has not, as far as I am aware, ever been undertaken before. It is important in those circumstances that the rules are followed appropriately. We are checking to make certain what exactly was the run-up to her resignation.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Many people may say that Ms Gray is a splendid woman—I understand she even fed the cats in the Cabinet Office—but does it not smash to pieces the idea of an independent civil service when we know that one of the most senior civil servants in the country was conniving in secret meetings with the party of Opposition? Does that not devalue years of advice and reports that she has given, her views on devolution, which were known constantly to be soft, and her report into my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), which we now know was done by a friend of the socialists? Does this not undermine all her previous work and the idea of an independent civil service?

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that, as I said, I do not want anybody creeping into the report—[*Interruption.*] I know you were careful, but this is just a marker. I do not want this to be a creeping feast.

Jeremy Quin: I have two points to make to my right hon. Friend. First, we need to make certain that this does not damage the impartiality—or the perception of impartiality—of the civil service as a whole. I am sure he would agree that that is incredibly important, and we need to ensure that it is retained. I am deeply worried that the approach made by the Labour party may serve to threaten that and put it at risk. We must not tarnish the whole civil service due to one appointment, but the Opposition are playing fast and loose with a set of rules designed to protect the impartiality of the civil service, which we all know is so constitutionally important for our country.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Here today we have Conservatives demanding that Labour observes the recommendations of ACOBA, when previous Conservative Chancellors and Foreign Secretaries bypassed the process before taking up appointments, and we have Labour stretching the process to breaking point by operating in the shadows. Is it time that we gave ACOBA some teeth?

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is considering proposals made by PACAC, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and Sir Nigel Boardman about how we could improve the business appointments process. There is a lot of sympathy with the idea that we should look at those rules, and we will report to the House about how they could be amended or improved. It is an irony, though, that the Opposition have consistently called for those rules to be tightened when they do not seem to be quite aware—or may not be fully aware—of what the rules are today.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The civil service's response to this issue amplifies and underscores, to the comfort of all of us, the importance that it attaches to its impartiality in serving Ministers of the Crown, irrespective of the colour under which they stand for election.

I will echo the growing theme, led ably by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). For ACOBA to put the recommendation to the Prime Minister always puts the Prime Minister in an invidious position, but particularly in this case. If he says no, he looks churlish. If he says yes, he makes the civil service, which is already anxious about the attack on its impartiality, still more anxious. I urge the Minister to speed up the process of response to the suggestions that have been made about formalising the committee's recommendations.

Jeremy Quin: I have said what I said about the Government considering how the procedures for business appointments could be improved. I have a lot of faith in the ACOBA process, and in Lord Pickles and his committee. We look forward to him looking through this process. Sue Gray will put through her application—if that is a confidential process, I presume that it is happening—and the committee will need to take a decision on that basis and then provide advice.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The faux outrage and wild conspiracies from the Conservative party are kidding nobody. I remind the Minister of the words of a predecessor of his as Cabinet Office Minister, the noble Lord Maude, who said that he had worked with Sue Gray for five years and never had the “slightest reason to question either her integrity or her political impartiality”.

He added that the Leader of the Opposition is “fortunate to have secured her services”.

He is right, isn't he?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman obviously knows faux outrage when he sees it; he has a long experience of seeing it, in the mirror. I am grateful to him for reminding me of the words of my predecessor as Minister for the Cabinet Office and, indeed, as the Member of Parliament for Horsham. I, too, have worked with Sue Gray. I have admired her advice and have had no reason to question her integrity. That does not mean, however, that this is the way we should conduct things in these circumstances. I am very disappointed in the actions of the Labour party. I am very disappointed in how this has come through, and there are real concerns about the impact that it may have on the perception of impartiality more broadly.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that on my appointment as a Minister, I, like many Members, was advised by Sue Gray on the steps that I needed to take in order to avoid any perception of a potential conflict of interest? Does he therefore understand why her appointment has caused such anger right across the civil service, as it undermines that very principle of the perception of conflict?

Jeremy Quin: I do. My right hon. Friend is right to draw on the fact that many senior civil servants are troubled by this. They know the vital importance of the bond of trust between Ministers and civil servants, and anything that might serve to undermine that is not healthy and is not good for the way we do business.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, we are experienced Members of this House, and I understand that very early on in your remarks, you rumbled what was going on in terms of the number

of requests for this to be debated this afternoon. Is it not a fact that this is a shabby little manoeuvre from the shabbiest Government that I have seen in 40 years—*[Interruption.]* Rather than this being spontaneous, let me just say that I was walking over here with a respected Back Bencher from the Government side who said, “I'm not going over. They've been trying to get everyone here this morning. The Whips have set a five-line Whip.” *[Interruption.]* They don't like it, Mr Speaker. The suggestion that the civil service is up in arms is nonsense. This comes from the Prime Minister and this shabby Government—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure there was a question, in which case we will move on.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): The whole situation surrounding this appointment is quite extraordinary, and many will say that it is outrageous. Does my right hon. Friend agree that appointing such a senior and high-profile civil servant to this post under such circumstances is questionable, and does he agree that what is of deep concern is the timing of this appointment and when she was approached? Where meetings were held, the details must be published.

Jeremy Quin: I believe that transparency would help. It is important that processes are followed, because this is an unprecedented appointment, and in those circumstances, it is not too much to ask for the details of the meetings to be published: who met whom, when, where, and what was discussed. To return to the points that have been raised, it is absolutely right that this is gone through, and that the Labour party publishes exactly what took place.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The impartiality of senior civil servants was called into question a long time ago during the Brexit debate and the events subsequent to that, but these negotiations obviously did not take place the morning after Sue Gray resigned—they have been going on for some time. I suppose the question for the House is this: what sensitive political issues was she involved in during those negotiations, and does the Minister agree that no amount of bluster from Opposition Front Benchers will ever hide the double standard of lecturing about accountability and transparency, while at the same time not being prepared to answer a straightforward question as to when they started talking to Sue Gray?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Gentleman puts it rather well. It would be very simple to help put minds at rest by publishing the data, setting out when the meetings took place—who met whom, when and where. That will help reassure the House; it will not reassure the House completely, but at least there will be proper transparency and some more clarity.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): This is about impartiality and trust, and it saddens me to see the deputy leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who is in such a senior position, defending this in the way that she did. If the rules have not been followed and a lengthy period of time—that is, two years—has not elapsed, Sue Gray has had access to highly confidential and very personal

[Richard Drax]

information that she is in a very powerful position to use, not just with anyone but with the Opposition party, and with a general election looming.

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend is correct. Clearly, Sue Gray has access to a lot of information, but that does not mean she would put that information to ill use. The ACOBA guidelines talk about sensitive information and how someone can avoid the perception that they have been put into a difficult position in those circumstances. ACOBA obviously has a job to do.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Which bond of trust or aspect of impartiality was broken when Sue Gray was a senior civil servant—the same Sue Gray who was praised by the Government as being almost the best thing since sliced bread? What is the problem or issue now?

Jeremy Quin: We are conducting analysis to find out the facts that led up to the resignation of Sue Gray and to ensure they can be set out. It would help dispel concerns, worries and problems if the Labour party could simply set out the facts itself. There is no reason why it could not do that today.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The permanent secretary at the Department for Education recently highlighted the detail of the civil service code to all her staff. She said that

“if anybody receives contact from the Leader of the Opposition or a member of the Shadow Cabinet you should tell your Permanent Secretary right away”.

Is the Minister aware of when Sue Gray informed her permanent secretary of the initial discussion she held with the Labour party before announcing her resignation?

Jeremy Quin: As I have said, there is work in progress to ensure that all the facts are identified, but I am not aware that there were any such discussions prior to Thursday last week.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Not that long ago, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments found that the former Member of Parliament for Aberconwy, a former Defence Minister, committed a clear breach of the ministerial code by not asking for ACOBA advice when taking up a position. Can the Minister remind us what actions were taken against the former Member for a breach that was described at the time as totally unacceptable? What was done?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman refers to a former Member of this House, a former Minister and a former member of the Conservative party—I think he had had the Whip withdrawn at that stage. I do not know what actions ACOBA took and I am not sure what actions it has available, because it is an advisory body. However, I think it behoves all of us who wish to respect the values of impartiality within the civil service and to respect the rules, to ensure that we follow them to the letter.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I think this is an important urgent question. Something about this desired appointment does not feel right to me. To echo the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who is no longer in his place,

I do not think it passes the reasonable test, but we are where we are for now, although I expect there is a lot more to come on this. The Minister confirmed that the Cabinet Office is looking at the circumstances of the job offer. Can my hon. Friend say when we might expect that to be complete? Will he be asking Sue Gray herself, who has every interest in transparency, the “Who met whom, when and where” question?

Jeremy Quin: We will be trying to wrap this up as soon as we can. I do not know how long it will take—hopefully it will be done shortly. It would ease that process if the Labour party would just come clean as to exactly what meetings took place. There is no reason why that should not be made public and why we should be not fully transparent—at least, no reason of which I am aware.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I do not know Sue Gray; I know her only by virtue of her reputation. I do weigh on the words of Lord Maude, which we heard just a moment ago, that she is a person of the utmost decency. I am aware of various civil servants who have joined this place as Members of Parliament on all sides. Therefore I am surprised really at the concern from Government Members, because this is a person of the utmost integrity. Given the high esteem in which she is held, why does the Minister think that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) never considered appointing her?

Jeremy Quin: As I said earlier, I am not trying to engage in a discussion about a particular individual. I have noted what my predecessor Lord Maude said. As I say, I have personal, direct experience of working with Sue Gray, and have no reason to question her integrity in any way, but this urgent question is about the process; we need to understand it. This is an unprecedented appointment of a permanent secretary to this position. When very senior civil servants choose to leave the service, it is incredibly important that everything is done appropriately. Analysis of that is being undertaken. We need to establish the facts, and it would help if the Labour party assisted us with that.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the shoe was on the other foot, the Labour party would be asking exactly the same questions? All that we have seen today from those on the Opposition Benches is rank hypocrisy. Does he also agree that the line put out by the Labour party that somehow the Leader of the Opposition’s most senior adviser and chief of staff would not have a role in a general election campaign is utterly ridiculous?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I have attended a number of urgent questions in this House, and I have rarely seen the Opposition Benches as empty as they are today.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Why are this Government happy to attack civil servants through this urgent question, yet unwilling to pay them properly?

Jeremy Quin: To be clear, we on the Government Benches have no desire or intention whatsoever to attack civil servants. We want to protect the impartiality of the

civil service, and protect it from any shift in perception of its impartiality; and we want to hold the Opposition to account, and ask them to be a bit more transparent about their dealings.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition was best friends with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), but dumped him as soon as the latter lost the election. The Leader of the Opposition was pro a second referendum, but when Labour lost the election, he dumped that. He made 10 pledges in order to become Leader of the Opposition, and dumped them. There has been rebrand after rebrand. The Labour party clearly has a grubby deal going on behind the scenes. The Leader of the Opposition talked about integrity, openness and honesty. Why cannot he evaluate those three things, and tell us: who, where, when and why?

Jeremy Quin: I very much agree that those questions need to be answered by Opposition Members.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I do not know how familiar the Minister is with Matthew 7:3-5:

“How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”. Contrary to what the Minister says, this move is not without precedent. Lord Sassoon was a senior civil servant on the same grade as Sue Gray. He resigned in the same month that Lehman Brothers collapsed, only to join George Osborne as his economic adviser three weeks later. In time, he became a Tory Government Minister. Will the Minister confirm that, and correct the record?

Jeremy Quin: I regret to tell the hon. Gentleman that I cannot recall that appointment. There are other appointments that I can think of, but none where the individual concerned had such a prominent role in Government, and was at the centre of affairs in the Cabinet Office and, in this case, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I understand why people inside this House and outside want to ensure that processes have been followed correctly.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The damage has already been done. The Minister keeps telling us about the impact this will have on the civil service, but it has already had an impact. It might also be noted that Sue Gray was chairing the infected blood inquiry; many of us in this House have written to various Minister about that inquiry, to see if we can get answers. What is the status of that very necessary inquiry?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. Sue Gray was actually the sponsor of that inquiry inside the Cabinet Office, and I am looking forward to meeting members of the infected and affected community tomorrow. Sue Gray had an incredibly important role in corralling that across Government, and we will need to fill that post. I have not been able to do so to date, but that is a huge priority for me. It requires a lot of work and there are very serious stakes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he accept that impartiality is not just a desirable quality, but an essential quality for any

investigation? Does he believe that the test for impartiality was met in this case before any news of later jobs had emerged?

Jeremy Quin: I do not want to prejudge the analysis of the facts. Clearly, ACOBA has to do its work and come to a conclusion. I am sorry to repeat myself to the hon. Gentleman, but more clarity as to what happened when would really help speed up that process.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I confess to feeling a little sorry for the deputy leader of the Labour party, because she has been sent here today to defend the indefensible. We have rules for a reason, and as has been rightly observed across the House, Sue Gray had knowledge not only of some of the most sensitive policy making, but of the legitimate personal interests of Ministers. It is for those very good reasons that we should abhor this decision. Can I agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of establishing the dates on which these meetings, which undoubtedly would have taken place over weeks if not months, took place? Can I also ask whether he will consider amending senior civil service contracts as well as the civil service code to prevent future such occurrences, because this strikes at the core of the integrity of the civil service?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my right hon. Friend. Work is being undertaken at the moment to look at the conclusions we will draw from the work by Sir Nigel Boardman, PACAC and the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and I would not wish to pre-empt any of those discussions. I do not know—I say this in all candour to my right hon. Friend—whether that has been considered, but there will be a further opportunity in this House, when we come forward with our proposed reforms in due course, for such matters to be raised.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not ironic that Sue Gray was the head of the Cabinet Office’s propriety and ethics team, and it is she who has put the civil service under a dark shadow—a shadow that need not have existed? Is it not also the case that this was therefore bad judgment by her, but also bad judgment by the Leader of the Opposition, who, when asked 10 times this morning to give more information about when the discussions began, evaded it 10 times?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend. I think it may well have been a miscalculation by the Leader of the Opposition. He can do his best to rescue that by being fully open about the facts.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I start by saying that I have worked with many fantastic civil servants in my time as a Minister, and those relationships are built on trust. I have also had a very good working relationship with Sue Gray in the Cabinet Office. Does the Minister agree that this appointment by the Leader of the Opposition is politically naive? It is hard enough for Ministers not knowing which of their WhatsApp messages are going to be leaked to journalists by Members on their own side, but surely this appointment now places all civil servants working with Ministers in a very difficult position in terms of trust and impartiality.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my right hon. Friend. When he says he had a good working relationship with Sue Gray, I know he speaks for many Ministers, me included, and I see other right hon. Friends nodding their heads in agreement with that phrase. However, that makes it all the more shocking that fast-and-loose approaches could be taken to the rules, it appears to me, and that that could therefore bring into doubt the really important relationships of trust that exist between Ministers and civil servants. As my right hon. Friend knows, this is so important for the way we do business, and I think people should think very carefully before they risk doing anything that might call that into question or jeopardise that incredibly important relationship.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I care very deeply about this place, and we have been plunged into a constitutional crisis. Members of this House, whether they are Ministers or not, need to be able to talk to senior civil servants without fear that that information is going to be used for party political purposes. This has done immense damage to the civil service and I do not know whether it will be able to recover, but it is not about Sue Gray; it is about the Leader of the Opposition. We would not be here today if he had not asked her to become his chief of staff. Does the excellent Minister agree that the person to be criticised here today is the Leader of the Opposition?

Jeremy Quin: I concur. I fear that the Leader of the Opposition, in making this appointment, perhaps blundered in his approach and did not really realise or think through the consequences of someone right at the heart of Government being invited to take up a position in the heart of the Labour party, shifting from incredibly important ongoing work to then working in a more party political guise, which obviously has implications.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): This latest grubby scandal from the Labour party has cast a dark stain on democracy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Leader of the Opposition should come out of hiding, come clean and publish the details of the meetings?

Jeremy Quin: That would help. I have been pondering the earlier question about the efficacy of people moving from the civil service into party political roles. Clearly that cannot be deemed an impossibility, and many of us have benefited from time in the civil service before taking on political roles. But there are ways of doing this; that is what is so important, and it would be very helpful if the Labour party could transparently set out exactly what took place.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): The House and the country should know that on 7 September 2019 I witnessed Sue Gray, then permanent secretary at the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland, discuss with a special adviser to the UK Cabinet Office how to exclude solutions other than high alignment with EU law and regulation from consideration by the Government in respect of Northern Ireland and the withdrawal agreement. A month later, the Government proposed the Northern Ireland protocol, which subjected Northern Ireland to EU law and regulation. Since then, Sue Gray has been the civil servant specifically responsible for advising on Union considerations in Government. It was reported this

week that Sue Gray was present at the briefing of Cabinet Ministers on the Prime Minister's Windsor framework, which, among other things, appears to confirm and embed the application of EU law and regulation in Northern Ireland—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Fysh: Does the—

Mr Speaker: No, sit down.

Mr Fysh *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Do you want to go out? No, right. I pulled up a Member on the other side about this, because once you go on and on there must be a question. I hope there is a question now.

Mr Fysh: Absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, sit down. You don't judge me. You just lost it completely.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): The only saving grace for colleagues in any honest, fair and unbiased investigation is the senior civil service. In the light of the appointment by the Labour leader of a senior civil servant who has been involved in many investigations of colleagues, does my right hon. Friend agree that if the process looks like a rotting, stinking fish, smells like a rotting, stinking fish and tastes like a rotting, stinking fish, chances are it is a rotten, stinking fish?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend has expressed his view in his own style. He knows me and will know that my style is to say I am going to await the conclusions that come out of the factual inquiry we are going through now—but he has made his point, as ever.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): When I was a Minister at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities I will have had several conversations with Sue Gray on the basis of confidentiality and impartiality, so I am slightly unnerved to feel she may have simultaneously been having discussions with the Leader of the Opposition. Is the Minister able to tell us when the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), became aware of the negotiations between Sue Gray and the Leader of the Opposition?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend refers to conversations he had with Sue Gray, and says that he does not know whether Sue Gray was having conversations with others at the same time. I am not aware of anybody in Government being informed of those discussions before last Thursday, but that could easily be cleared up if the Labour party were just to publish the timeline this afternoon.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I believe in the integrity, diligence and value of our most unique civil service. All civil servants, as with everybody else, have a right to a political view, and they can exercise that privately at the ballot box. I want to put on record that I rigorously defended Sue Gray as she did her work on partygate last year. But in this case what is important is the job that has been left, the time in between, and the job that has subsequently been taken up. I do not need

to make the House aware that the events of last year are not just dust that has settled; they are still hanging thick in the air. I am asking, on behalf—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Craig Mackinlay: I'm finishing.

Mr Speaker: No, you don't finish; you're finished now. When I stand up, that means you sit down. I hate to say it, but we have both been here a long time, and we should know the rules of the House. Now can we just have the question without going into the areas that I asked people not to venture into?

Craig Mackinlay: Yes. Thank you, Mr Speaker—my apologies. I am asking a question of the Minister, from the men and women on the normal Clapham omnibus: does this smell right?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend, who is very succinct. We do need to get the facts out and to know exactly what took place. We are doing that work, and it would help if the Labour party were to assist us in that process.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The civil service code states that officials must retain the confidence of Ministers as to their political impartiality. Now that Sue Gray, with knowledge of the most sensitive details of Ministers, has agreed to work in a political capacity for the leader of the Labour party, how can the Government ensure that other Ministers are protected from political stitch-ups?

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. There are rules in place. As I have already said, there is a means by which civil servants who choose to leave the world of the civil service—and even take on political roles—can do so. It is just really important that we know, and that Ministers know, that the rules will be followed in those circumstances, and that we know that they have in this case. That is why we are looking at what took place, and the Labour party could help us with that.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker,

“The Labour Party has offered Sue Gray the role of chief of staff to the leader of the opposition.”

That statement was issued by the Labour party on Thursday 2 March 2023. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any reasonable person would call into question the impartiality of that person, as of 1 March and any day before?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend raises a fair question, but it is one that we need to explore, given the questions that we are now asking about the timeline towards the resignation of Sue Gray. As I have said repeatedly in this place, why can the Labour party not just tell us when the first meeting took place, and how long the meetings have been happening? It might have been a very short period of time, or it might have been much longer, but I think we would all be reassured to know. They can tell us this afternoon.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Regarding the timing of the approach, the Leader of the Opposition failed around 10 times this morning, on LBC, to answer the actual question. Listeners will be questioning whether “Mr Rules” missed the rules. I also note that today's *Daily Telegraph* contains a piece from the constitutional expert Sir Vernon Bogdanor, who says:

“The issue is important, since, if the approach was made before publication, the hope of future employment might—even if only subconsciously—have influenced its content. So it would not be possible any longer to regard Sue Gray as an impartial investigator.”

Does the Minister agree that perceptions matter?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I, too, read the article by Sir Vernon Bogdanor. He raised interesting questions. It is why we are taking this issue so seriously. It is why we are exploring and want to get to the facts.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): Not only is impartiality important; honesty is important. The Leader of the Opposition seemed a little foggy about dates today. It seems as if perhaps the dates are being scribbled on the back of a fag packet as we speak. If any dates are declared to the Minister, can we trust that they are accurate?

Jeremy Quin: I understand that the Leader of the Opposition may be short of a chief of staff at the moment, but I am sure he has someone who keeps an eye on his diary. I am sure there is someone who could inform this House what the dates were, when the meetings took place, where they took place, and what was discussed and with whom. It is not too much to ask and it would help to clear this up. It would save the Leader of the Opposition the embarrassment of being asked about these things on repeated occasions and not being able to be clear.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Maintaining complete political impartiality is absolutely key to maintaining credibility within the civil service, so does my right hon. Friend agree that if even one meeting or one conversation took place between Sue Gray and the Labour party and the Leader of the Opposition in advance of her resignation about the job offer for such a hugely political job, surely Sue Gray's political impartiality in her role in the civil service has to be brought into question?

Jeremy Quin: I set out the rules in response to the urgent question. They are there in *Hansard* and people can read through them. There are protections in the rules to try to ensure that impartiality, and perceived impartiality, is not jeopardised. We will explore exactly what happened in these circumstances.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): In the debate on standards in public life in June last year, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) complained to the deputy leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), that Sue Gray had been asked to come before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, but that the request had been refused several times. The deputy leader of the Labour party replied that she agreed with the complaint and that it showed the then Prime Minister had “no regard for transparency”. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the deputy leader of the Labour party should live up to the standards she was extolling then and be transparent with all the facts?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne says we should follow the process, and I agree with her. It is always important to follow the correct processes. I am sure that when the Labour party reveals all the data, as I am sure it will, we will be able to see whether the processes were followed.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): In his response to the Sue Gray report on 25 May last year, the Leader of the Opposition said:

“I have been clear what leadership looks like... I have not broken any rules”.—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 298.]

If he did not consult ACOBA before announcing this appointment, has he still not broken any rules?

Jeremy Quin: I will conduct the analysis first and then I will be better informed as to exactly what took place, but as I say, this could be cleared up by the Labour party quite swiftly.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): A woman of integrity and a self-proclaimed Mr Rules. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in refusing to publish the timeline of the meetings, they have trashed both of those reputations?

Jeremy Quin: I think that is the case, sadly. I think it is, but it could easily be changed by simple publication.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I have already been contacted by the hard-working civil servants who work in my Jobcentre Plus in Maltby and Dinnington who were horrified to hear on LBC Radio this morning the Leader of the Opposition refuse to say 10 times when he was contacted first by Sue Gray in connection with a political job. Does the Minister agree that if any contact took place between her and the Leader of the Opposition or any member of the Labour party, it calls into question not only her current work and previous work, but, unfortunately, the impartiality of the whole civil service? We need to have the dates of the meetings now.

Jeremy Quin: I respect the work of those hard-working civil servants in my hon. Friend's constituency. Right across the civil service, there is an absolute desire to retain their reputation for impartiality, which they all live in their daily work. That is how they work and they are determined to work for Ministers with a relationship of trust. That is incredibly important. We are not asking much of the Labour party—just to produce that timeline of dates so that we can start to put this matter behind us, with greater transparency.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Does the Minister share my concern that the appointment severely weakens trust in our senior civil servants? The media have now shone a light on Sue Gray and her decisions, such as her appointment of an adviser who told all his Twitter followers to join the Labour party. To the public, this looks farcical. Does he agree that, as a result, only a full disclosure of meetings and conversations will suffice in this grubby affair?

Jeremy Quin: The tragedy is that a public servant's hard work over a long period of time is called into question, given the nature of the process that appears to

have taken place. That is incredibly unfortunate, but the Labour party could help to fix that by being a bit transparent, very open and saying, “This is what actually took place; these are the dates; this is who met and this is where they were.”

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): This is nothing to do with Sue Gray—the lady could be our first living saint, for all I care—but it is about the roles that she had in government. I could not think of a more sensitive position than head of propriety and ethics, where Ministers need trust. It is not about my party, either—seven Labour MPs have been sentenced to jail over the past 10 years. If they had been in government, I think she would have been quite busy with them, too. It is about those on both sides of the House being able to trust Ministers. I have to agree with colleagues that the trust is already broken. We cannot now have a discussion with someone in that position and be sure that they will not cross over to the other side. Is it time to look at introducing regulations to ensure that this kind of thing cannot happen in such sensitive roles?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend closes this urgent question by noting that it is not necessarily about Sue Gray and her actions. She is a public servant who has, for many decades, worked hard at the heart of government. It shows a miscalculation and a misstep by the Leader of the Opposition. I can only assume that it was inadvertent—I have to hope that. This matter has caused more problems, because in some people's minds it has called into question the perceived impartiality of the civil service. That was a misstep and a mistake; the Leader of the Opposition should accept that and set out transparently what happened and when, so that we can have absolute clarity on what took place.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): You may make a point of order if it is relevant to what has just taken place.

Wayne David: It is relevant—it is a point of clarification that I ask for. In response to my question, the Minister strongly implied that the reason that the former Conservative Member for Aberconwy lost the Conservative Whip was that he did not consult ACOBA. That is not the case. He lost the Conservative Whip because he voted against the Government on a Brexit vote.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I assume that the hon. Gentleman would like me to rule on something. Would he like the Minister to clarify his point of order?

Wayne David: You read my mind, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jeremy Quin: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am happy to clarify. If that was the impression that I gave the hon. Gentleman, it was not my intention. The Conservative party took no disciplinary action in respect of that matter. It was a Brexit vote, as the hon. Gentleman will recall. I thank him for the opportunity to put that on the record.

Manchester Arena Inquiry: Volume 3 Report

4.39 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the inquiry into the horrendous attack on Manchester Arena on 22 May 2017.

I work closely with MI5. While its activity is necessarily discreet, the whole country should be profoundly grateful for the patriotism and courage of its staff. They work indefatigably every day to keep the British people safe. Since the start of 2017, MI5 and the police have disrupted 37 late-stage attack plots.

An Islamist suicide bomber murdered 22 people and injured more than 1,000, as well as inflicting incalculable psychological damage and misery. I know that the whole House will join me in expressing our profound sorrow and extending our heartfelt condolences to everyone affected by this barbaric act. They were supposed to have a brilliant time and come home safely. What should have been a simple pleasure turned into a hellish nightmare. It is vital that we understand what happened and what lessons we need to learn, because we must do everything possible to prevent a repeat of this outrage.

Volume 3 of the inquiry was published last Thursday. I would like to thank Sir John Saunders and his team, who have spent more than three years on it. Sir John finds that there was a failure by the Security Service to act swiftly enough, and that there were

“problems with the sharing of information between the Security Service and Counter Terrorism Policing”.

Following the publication of the report, the director general of MI5 and the head of counter-terrorism policing offered their profound apologies for not preventing the attack.

Sir John does not blame any of the educational establishments that the bomber attended for failing to identify that he was a risk, but he does find:

“More needs to be done to ensure that education providers share relevant information about students”.

Sir John concludes that the bomber

“should have been subject to a Prevent referral at some point in 2015 or 2016. However, it is very hard to say what would have happened if”

the bomber

“had been approached under Prevent or the Channel programme.”

The police investigation into the attack, Operation Manteline, is praised.

Although Sir John cannot conclude whether the attack would have been prevented, he finds that there was a significant missed opportunity to take further investigative action that he judges might have led to information that could have prevented it. While this is welcome, and the Home Office will work at pace with both organisations to act on the chairman’s recommendations, we must not lose sight of the fact that responsibility for the attack lies with the bomber and his brother. These conclusions require careful consideration.

Since 2017, the Government have made a number of changes to how we deal with and seek to prevent terrorist attacks. We have given law enforcement and intelligence

agencies improved powers. We have strengthened the controls around access to explosives precursors. We have strengthened the management of terrorist and terrorist-risk offenders in prison and on licence. We have ended the automatic early release of terrorist offenders in England, Wales and Scotland, and we have ensured that the sentences served by terrorists reflect the severity of their offending. We have strengthened the tools for monitoring dangerous people in the community.

We have invested heavily in counter-terrorism. We unveiled a new counter-terrorism operations centre in 2021 that brings together partners from counter-terrorism policing, the intelligence agencies, the criminal justice system and other Government agencies. This will allow minute-by-minute collaboration between teams in the police and MI5. Last year’s integration of special branch into the national CT policing network will improve our response to the full range of national security threats, boost skills and ensure better communication between agencies and a more consistent and effective national response.

Work is under way to develop a new faith security training scheme to raise security awareness among faith communities and help them to mitigate threats. We continue to engage with faith organisations and security experts to develop the scheme. In April, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) announced the continuation of the Jewish community protective security grant for 2022. In May, new funding was allocated to provide protective security at mosques and Muslim faith schools.

In response to any terrorist attack affecting British nationals, in the UK or overseas, the Home Office’s victims of terrorism unit works to ensure that the right support is available to them. The unit is conducting an internal review to strengthen its work. I am overseeing a comprehensive review of the CONTEST strategy to combat terrorism. It follows on from the independent review of Prevent, led by William Shawcross, which assessed the programme’s effectiveness in preventing people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. As the review made clear, Prevent requires major reform, and I have accepted all its recommendations.

Prevent has underestimated the threat of Islamist extremism, which remains far the biggest threat that we face, and too often it has minimised the role of ideology in terrorism. It will focus on security, not on political correctness, and its first objective will be to tackle the ideological causes of terrorism. The Government have also developed a comprehensive system of support for the owners and operators of public places across the UK. It includes access to research-driven expertise through products delivered by the National Counter Terrorism Security Office and the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure.

However, we must go further. Martyn’s law, formerly known as the Protect Duty, will introduce proportionate new security requirements for certain public premises throughout the UK. They will be better prepared and ready to respond, and their staff will know what to do in the event of a terrorist attack. Martyn’s law will clarify who is responsible for security activity at the premises in scope, increasing accountability. We are also considering how an inspection function will oversee compliance, to provide appropriate advice, and, where necessary, to sanction.

[Suella Braverman]

Martyn Hett was one of those killed in Manchester. I am enormously grateful to his mother, Figen Murray, and the Martyn's Law Campaign Team, as well as to Survivors Against Terror and all the security partners, businesses, charities, local authorities and victims' groups that have informed our work. I have always been humbled when I have met them and heard about their experiences.

The doctrines that underpin the way in which the emergency services respond to incidents have improved since the attack. Let me end by once again recognising the anguish, and the courage, of the loved ones of those who were killed or hurt on that dreadful night. It united the country in sorrow and in disgust. We will continue to work non-stop to prevent further such tragedies from being visited on others, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.47 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On 22 May 2017, thousands of people, including children and their parents, went to watch a pop concert. Instead, they were faced with the most unimaginable horror, and 22 people lost their lives, including children, the youngest being just eight years old. Hundreds more were injured. Those families have endured the unimaginable. All our thoughts are with them today, and with the people of Manchester, who have stood and supported each other through the most difficult of times. I join the Home Secretary in thanking Sir John Saunders for his far-reaching inquiry, and for his vital work in seeking answers for the victims and their families.

The responsibility for this vile attack lies with the bomber and his brother, and with those who may have radicalised and enabled them, and we—all of us—condemn their actions in the strongest possible terms. It is right that the brother has been brought to justice. Rightly too, however, this report has looked at why it happened and at what might have prevented it, to seek the truth for families and their loved ones and to identify changes needed for the future. These are important and serious conclusions which are hard to hear: that there was, in Sir John's words, a

“significant missed opportunity to take action that might have prevented the attack”;

that there was a failure to act swiftly enough on information; that there were failures in the sharing of information; and that the bomber should have been referred to the Prevent programme in 2015 or 2016, although Sir John says it is unclear whether that would have led to action. These are hard conclusions to hear, especially for those who have lost loved ones.

The Home Secretary has rightly said that agencies and counter-terror police work immensely hard to keep us safe every day. Sir John also says in his report that they have disrupted 27 major Islamist extremist terror plots in recent years, in addition to five right-wing and left-wing terror plots. That is a result of their immense efforts night and day. It is because they are dedicated to keeping us safe that they also recognise the importance of facing up to things going wrong, and they too have expressed their profound sorrow and apologies.

Sir John has rightly made recommendations, and everyone is rightly seeking to take them forward. We should support them in doing so, but I want to press the Home Secretary on some of the details of those measures. First, all of us support the work of Figen Murray and many of the Manchester survivors to introduce Martyn's law, but can the right hon. Lady tell me the timetable? Will the Bill have its Second Reading before the summer recess? On the closed recommendations, which are clearly important, will the entire report be shared with the Intelligence and Security Committee so that it can oversee the changes that need to be made?

On the issues around prisons and the Prevent programme, the bomber repeatedly visited someone who was in prison for terrorist offences, but that did not trigger a further assessment despite some of the wider things that were known about the bomber and his family. That raises serious concerns. Will the Home Secretary look again at the process for monitoring prison visits, and will she accept Sir John's recommendations about the changes in approach to visits to terrorist and extremist prisoners that need to be taken and also his recommendations on changes to the law?

Sir John also concludes that it is highly likely that the bombers used a video online to help them to make the device in 2016. It is appalling that that video was not taken down. It is also troubling that, seven years on, we do not have the Online Safety Bill on the statute. This also raises concerns about the lack of a proper strategy on online radicalisation. Can I urge the Home Secretary to urgently revise the countering extremism strategy, which is now eight years out of date despite her predecessors having received recommendations from the countering extremism commissioner in 2018 that it was already out of date then? Will she urgently revise it to address online radicalisation?

Sir John also warns about a potential indicator of extremism being violent misogyny in this case. There are patterns here affecting different kinds of extremism—Islamist extremism, far right extremism and incel extremism—so will the Home Secretary commission a review to look at what role violent misogyny may be playing and how far it should be understood as a potential indicator of extremism and radicalisation? Sir John also raises workforce pressures, particularly in the north-west. Given the new threats from hostile states, can the Home Secretary comment on what her assessment is of resources?

Finally, concerns were raised that the security services did not understand the threats from Libya sufficiently, and that that was a wake-up call. Does the Home Secretary recognise that that shows the importance for them to continually reassess different threats and not to have a hierarchy of threats or extremism but to pursue the evidence wherever it takes them? The Home Secretary mentioned the survivors, and we think of them. However, many of them still feel that they lack the support and help they need, even many years after the truly terrible things that happened. Will she meet Survivors Against Terror and look again at what further support can be provided for those who lost loved ones and those who were hurt in that terrible event?

Suella Braverman: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions, which I will address in due course. I agree entirely with her assessment that we must now all come together—the Government, the security services and

the emergency services—to learn the lessons of this awful tragedy and work to reduce the likelihood of future attacks. It was a truly sad and terrible incident, but I want to reassure the public that our priority is to keep them safe. We must root out extremism wherever we find it, and we must give no quarter to political correctness as we do so. We must respond quickly to all criticisms, but we must also recognise the serious work that has taken place since the attack.

On Martyn's law, the Government will publish draft legislation for scrutiny in the spring. After that, we will introduce a Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows. Its progress will depend on Parliament passing it and agreeing a date for commencement. There will be a lead-in time to allow for those captured by the Bill to prepare.

Martyn's law is one part of our extensive efforts across Government, including by the police and security services, to combat the threat of terrorism. There remains an intensive programme of guidance, developed by security experts, counter-terrorism policing and other partners, to provide high-quality advice to stakeholders and others with responsibility for public places. I look forward to moving forward with the solution and to presenting the Bill on Martyn's law.

We have published a new policy framework allowing for greater scrutiny of the contact between terrorist prisoners and the public. Our new approved contacts scheme, to be implemented this year, will allow greater checks on the visitors and phone contacts of those convicted of terrorism and terrorism-connected offences, regardless of the category of prison in which they are held.

A large amount of work has been done since 2017 to support and improve the consistency of local authority Prevent delivery, and to manage the risk posed by subjects of interest. This includes additional funding and support for the highest-priority areas, the publication of the Prevent duty toolkit and the development of the multi-agency centre programme. We are working across Government to mitigate the risk posed by those about whom we have concerns.

Finally, the right hon. Lady asked about support for families who are going through this unimaginable process, which is why I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement last week on the Government's commitment to legislating, as soon as possible, to establish an independent public advocate to support victims following a major incident. The IPA will help victims to navigate the systems and processes that may follow a major incident, such as the police investigation, the inquests and inquiries. I hope it does not have to be used, but in the event of a tragedy, we will have the resources, expertise and structures in place to support families in this unimaginable situation.

I know the whole House will agree that we must now move forward with a solution to ensure our frameworks and processes are as robust as possible so that we never again see anything like this.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On behalf of the ISC, I extend our deepest sympathy to the families and individuals so dreadfully affected by this terrorist act.

I welcome the publication of the third volume of the Manchester Arena inquiry report, and I express my strong appreciation for the work of the inquiry team. Of course, the Committee will carefully consider the report and Sir John Saunders's request that we should monitor the implementation of the inquiry's recommendations. In the meantime, do the Government acknowledge and accept that the ISC is the only Committee of Parliament equipped with both the facilities and the clearances fully to undertake this type of classified scrutiny?

Suella Braverman: Sir John Saunders has made it clear that he is determined that the recommendations are monitored, and he has made arrangements with the ISC to that effect. The open part of volume 3 has only just been published, and the closed recommendations have not yet been shared with the Government. We will carefully consider the report's findings and recommendations in full. We will also consider any recommendations that Sir John makes about the role the ISC can play in the light of the memorandum of understanding that exists between the Committee and the Government. That MOU is available on the Committee's website.

Yes, the ISC is a very effective and secure forum in which, as has happened in the past, the delivery on the back of such inquiries can be properly scrutinised.

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

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The awful events on 22 May 2017 led to the deaths of 22 innocent people and to hundreds more being injured and affected for the rest of their lives. Of course, the ultimate responsibility lies with the bomber who detonated his homemade device in the foyer of Manchester Arena as the crowds left an Ariana Grande concert. I welcome the fact that MI5 has reflected and apologised for its role in failing to prevent this heinous attack. For example, the report finds that intelligence could have led to the bomber being followed to a car where he stored his explosives. The inquiry also found that two pieces of information about the bomber were assessed by the Security Service as not being terrorism-related. An officer also admitted that they considered a possible national security concern on one of those pieces of information, but did not immediately discuss it with colleagues and did not write up a report on the same day.

May I first ask the Home Secretary what steps she is taking to ensure that the security services improve in their communications and information sharing, guaranteeing that professional standards do not fall short, as they have done in this case? Secondly, the inquiry has found that the bomber was probably assisted by someone in Libya, but because of gaps in available evidence, that line of inquiry has not been addressed sufficiently. Can the Home Secretary provide further information on whether the investigation will continue to search for those who assisted the bomber? Given how much frustration the victims' families are experiencing, understandably, as a result of information being withheld due to national security implications, will the Home Secretary at least provide reassurance to those families that the UK Government will leave no stone unturned in finding justice for their relatives?

Suella Braverman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Following the attacks in 2017, MI5 and counter-terrorism policing together carried out a series of reviews. Their 126 recommendations included: better data exploitation; the wider sharing of intelligence; and changes to how terrorist threats were assessed and investigated. An independent review by David Anderson concluded in December 2017 that

“the recommendations taken as a whole will strengthen MI5 and the police in their ability to stop most terrorist attacks.”

So a wide range of measures and actions have been taken since 2017 to improve data sharing, data exploitation and the assessment of intelligence. Let me give her and the British people the assurance that no stone will be left unturned by this Government to keep the British people safe. That is why we have announced an investment of £370 million in a new counter-terrorism operations centre—CTOC. The new headquarters for London-based counter-terrorism policing, the intelligence community and Government partners will increase the strength, resilience and collaboration of our wholesale UK counter-terrorism effort.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for this statement. With 22 people murdered and more than 1,000 people injured, the impact of this attack on families will go on for a lifetime. We must not only learn lessons, but ensure it never happens again. I welcome the Government backing for Martyn’s law. That is really important, because people want to know that when they go into a venue they are safe. While we are waiting for that to come forward—I hope it can be brought forward quickly—what conversations is she having and what instructions is she giving to venues to make sure that they start to act now and do not wait until the legislation is put in place?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the steps we are taking. We are going to introduce Martyn’s law to impose legal duties on public venues and those responsible for public spaces to secure them against potential terrorist threats. We are already taking considerable action to ensure that there is high-quality advice, best practice and support for those responsible for public places. Many businesses and organisations already do excellent work to improve their security and preparedness, but legislative requirements will go just that step further in ensuring that there is a robust approach and that everyone knows what their duties are.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I wish to thank Mr Speaker for allowing me to speak as a constituency MP from the Back Benches today.

The Manchester Arena attack led to the devastating loss of 22 innocent lives, including those of Alison Howe and Lisa Lees, who were killed as they waited for their 15-year-old daughters to come out of the concert. I wish to place on record my heartfelt sorrow for the family and to reflect on their courage and dignity over the past nearly six years during the course of this investigation and report. I say to the Home Secretary that, given how long the victims have been waiting to see this report and the outcomes, the cruel findings of that report have to be acknowledged. Although she has done some of that, can she go further and put on record what will be done for the victims finally to put right the wrongs that have been identified in the report?

Suella Braverman: May I associate myself with the comments that the hon. Gentleman has so powerfully made about his constituents? The report does not pull its punches. Sir John is unequivocal in his assessment of what happened, what should have happened, what could have happened, and what may have resulted as a consequence. That is why the director-General of MI5 and the lead at Counter Terrorism Policing did not shy away from the words that they expressed last week. It is absolutely right that we support the families going forward. I want them to know that I have full confidence in the process that Sir John has just run. It has been extensive and it has taken a long time. Some of the hearings had to be carried out during covid, with additional burden. The process was exhaustive and robust at all times. We have here an authoritative conclusion and assessment of what happened and, importantly, lessons that we can all learn and take forward, so that such an incident does not happen again.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Home Secretary is to be commended for her statement today and for her refocusing of Prevent on Islamist fundamentalism. That tyranny is the greatest threat to us. Will she take account of the recommendations of this inquiry in two particular respects? The first is the relationship between counter-terrorism police and the intelligence services—she spoke about collaboration a moment ago. Secondly, as the shadow Home Secretary said, the continuing observation of those who were formerly subjects of interest but then moved to less stringent surveillance seems to be a critical element in this inquiry.

Suella Braverman: As Sir John said in his report, no one should underestimate the very difficult job that the Security Service and Counter Terrorism Policing do, and that job has become more difficult with the emergence of lone-actor terrorists whose activities are more difficult to track. That is why the Government, including MI5, are committed to doing everything in their power to strengthen our defences against terrorism. That is also why Prevent remains a vital tool for early intervention. Without a Prevent referral being made, it is impossible for authorities to intervene to support those susceptible to radicalisation. It is an essential tool in minimising and eliminating the threat posed by terrorism, and it is vital that we now carry out the reforms of William Shawcross to improve it so that we stamp out this insidious behaviour.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am also grateful for special dispensation to speak from the Back Benches on this matter.

The arena bomb was one of the most distressing and difficult episodes in the history of Greater Manchester—I think because so many children were affected by life-changing injuries from having been at a music venue. One of my constituents has been left without her hearing, possibly for the rest of her life. My constituents have never wanted this inquiry to be about blame; they wanted it to be about being able to say that we will learn lessons from the response that the country makes and that in future we will be better and stronger as a result.

I will raise just two specific matters. First, the report highlights the lack of an update to the counter-extremism strategy; the Home Secretary mentioned many things

that I think form the strands of that, but I want to know that, if somebody who has links to a country such as Libya is visiting a known terror offender in prison, that will be closely monitored in future. Secondly, from the point of view of the survivors and the victims' families, who have shown great courage throughout this very difficult process—I pay specific tribute to groups such as the Manchester Survivors Choir, which has been a huge source of support for some of my constituents—can the Home Secretary confirm how they will be supported now the that inquiry has finished?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman asks about changes to the counter-terrorism system and in particular the refresh of our world-leading counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, which is being updated to protect the public from new and emerging threats to our way of life. As I say, we expect to publish the updated version of CONTEST later this year. We want to ensure that it achieves its aim of reducing the terrorism risk to the UK, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence. It is based on prevent, pursue, protect and prepare, and we must ensure that it is fit for purpose so that the public are kept safe from terrorism.

In terms of support for the families, they have been frankly heroic in the ordeal that they have been through in voicing their concerns, giving evidence and dealing with the tragedy of this horrendous incident. They have been very powerful. Their evidence has informed the recommendations and the conclusions, which will inform the practice of MI5 and all our security agencies, and for that I am grateful.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Olivia Campbell-Hardy, from Bury, was 15 years of age when she went out that evening and did not come back. She was a beautiful, wonderful person. Today we have the third volume of the report, which says there was

“a significant missed opportunity to take action”

on the part of MI5. We have also had previously highlighted the shocking failures of the venue's owners, the security contractors and the emergency services. Some of those who died—not all of them—could still be alive today, and I would like to know about accountability. Too often in this place, an apology from an organisation seems to be enough. Well, it is not. People died as a result not only of the actions of this bomber, but because of the gross negligence of some of the bodies I mentioned. Who is being held accountable, who will be responsible, and will that information be passed on to the families?

Suella Braverman: As the inquiry's report makes clear, the responsibility for the events of 22 May 2017 lie with the bomber and his brother. Responsibility rests with them. When it comes to whether lives could have been saved, the Government are of course incredibly sorry—I understand that sorry is a weak word for the people directly affected, and our thoughts remain with them—but Sir John Saunders is also clear in his conclusion:

“It remains quite impossible to say whether any different or additional action taken by the authorities could have prevented the Attack. It might have done; it might not have done.”

He also says that it is

“very hard to say what would have happened”

if the bomber

“had been approached under Prevent or the Channel programme.”

It is difficult to make those clear, direct causal connections. However, as I have said before, he does not shy away from saying that there was a significant oversight and there were failings in the process. There are no words that will provide solace to the families affected, but I hope that they can gain confidence from knowing that huge seriousness is attached to this report and we are doing everything in our power to make sure that the lessons learned will be applied in the real world.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Our thoughts are with the families of the victims, and I thank Sir John for his report. The Home Secretary will be aware that in 2018, the ISC, which I sit on, did a report on the Manchester bombing and the other terrorist attacks that took place in 2017. Many of the conclusions are mirrored in Sir John's report, including on the purchase of precursor chemicals. Five years on, nothing has been done about that.

The Home Secretary said to the Chair of the ISC, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), that she respects the Committee's work. As we are the only Committee that can look at the closed report and closed evidence, it is important that if we make recommendations, they are acted on. To date, the Government's response to ISC's work is not good. Last July, we produced our right-wing terrorism report. The memorandum of understanding says that the Government have 60 days to reply but we are still waiting. I also say to her that the actions of her Department in our scrutiny of the National Security Bill were far from helpful.

Suella Braverman: On chemical precursors, we have enhanced our capabilities to detect terrorist activity involving chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive materials and their precursors, and to control and safeguard those materials. Since 2017, among other things, we have strengthened the controls on access to explosive precursors. We regulated sulphuric acid, for example, in 2018. In 2023, we have laid secondary legislation that will improve how suspicious activity reports are made. We have done a lot of work on that issue, but we can always go further.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The UK has some of the best intelligence agencies in the world. They have many successes every day, many of which, as the Home Secretary will know, cannot be made public. However, they also make mistakes, and they admit that, as in this case and others.

More widely—but not linked to this specific inquiry at this point—is it not time for the Justice and Security Act 2013, and the memorandum of understanding that allows the Intelligence and Security Committee to do its work, to be updated so that there can be full, comprehensive, up-to-date scrutiny of our intelligence agencies, which have huge budgets, huge powers and a huge number of personnel?

Suella Braverman: We have a very high level of scrutiny of our agencies, whether that is through the Intelligence and Security Committee or the independent reviewer. In relation to the Manchester Arena attack, there have been several reports and hundreds of recommendations, many of which have been implemented by the agencies. There is a high level of scrutiny, but we need to balance that with the need not to tie the hands of our agents, because they do vital work and we do not want to start chilling the effect of that work.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Manchester Arena bombing was an utterly despicable attack on innocent children and adults, and our sympathies go to all the families who were affected.

Sir John Saunders' report recognised failings in information sharing. The fact that Salman Abedi was a person of interest would not have been known to many of those who were perhaps best placed to spot his radicalisation, and they were unaware of the risk that he presented, including at the mosque where he worshipped. The Home Secretary mentioned the new faith security training scheme. Will she expand on how that scheme might appropriately equip religious institutions and community groups to assist the authorities in identifying potentially radicalised individuals, so that they can help to thwart future attacks?

Suella Braverman: There are lots of measures that we have implemented and are continuing to roll out to ensure that those who may pose a risk receive some kind of intervention. The "ACT Early" campaign, for example, seeks to raise awareness of the signs of radicalisation and where to go if a person needs support about someone they know. The Shawcross report looked into educational establishments and how they can more effectively support counter-terrorism work. There is a multi-agency job of work to do and everyone needs to be clear about their responsibilities to ensure that we prevent and minimise the risk.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and of course all our thoughts are with the victims, their families and the survivors.

Prevent's original principles were about rooting out extremism and stopping people from turning into terrorists. As the Shawcross review found, a number of its projects drifted away from that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what has happened only underlines the need for a successful and effective Prevent programme that deals with the people most at risk of becoming terrorists, whatever their motivation?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: whether we are talking about Islamist extremism or far-right extremism, the Shawcross review is clear that we need a more transparent, efficient and sustainable programme. We need more independent oversight; we need to build an extensive programme of communications and community engagement; we need new risk assessment tools; and we need to ensure that a consistent approach is applied to all risks, so that we can be effective in minimising the threat.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Elaine McIver was a serving police officer with Cheshire police who went along to a concert and was killed, like 22 other people—the youngest victim being eight. A very close family member worked in the immediate aftermath of that terrorist atrocity. What I am seeking from the Home Secretary today, like all other Members from across the House, is reassurance that the recommendations of Sir John's report will be implemented in full, no ifs and no buts.

Suella Braverman: We want to ensure that all the recommendations of Sir John's reports are fully reflected upon and make a difference. That is what I am focused

on—that we learn the lessons from this tragic incident, and improve our operational responses and our manner of dealing with the risks. We also want to make sure that victims of terrorism receive the support that they deserve, which is why the victims of terrorism unit is conducting an internal review to see how we can improve the package of support available to victims in that terrible situation.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Liam Curry and Chloe Rutherford from South Shields were murdered in the Manchester Arena attack. The Home Secretary will have seen their brave parents in reports outside court last week. She will also know that archaic law in relation to terror attacks is denying them the chance to register their precious children's deaths. After being told repeatedly that there was a willingness from Government to try to change that law, they recently attended another meeting with Ministers. This time, they were treated with contempt, patronised and insulted. It then became clear that they have been misled by the Government for nearly a year, because despite it being entirely possible to change that law, the Government and, in particular, the Home Secretary's Department simply do not want to. This is adding to the parents' anguish and pain. Will the Home Secretary please reconsider and meet with them?

Suella Braverman: Of course, I deeply feel for and sympathise with the families who have been so tragically bereaved by the Manchester Arena attack. Any family bereaved in unexpected and tragic circumstances deserve our full support and condolences.

There is no legal flexibility on that requirement, as the death would not otherwise be registered in accordance with the legislation. I know that this is a disappointing situation. This is not an issue that the Ministry of Justice alone can resolve, and the Home Office Minister, Lord Murray of Blidworth, explained to the Manchester Arena families that long-term change would interfere with the coherence of the General Register Office's registration process. I know that that is disappointing, but I am always willing to consider new approaches.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): This report details opportunities tragically missed by MI5, but also reminds us of the need for us all to be vigilant. We know that a member of the public who saw the perpetrator and thought he looked suspicious raised his concerns with a member of the Showsec security staff, but no effective action was taken. While welcoming the Government's approach to Martyn's law, can I ask the Secretary of State what more the Government are proposing to do to ensure that security staff in both the public and the private sector have proper training and well-rehearsed procedures for how to respond in similar circumstances, to help prevent future such tragedies?

Suella Braverman: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the proposed Martyn's law. The details in general have been set out: premises that will be within the scope will be those that are a building or event within a defined boundary. There will need to be a qualifying activity at the location, and the maximum occupancy of the premises will need to meet a specific threshold—either 100-plus or 800-plus. That will potentially cover a lot of public spaces and be a real step change in how we ensure more protection for users of public spaces.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After the horrific, tragic, cowardly Manchester Arena bombing, survivors and victims' families have shown immense strength and courage throughout the whole inquiry process. However, the victims and survivors of previous disasters, including the Hillsborough tragedy, have had to wait years and years for Governments to act on the recommendations of reports and issue a full response. Can the Home Secretary commit today to ensuring that the Manchester families do not have to suffer a similar delay?

Suella Braverman: We are working on that, and as I have said, there has already been a huge amount of change, reform and improvement within the agencies as a response to the event in 2017. This report marks another step forward. We will consider everything and we will move forward accordingly, but we will also be responding both to Bishop James Jones's report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families and to the report of the Daniel Morgan independent panel, following which we will consider fully the recommendation on the full duty of candour.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and the compassion and tone of her response? I think we all deeply appreciate it and thank the Secretary of State for that. On behalf of my party, the Democratic Unionist party, I wish also to record that our thoughts and prayers are with all those who lost loved ones and who today grieve greatly.

Will the Secretary of State accept that the parents of the children slaughtered and maimed are not looking for apologies? Instead, they are looking for improvements to ensure that no parent goes through the devastation that they have felt and still feel. For those parents and those families, what further changes will stem from the finalisation of this report?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman puts it very well. Just to give a sample, even before this report was published, since 2017 MI5 and other partners have conducted a series of reviews, subject to robust external oversight, and the Intelligence and Security Committee has published a report. There were hundreds of recommendations, and many of them have been implemented already to improve counter-terrorism operations, to improve intelligence sharing, to build a better response that goes traditional security agencies, and to connect expertise and all kinds of public sector authorities. A lot of work has been delivered, and we want to build on that.

SEND and Alternative Provision

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we come to the statement, I would like to point out that British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

5.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): With permission, I will make a statement on our progress to improve outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities or in alternative provision in England. For those with special educational needs and disabilities, many schools and councils are doing a brilliant job. I have met many wonderful teachers who are unbelievably passionate about supporting children to be happier, more confident and better prepared for adulthood. However, too often our children and young people do not get the support they need and their parents have lost trust in the system. Our special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision Green Paper set out proposals to deliver a more inclusive system, and I give credit to my predecessors, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for the work they have put into this area.

I would like to put on record my thanks to the thousands of people who responded to the Green Paper consultation, and to the parents, children and young people who shared their experiences with us. Most people agreed that the experiences and outcomes of children and young people vary significantly around the country. We heard too many stories of families who were frustrated by the system, and who were battling to access specialist education, health or care services, including mental health services. I assure the House that we have taken those contributions and comments on board.

On Thursday, we published the "Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan" jointly with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. The plan sets out the next steps that we will take to deliver a more positive experience for children and families. Our mission is threefold. First, we want every child and young person to enjoy their childhood, and feel well prepared for their next step, whether that is into employment, higher education or adult services. Secondly, we know that the system has lost the confidence of parents and carers. We need to regain their trust by improving the support that is ordinarily available. Finally, we have increased the high-needs budget by over 50% in the past four years; we now need to make sure that the funding is being well spent.

We will establish a single national system that delivers for every child and young person with special educational needs and disabilities from birth to age 25. To do that, we will develop new national special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision standards, which will cover early years, school, and post-16 provision. The standards will set out what types of support should be available, and who, according to the best possible evidence, should be responsible for making sure that it is. That will include clarifying the types of support that should ordinarily be available in mainstream settings, so that

[*Claire Coutinho*]

families can have confidence and clarity about how their children's needs will be met. We will develop new practice guides to support frontline professionals in implementing evidence-based best practice. We will start by building on best practice, including on early language support, autism and mental health and wellbeing.

To deliver for children and their families locally, we will establish local SEND and AP partnerships. They will support local authorities in producing, together with families, local inclusion plans that are in line with the national standards. Those plans will set out how good-quality alternative provision will be made available. In our new approach to AP, instead of it being a permanent destination, it will be used as an intervention, in order to support those who may feel anxious, or struggle with their behaviour, in mainstream school. This system will mean that more children and young people have their needs met effectively in mainstream settings. That will reduce the reliance on education, health and care plans for accessing support.

Early intervention is crucial. That is why we are training thousands more early years special educational needs co-ordinators and 400 more educational psychologists, who will be able to identify children who need support, and to provide expert advice. We will ensure that children and young people who require an education, health and care plan or specialist provision will get prompt access to the support that they need, within a less adversarial system. We will introduce new standardised EHCPs, and will support local authorities in increasing their use of digital technology, so that the process is easier and quicker for families. By providing a tailored list of settings that are able to meet the needs set out in an EHCP, we will ensure that families can express an informed preference for a placement, so that children and young people can get the right support in the right setting. We will continue to work closely with families and local authorities as we test this proposal.

It is crucial to have the right school places in an area. We will invest £2.6 billion by 2025 in new special and alternative provision places, and in improving provision, including by opening 33 new special free schools; a further 49 are already in the pipeline. We will shortly launch competitions to run these schools.

I am determined to ensure that all children and young people progress to the next stage of life with confidence and optimism, so we will publish guidance on ensuring effective transitions between all stages of education, and an effective transition into employment and adult services. To improve transitions into employment, we are investing in supported internships; we aim to double the capacity of the programme between 2022 and 2025. We will also continue to work with the Department for Work and Pensions on the introduction of the adjustments passport, so that employers know what support young people require.

I know that the whole House will wish to join me in thanking everyone who works so hard to deliver for children and young people with SEND or in alternative provision. Honestly, some of the most inspirational visits that I go on involve meeting them. For our reforms to succeed, we need a strong, confident workforce with robust leadership, and access to specialists where needed. We will deliver a new leadership-level national professional

qualification for special educational needs co-ordinators, so that this key part of the workforce receives high-quality, evidence-based training. We are also extending the alternative provision specialist taskforce pilot programme, which co-locates a diverse specialist workforce in alternative provision schools.

Informed by a stronger evidence base, we will take a joint approach to workforce planning with the Department of Health and Social Care, and we will establish a steering group this year to drive this work forward. We will also partner with NHS England to trial new ways of working to better identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs in early years and primary schools. Meeting children's social, emotional and mental health needs is also a crucial aspect of strong special educational needs provision. Our school and college mental health support teams will be expanded to around 400 operational teams later this year, covering around 35% of pupils in England, and it will reach around 500 operational teams by 2024.

I began by saying that we had to regain parents' trust, and I know that part of this means strengthening accountability across the board so that everyone is held to account for supporting children and young people. The new Ofsted and Care Quality Commission area SEND inspection framework now focuses on the experience of children and young people with SEND or in AP. Going forward, Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission and the Department for Education will provide oversight and ongoing monitoring of reforms, including delivery in line with the local inclusion plans. From this autumn, parents will be able to monitor the performance of their local systems through the establishment of local and national inclusion dashboards. Where there are disagreements about an individual's special educational needs provision or support, we will make it clearer how concerns and complaints should be dealt with by local areas. We will also strengthen the quality of mediation and test different approaches for resolving disputes earlier.

So that all children and young people can access the support they need to fulfil their potential, we must put the system on a stable and sustainable financial footing. We secured £2 billion a year in additional schools funding in the autumn statement from this April, of which £400 million has been earmarked for SEND and AP. We are working with local authorities to address deficits through our delivering better value and safety valve programmes. Parents told us that some reforms would need careful consideration, so I am pleased to announce that a £70 million change programme will fund up to nine regional expert partnerships to design and test our reform proposals in collaboration with parents. To get this under way, we are today launching the tender for the programme's delivery partner.

Oversight of reform will be provided through a new national special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision implementation board, jointly chaired by myself and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is the Minister responsible for mental health and the women's health strategy. Delivering for children and young people is of the utmost importance. My priority is to make sure that every single child and young person can access the support they need to make the most of their lives. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.37 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

“Every family in the country with anyone with special educational needs will have felt at times like they’re battling the system...you’re fighting for it, fighting for support.”

This is how the Education Secretary spoke about the SEND system last week, and I know that her words will chime with many parents and families across the country. So my question to the Minister today is this: does she really believe this plan is good enough? Does she truly believe it will shift the dial and end the fight for support, end the battle for places at special schools and end the scandal that sees so many children with special educational needs held back?

I know there is support right across this House for action to improve the lives of children and young people, yet in the words of the Children’s Commissioner, the plan the Government have set out risks seeing

“more years of children being fed”

into a “vicious cycle” of poor outcomes. Much of the substance in this plan will not even come into effect until 2025 or even 2026, at best six years after the review was announced. New national standards, new special school places, new standardised digital education, health and care plans—none of this will be coming online until a further 300,000 children with SEND have left secondary school. So can the Minister say what the Government are doing right now for the children in the system today? How can parents, carers, and families be better supported now for the children whose needs are currently going unmet?

I welcome the fact that the Minister has listened to Labour’s call for a focus on the early years. Identifying children’s needs early is vital and the evidence could not be clearer, yet over 5,000 early years childcare providers have closed since August 2021. I am proud of Labour’s record in Government: the network of life-changing children’s centres we delivered across the country. The Minister’s Government closed over 1,300 children’s centres, and now, 13 years on, why on earth do Ministers expect parents to be grateful for the promise of the much more limited family hubs?

The plan sets the aim of reducing the number of children with education, health and care plans. Reducing EHCPs through improving support in mainstream schools and getting better support in place early would be welcome, but it must not simply be seen as a means of reducing costs within the system. Which of the proposals discussed will reduce the need for EHCPs, and how will they be delivered? Will the Minister provide reassurance to parents, already facing an adversarial system, that an EHCP will not become more difficult to obtain for children who do need that level of support?

I want to thank the thousands of staff working every day to support young people with special educational needs and disabilities. School support staff are frequently working with children with the most complex needs, yet all too often they are not given the training or recognition they need and deserve. Meanwhile, less than half of teachers feel that they receive sufficient training to

support pupils with SEND. I am sure the Minister will point to the promised new practice guides, again, sadly, not due until 2025, but can she today go further and tell us when all school staff working with children with additional needs will receive greater support?

The plan talks about accountability within the system. After 13 years of Conservative Governments, we hear time and again about the same problems: “significant weaknesses” in local services for pupils with SEND; health services disengaged; families bounced from pillar to post, unable to access the support they need. This is a national pattern of failure that requires a national response. When do the Government intend to get their own House in order?

Parents, providers and all people working in the system to support children and young people are already asking whether Labour will stand by the direction of travel set out in this plan, because while it is right to test policies to ensure they work, this plan is symptomatic of a Government who have simply given up, and who are governing through a mixture of distraction and delay, pushing the tough decisions to the other side of the election. So, I say to all parents, carers and children with additional needs, “Labour wants to work with you to get this right and deliver the system that you have rightly been calling for over so many years, and to enable every child and every young person to achieve and thrive.”

Claire Coutinho: I would like to come back on some of those points.

First, on the ambition of the reforms, these are systemic reforms: we are looking at every single part of the system and addressing a lot of the challenges that providers and parents talk about. Communications with councils comes up a lot with parents, for example, and we are setting out a new standard on that. On timeliness of EHCPs, we are working on joint-partnership working with health providers and local councils so that they can deliver on that. On teachers, we are talking about training as well. So, yes, I do think this is an ambitious set of reforms and that it will improve people’s lives.

On the timeline, we have not waited for the publication of the improvement plan. Not only have we increased the amount of funding for the high needs block by over 50% in the last four years, but we have also taken schools funding to historic record real-time highs, so anyone who is in mainstream funding can also get additional support.

We have also set out £2.6 billion on a capital programme to increase the number of specialist places. We set out 33 new free-schools last week, but we have already built 92 and there are 49 in the pipeline with seven due to open in September. We have also set out funding on educational psychologists. So there is much that we have already started to do, and we have not waited for the improvement plan. When setting out steps like national standards, however, it is important that we consult and take time to get it right.

The hon. Lady mentioned teacher training. We are going to review both initial teacher training and the early careers framework, which will work in tandem with our best practice guides to make sure that all teachers have the best possible evidence base to work from.

[*Claire Coutinho*]

Lastly, accountability is something that we have been baking into the system for a while. We have put forward a new area inspection framework. Again, that brings in all the partners, because we know that education is as important as health. We will have a new social care inspector on those area inspections for the first time. In 2019, we changed the standards for schools so that a school cannot be considered good or outstanding unless it gets good outcomes for its special educational needs children. We are looking at all those points of accountability to ensure that the system works as well as possible.

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

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (*Claire Coutinho*), and the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (*Will Quince*), for all the detailed work they have done in this area. There is much to be welcomed in the improvement plan. The aspiration in the foreword to “deliver a more dignified experience for children and young people with SEND and to restore families’ confidence in the system”

must be one that colleagues from all parts of the House can agree with.

Important strides are being taken to invest in new capacity where it is needed. In that vein, I warmly welcome the announcement of a new all-through autism school in south Worcestershire. I have long supported and campaigned for that, as has my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (*Harriett Baldwin*).

Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that, to maximise opportunities for children with SEND, we must get the right support for inclusion in mainstream schools, early identification of need and the right specialist provision where it is needed? With that in mind, I urge her to continue to work with Worcestershire Children First to ensure that we can meet the increasing level of need in early years and primary in my neck of the woods.

I would also say that implementation is crucial. We have a strong plan, but getting the implementation right will be very important. With that in mind, will my hon. Friend agree to give evidence to the Select Committee when we look further into these issues in the near future?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is absolutely right that getting the right provision in mainstream is the key to success, particularly in respect of early identification, so that needs do not escalate, as we know they so often do if people do not get the help that they need at the right time. I welcome the new specialist provision that my hon. Friend will have in Worcestershire. I know that he has campaigned long and hard on that. I would also be delighted to give evidence to the Education Committee.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The goal must be to ensure that every child with a special educational need or disability gets the support that they need now—not in a year or in two or three years’ time—in order for them to achieve their potential. The curriculum framework

for children and young people with vision impairment provides a framework of support to those children to access the curriculum and develop the broad range of skills that are necessary to learn alongside their peers and live independently. The curriculum also involves developing life skills for visually impaired children and young people. Will the Government agree to include that new curriculum framework for children living with sight loss in their new standards, or the soon-to-come code of conduct, and draw on the vast knowledge from within the sight-loss sector?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As we set out national standards and best practice guides, we will be trying to work with the best possible evidence from all providers to ensure that we have those included. We have also set out a new apprenticeship, with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, for teachers of children with sensory impairment. That may be an area that we can collaborate further on.

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): I congratulate the Minister, her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (*Will Quince*), and the Secretary of State for Education on an excellent paper. I would press her further on the initial teacher training review. When will that conclude? That is obviously crucial. Early identification is at the centre of this review. Early identification of neurodiverse conditions—including, for example, dyslexia—is critical, so what tangible action will we see for better screening and better early identification so that every neurodiverse child can reach their potential, and we can support all children to succeed?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Obviously, he has been a doughty campaigner on the issue of dyslexia, and he has had many constructive conversations with me about the issue. On initial teacher training, we will be working at pace to get that right. On early identification, one thing that will really help is that we are setting out a best practice guide on early speech and language support. Coupled with the phonics test, I think that will be effective in working out which children are struggling with their reading, so that we can get the best support in place as quickly as possible.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): This is quite a confession from the Minister after 13 years of Tory Government. In my constituency, children have waited months, if not years, for an education, health and care plan. Children are waiting three years for an autism diagnosis. There is parental anxiety over schools that do not have the right provision for their children, and anger that special needs children are excluded for misbehaving and left at home with no support. In one case, a teenager with a maturity age many years younger was left to cope in mainstream—they don’t! Does the Minister really think that parents trust her and her failing Government to get it right this time?

Claire Coutinho: I am not sure I would like to thank the hon. Gentleman for that particular question, but I understand the frustration parents feel. It is something I have talked to lots of parents about since I became an MP, as I am in an area that has seen a huge rise in need. That is something the system is facing. The Conservative Government enhanced parents’ rights through the Children and Families Act 2014. We are seeing a huge rise in

needs and we are setting out plans to deal with that. One thing that I think will help in particular—he mentions cases of children who are struggling in the system to find a place—are the local inclusion plans and partnership working. We will look at every single part of the system to ensure that we can assess needs and that there is suitable provision for all children and young people.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I refer Members to my registered interests. I thank my hon. Friend for what is both a detailed and serious piece of work that identifies the issues that remain in the special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision system. She will know that I took the original reforms through in 2014 in the Children and Families Act. The legislative framework still holds together well, but as the Chairman of the Select Committee said, this is a lot to do with the implementation and the experience on the ground, not least when it comes to the role of health in bringing EHCPs together, especially in mainstream schools. To that end, can she say a little more about how she will make health bodies comply with their statutory duties, and about any greater powers that the Health Secretary may have to take robust action where children's needs are not being met, both within the current legislative framework and in any future national standards? It is so important that this is done with parents and children, not to them.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for everything he has done on children's policy in his time in government. He is absolutely right that we must make sure the health sector is also held accountable. One thing we have done is to change the area inspection framework, as I mentioned, which means that for the first time we will have a social care inspector looking at the health element. The Health and Care Act 2022 requires every integrated care board to have a named person accountable for SEND, which will take on the statutory responsibilities from clinical commissioning groups.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The implementation plan will not work if the workforce is not in place. As we know, to be able to achieve an EHCP, the workforce needs to be in place and it takes many years to train. Those professionals are not there currently, so how will the Minister ensure that the workforce is in place not just in the health pathway but in the school? The experience I am seeing in a particular multi-academy trust in York is that it is laying off the staff who would take responsibility for those children, as opposed to providing the therapeutic environment that children so need.

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that specialist support is really important. We are working with the Department of Health and Social Care on specialist health support, whether that is occupational therapists or speech and language therapists, but we are also training educational psychologists and changing the special educational needs co-ordinator training. More importantly, we want all teachers to be trained in SEN. That is why we are looking at initial teacher training and the early careers framework. A huge proportion of the school population now has an SEN and we need everybody to be trained in it.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Government's new improvement plan on special educational needs and disabilities. I recently held an autism roundtable in Stafford to discuss the pressures parents are facing with gaps in support locally. What new support will now be available for parents of children with special educational needs?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for meeting me when she pressed me on this issue. We will be putting lots of things in place for parents, but in particular we will be ensuring that a specialist workforce is in place, that increased funding is going into schools and that there is better communication from councils, which is one of the new standards we will be bringing in. Hopefully, all that will help give parents confidence in the system. On the particular challenge with EHCPs, we will be streamlining and digitising them, which will hopefully help parents with the bureaucracy of trying to get their children the support they need.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), I recently held a meeting with parents of children with special educational needs. They raised a number of issues, including having to wait years for support, a lack of psychologists available and a lack of specialist school places. Barnsley has one of the highest numbers of EHCP plans in the country. I therefore welcome a number of the proposals in the statement, but how many young people with SEND will have left formal education before the plans come into effect? May I press the Minister again on what resources are available to help people now?

Claire Coutinho: As I mentioned, we have been increasing the budget, the high needs block, for the last four years. We have also set up further funding for schools, which will be going into the system. On specialist provision, as I said we have 92 new free special schools, with 49 in the pipeline and seven opening in September. We have also announced a further 33.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I warmly welcome more resource and better service in this crucial area. Where new schools are being considered, will the Minister ensure that local MPs are properly consulted, because there will be a lot of local public interest in the location, the style of development and the impact on existing provision?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Yes, I am happy to discuss with him the school—I think there might be two—coming forward in his area.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): This plan comes three years after the SEND review was launched. Given that most of the national standards will not be published until late 2025, the new EHCP template will not be rolled out until 2025, the cross-departmental steering group will not complete its work until 2025 and no new primary legislation will be proposed until at least 2025, what message would the Minister like to give to the parents and children in my constituency and right across the country who have already been waiting too long and fighting far too hard to access the support they need and are entitled to?

Claire Coutinho: We have not waited for the improvement plan to take action. Not only have we increased the overall budget for the high needs block by 50% in the last four years; we have increased school funding to record highs, we are bringing online more educational psychologists and we are building more specialist school places. All that work is under way. We are improving speech and language in primary school, and we are now looking at what we can do in the early years. All that stuff is under way. We are trying to make sure we can take forward standards in a way that works. We will consult heavily with parents and carers. It is really important to get that right, but there is much action we have been taking already.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have met and got to know families who have children with special educational needs and disabilities. The difficulties those families face in finding the right educational support in the right location can be frustrating and tortuous, as the Minister will know. For too long, the most vulnerable children in Selby have had to travel long distances to find the education they need. As she will know, there has been discussion for some time about a new SEND facility in Selby. I welcome her plan and I know she is passionate about this area. Can she inform me, and the families and children in the Selby district and North Yorkshire, when such a facility will be delivered?

Claire Coutinho: My right hon. Friend has long campaigned for this kind of facility in Selby. I would be happy to meet him to talk further about the details. We are setting out a lot more special free schools in different areas. For those who have not got one in the recent tranche, we will, I am sure, set out more in due course, but we will also be setting out local inclusion plans, which will mean that every area has to assess and meet the needs of its children.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on special educational needs and disabilities. I also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia and dyslexia, so I speak with some experience of difficulties in school. I am concerned about the national standards, which I welcome, but we need to ensure that personalisation is not lost in the process and that there is not a levelling down of standards where they are currently good. I am also concerned that mental health support needs to be accessible for every single child with SEND. Can the Minister reassure me?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that national standards should not be levelled down but there should be a minimum. Across the country, there is huge variability. Some schools, colleges and early years settings do things incredibly well, and we want to ensure that we use the best evidence and make things as transparent as possible. On mental health, we are rolling out support in schools, and we are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on child and adolescent mental health services.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the measures to help children with special educational needs and their families, particularly the focus on speech and language therapy, which I have discussed with the Minister. Will she consider Norfolk and Waveney as

one of the early language support pathfinder areas, and may I encourage her to accelerate these reforms and good ideas?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has had constructive conversations with me about speech and language therapy. I am delighted that we are rolling out pathfinders, and I would be happy to discuss his options in Norfolk further.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The Disabled Children's Partnership will tomorrow publish its new research report, which shows that just one in five parents reports that they receive the support needed to enable their disabled child to fulfil their potential. That is no surprise considering that it can take up to a year for a case to be heard at tribunal, which delays access to the crucial support that those families desperately need. What are the Government doing to speed up the process, to ensure that every child receives the support to which they are entitled in a timely manner?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Lady is right that too many families are waiting too long. There has been a huge rise in need. We have put elements in place to help: the workforce strategies will ensure specialist provision; the local inclusion plans will ensure that each area is assessing and can meet needs; and the inspection framework will look at health partners, their roles and what they are delivering, so that all children and families can feel confident that the local area will meet their needs.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Too many desperate parents have been seduced by glossy brochures and slick salesmanship to engage in the adversarial process that the Minister mentioned, and to send their children to settings that are often far from home and where the profit motive of their venture capital owners sometimes takes precedence over education delivery. Does she agree that today's announcement means that more children will receive education that meets their needs closer to home, which will be more cost-effective for the taxpayer?

Claire Coutinho: I have seen a range of provision, including some private provision that is absolutely excellent, but I agree that too many children have to go outside of county to get the specialist provision that they need. Our plan will ensure that each area must assess its local needs and put the specialist provision in place if there is demand for it, so that people can get help on their doorstep, which is good for them and their families.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I welcome the Minister's undertaking that, "we now need to make sure that the funding is being well spent." I do not think that that has always been the case in Devon. I have a constituent whose son's placement in a special school has become unviable, but the child is still on the school roll and the funding connected to his placement is being held in limbo. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that SEND assessments happen in a reasonable timeframe and that the funding follows the child?

Claire Coutinho: In the new area SEND inspection framework, timeliness will be assessed, which it was not previously. The educational psychologists that we are bringing on stream will help to speed up the assessments, as will our other specialist workforce plans.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Stroud district families of children with special educational needs are exhausted from battling. Schools raise SEND all the time, so more power to the Minister's elbow for the welcome systemic changes she is trying to work through. I would like to hear more about the Department's work with local authorities, because it is the day-to-day experiences that are exhausting many parents, in councils all over the country of all different colours. Getting back to people, managing expectations and giving advice about delays all need to work better, because they are causing additional stress for families who absolutely do not need it.

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is passionate about this area. She is absolutely right, and I have heard from parents in my area and across the country that it is the daily grind of poor communication that can wear them down. We will set out more guidance and training for SEN caseworkers in councils, and better communication standards, to stop that happening to parents.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Children and Families Act 2014 set out national standards in legislation, but families, parents and guardians of children with special educational needs and disabilities in Slough regularly lament that they feel completely let down because even those legislative safeguards have failed to provide support for children and young people. After so many years of failures, why does the Minister think that announcing new standards and a plan with no legislative underpinning will deliver better outcomes?

Claire Coutinho: A combination of plans within the strategy will support that. We have seen an increase in need and better awareness of different conditions, so the national standards will bring together the best evidence so that people's needs are met consistently and at a high quality across the country. On accountability, we have improved the area inspection framework by recognising that we need to bring in not just education and councils but health partners.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister will recognise that one of the greatest causes of strain and stress in the system is the assessment process. I welcome much that is in this plan, including funding for additional educational psychologists, but they will not be present in the system for some time. More urgently, what can we do to accelerate the assessment process so that children in need can take advantage of all the good things that she has described?

Claire Coutinho: There are two things: increasing the number of educational psychologists, which will improve the ability to get a diagnosis quickly; and ensuring that identification happens in schools or early years. If we can catch things early, we can treat them and make sure that people get the right support so that they do not escalate. Too often, people do not have their needs met and they escalate into a crisis. That will help children and young people to get the exact support that they need earlier on.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I want to give a voice to Oliver, who has high-functioning autism and an EHCP plan in place. The fundamental issue is that the resources have not followed—there has been a lack

of specialist provision in the area, and the local authority talks about a lack of resources. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that particular case?

Claire Coutinho: If the hon. Gentleman's constituent has an EHCP plan and resources have been set out, they should be delivered. In the case of autism, we need to ensure that people are properly supported; it is one of the areas that has risen greatly over the last few years, and I am passionate about ensuring that we have everything in place. I will be happy to look at meeting him.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I welcome the focus on ensuring that general, non-specialist teachers have a better understanding of new neurodiverse conditions. Many young people with learning disabilities are in the mainstream setting and have teachers who understand that neurodiverse people think differently. When it comes to diagnosis, can we please push harder, because so many of my constituents still cannot get an assessment for their kids and are having to go privately?

More generally, could we do a national campaign to encourage employers to do more to hire neurodiverse individuals? This is not about virtue signalling; neurodiverse people are among the great minds—the unconventional, creative thinkers—so the more we can do on that, the better. Neurodiversity week is coming up; I am not usually a fan of such weeks, but on this occasion I think we should put rocket boosters up it.

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has been a brilliant campaigner and has shown me around some brilliant special schools in his patch, such as the Sir Bobby Robson School. He is absolutely right to recognise neurodiverse people's opportunities and the benefits that they bring. When I was Minister for disabled people, I saw lots of employers champing at the bit to hire neurodiverse people because of the brilliant skillsets that they draw on. I would be happy to look at what we can do further on the matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her detailed and helpful statement on special educational needs, which builds on a previous statement about the Stable Homes, Built on Love programme. It is important that that is a key foundation.

With more children struggling to integrate into multi-ability groups, and with funding pressures affecting the ability to provide classroom assistance, does the Minister agree that it is time for an overhaul of the system and that a pupil-focused approach is required? In the meantime, what can be done to stop capable children falling through the gaps? Will the Minister consult the Northern Ireland Department of Education on taking these ideas forward?

Claire Coutinho: I would be happy to discuss any matters in this area that the hon. Gentleman would like to talk about. He is absolutely right that we must get the support right, with a focus on pupils. It is about early identification, flexibility and ensuring that each child and young person gets the support that they need to thrive in an educational environment.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): SEND provision is one of the most critical issues in education in Oxfordshire. Exasperation is frequently expressed by parents who are frustrated by Oxfordshire County Council's processes. I welcome the extra 50% in funding since 2019, but what

[Robert Courts]

is the Minister doing to work with local authorities to ensure that we cut through the bureaucracy, get people assessed and give help where it is needed?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have heard from a lot of parents about their frustrations. We will streamline and standardise the EHCP process to make it much simpler for parents to deal with. To improve access to diagnosis, we are increasing the number of educational psychologists. We are also trying to raise standards in schools so that early identification can happen even in mainstream settings.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I was thrilled last week to receive notification from the Minister that the Department will fund a new SEND school in Bracknell for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder at key stages 1 to 5. That will be massive locally, so I thank her very much.

Having fought for improved SEND provision since becoming an MP, I know the importance of today's announcement. Again, I am thrilled and I thank the Minister, but may I politely point out that diagnosis is really important? We have to fix CAMHS as well.

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has long campaigned for extra specialist provision in Bracknell, so I am delighted that that is happening. He is absolutely right that diagnosis is important, which is why we are increasing the number of educational psychologists. We will work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on CAMHS and will ensure that we are rolling out mental health support in schools.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Carers and parents of those who need SEND and alternative provision are often battling against the system. Their children are their heart and soul, so it is heartbreaking to find that they cannot get provision and support when they need it or that they face reams of forms: it makes their life, which is already difficult, even harder. Will my hon. Friend confirm that we will put those who are helping children who need support at the heart of our approach, and that we will not create more bureaucracy? We must not just cut the red tape, but get rid of it forever.

Claire Coutinho: I hold very near my heart the plight of parents who are struggling with the system. They know that their child gets only one shot at education; it is very stressful for them, and it can be heartbreaking when they feel that specialist support is not there. We will streamline the EHCP process and try to make it easier—we want them to spend more time with their children rather than doing paperwork. We are also trying to ensure that everything in the system is available so that they can get the specialist support they need.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How closely is the Department for Education working with the Department of Health and Social Care? In Westminster Hall on 6 February, as my hon. Friend may be aware, there was a very constructive debate about ADHD at which it emerged that a bottleneck is being caused by a lack of psychiatrists to make the initial diagnosis. Will she say a little more about the resources that may be made available on the health side for her educational project?

Claire Coutinho: We are working so closely with the health Department that it has jointly published the report with us. We will also be working with it on a joint steering group. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about diagnosis, which is why we are increasing the number of educational psychologists in the system. I know that the health Department takes the matter seriously, including by looking at what can be done to improve autism diagnostic pathways.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I commend the Minister for her statement: it is really refreshing to know that she has such a passion for understanding the situation, especially the fact that alternative provision is an intervention and not a destination. I thank her for meeting me to discuss issues in local children's services and for the important announcement of a special free school in North East Lincolnshire, of which Grimsby forms part. Does she agree that this is part of levelling up for children, parents and young people with jobs and opportunities? Will she work with me on how we can advertise and promote the jobs and careers available in special educational needs?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has huge personal experience in improving the skills and life chances of children and young people. She is absolutely right that this is about levelling up, which means helping people to live the best lives they can, get the best employment opportunities they can, and enjoy their adulthood. I would be absolutely delighted to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement, which I am sure will provide some reassurance to many of my constituents who have voiced their frustration with the whole SEND system. Dorset Council does its best, but problems have been identified in diagnosis prior to SEND support, particularly for those with autism.

On a related matter, we were delighted to hear that a special school for 14 to 19-year-olds was due to open on Portland in September this year, but now there is to be no sign of it until September next year. We are all nervous that somehow it may disappear. May I meet the Minister to discuss it and, hopefully, to confirm that it will come next September?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about diagnosis. Autism is one of the areas in which need has most risen. We will work with the NHS on new autism diagnostic pathways, as well as increasing the overall number of educational psychologists in the system so that people can get a diagnosis as early as possible. I would be delighted to meet him about his local specialist school.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As another dyspraxic MP in this House, and one whose handwriting closely resembles Guy Fawkes's confession note, I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. In Bassetlaw we have some outstanding specialist provision at St Giles School in Retford, as well as many excellent examples of mainstream provision and some very dedicated and hard-working staff, but SEND support for pupils varies across the country. Does the Minister agree that working

to equalise that support and ending the postcode lottery is vital to levelling up SEND provision and increasing parental choice?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have seen some areas and schools doing unbelievably brilliant work, and some areas that are not doing so well. We want to reduce that variation and ensure that we use the best possible evidence all the way through the system so that there is much more consistency and choice for parents.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I welcome the alternative provision implementation plan that the Minister has outlined, particularly the focus on early intervention. As she knows, many of the children who end up in alternative provision are those most at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system in future. A particular concern that has been raised with me as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school exclusions and alternative provision is the short-term nature of funding in the system. AP places are often called on at the very last minute when a child is excluded from school. Could the Minister say a little more about what her announcement today will mean for the commissioning contracts that are in place?

Claire Coutinho: I am passionate about alternative provision: it is where some of our most vulnerable at-risk young people go, so we want to ensure that it is of really high quality. We will bring out new standards for it, which will be included in the Ofsted area framework for the first time, and we will look at how it is funded. Importantly, the local inclusion plans that we will set out will look at all parts of the system so that whether someone is in AP or struggling in mainstream, we can ensure a place for them and ensure that they are properly supported.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the measures that she has announced. They include provision for a new and much-needed school in Darlington, which is warmly welcomed. May I put on record my thanks to Councillors Jonathan Dulston and Jon Clarke for the work that they have done in this regard, along with parents and carers in my community? May I also ask my hon. Friend what assessment she has made of whether this additional provision in Darlington will meet all unmet need, and what more can be done to speed up the woefully inadequate waiting times for CAMHS assessments by Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust?

Claire Coutinho: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is to have that specialist school. He has raised the subject with me on many occasions. We will work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on the entirety of the plan, but we are looking at mental health support in schools as well.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the SEND improvement plan. I was also delighted when, in August 2020, the Government

announced £17 million of funding for a new SEND school in my constituency. Six months ago it was given the green light for planning, but there now appears to be a delay owing to a change of contractors. These things really matter, and we need to speed them up. Will my hon. Friend agree to look into the situation and find out what is going on, so that we can avoid any further delays and get on with completing this new and brilliant provision?

Claire Coutinho: I know that my hon. Friend is passionate about SEN support in Cheadle, a subject that she has raised with me numerous times. I should be delighted to meet her and discuss it further, and I will certainly raise it in the Department.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): As a number of us know from our mailboxes and surgeries, many parents face an uphill battle against the bureaucracy and, often, the postcode lottery of SEND provision. That is why I was so happy to receive an email from my hon. Friend last week with the news that we were to have a brand-new free school with SEND provision in south Birmingham. Will she join me in calling on anyone who is passionate and ambitious about young people in Birmingham to step forward and consider submitting a bid to be the sponsor body for the new school?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me many times, and I am pleased that we will be able to end the postcode lottery by reducing that variation while also improving the specialist education provision in south Birmingham.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): I welcome the statement. I should probably declare an interest, as the husband of a senior learning support teaching assistant.

Sinkholes are making playgrounds unusable in one pupil referral unit, windows are being locked owing to fumes from a petrol station built next door to another, and there is widespread use of unregistered alternative provision. My Labour council has long ignored the needs of children who are unable to attend mainstream schools and who, like all children, need to be given opportunities. Its recent alternative provision building programme ignored west Cumbria entirely. I have supported a bid as part of the recent programme—the results will be announced later in the year—for an AP free school to be built in my constituency. May I ask the Minister to help me to give these kids a chance by enabling AP schools to be built outside the control of the council, which sees them only as a problem to be managed rather than as youngsters who need to be nurtured?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend for everything he has done in his area for alternative provision, which he clearly cares about. AP schools are important because they are where some of our most vulnerable young people go, and we need to ensure that they are of the highest possible standard. I look forward to seeing my hon. Friend's bid.

Point of Order

6.23 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Starting early in 2020, the Government spent more than £1.5 million on opinion polls on public attitudes to covid. I feared at the time that opinion polling as much as science was driving the creation of policy, and recent reportage about wanting to “frighten the pants off everyone” leads me to conclude that I was correct in that belief.

On 28 July 2020, I submitted a freedom of information request to the Cabinet Office seeking the results of the polling. It was refused on the ground that it was policy advice. That failed, so it was then refused on grounds of cost. I pressed the matter for 18 months, but was unable to get the Government to publish the taxpayer-funded data. In September 2021, I tried to obtain the information through written parliamentary questions, but on each occasion the Government refused to release the data. I kept pressing, and eventually, in April last year, I was told that a timetable for releasing the information would be available in the spring. That deadline came and went, so I tried again in September, when I was told that the data would be published by the end of the year. Now, three months into 2023, I have still not seen it. About an hour ago, a journalist was told by the Cabinet Office that it had been made available to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, whose Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), is present; but I have not seen it.

Public money was used to obtain polling information relating to some of the biggest policy decisions in a generation. It must be made easily accessible and comprehensible to the public. May I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how the House can make the Government give it the data on the basis of which it appears to have created policy throughout the pandemic?

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As my right hon. Friend prayed me in aid during his point of order, let me simply say that this is news to me, as Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I can certainly inform the House that the Committee has never received the data in any simple form, such as the questions that were asked and the answers that were received.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for giving me notice of his point of order. Although the Chair is not responsible for decisions by the Government about the publication of information, if a Member has been told that information will be made available by a particular date, I would expect that commitment to be met. Knowing him as I do, I am sure that the right hon. Member will be assiduous in pursuing this matter, for example through parliamentary questions, and I hope he will receive helpful responses.

As for the point from the Chair of the Committee, I suspect that he may go back and request further information, but that is entirely up to him and his Committee.

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

Considered in Committee

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

6.27 pm

Clause 1

MEANS-TESTED ADDITIONAL PAYMENTS:
MAIN PAYMENTS

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move amendment 4, page 2, line 10, leave out “30 April” and insert “1 April”.

The intention of this amendment is that all payments under this Bill should be made no later than 1 April 2023.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Amendment 5, page 2, line 14, leave out “31 October” and insert “1 April”.

The intention of this amendment is that all payments under this Bill should be made no later than 1 April 2023.

Amendment 6, page 2, line 16, leave out “29 February 2024” and insert “1 April 2023”.

The intention of this amendment is that all payments under this Bill should be made no later than 1 April 2023.

Clause 1 stand part.

Amendment 3, in clause 2, page 2, line 27, leave out “one month” and insert “two months”.

This amendment would extend the assessment period for recipients of universal credit, allowing them to receive the additional payments under this Bill if they had been entitled to a universal credit payment of at least 1p in the two months prior to the qualifying day for each additional payment.

Amendment 2, page 2, line 27, at end insert

“or—

- (ii) the person would have been entitled to a payment of at least 1p in respect of that period if the person had not been subject to a benefit sanction.”

This amendment is intended to ensure that, in respect of universal credit, payments under this Bill are not denied to a person who is subject to a benefit sanction.

Clauses 2 to 12 stand part

New clause 1—*Assessment of bringing forward the second qualifying day—*

“The Treasury must publish, no later than six weeks after the day in which this Act is passed, an illustrative analysis of the impact of this Act on household incomes if —

- (a) the second qualifying date was no later than 15 August 2023, and
- (b) the third qualifying date was no later than 3 January 2024.”

The intention of this new clause is to explore the impact of bringing qualifying dates forward to the beginning of the school year in Scotland and the beginning of the New Year.

New clause 2—*Assessment of cost of living support package—*

“(1) The Treasury must publish, no later than the next fiscal event after the day on which this Act is passed, a full and detailed analysis of the impact of this Act on households.

(2) The Treasury may include in the analysis the effect of support for households announced in October 2022 in response to energy price rises.

(3) The analysis must include an estimate, based on the latest available reliable data, of the impact on household incomes of —

- (a) payments made under this Act to households on mean-tested benefits,
- (b) payments made under this Act to recipients of disability benefits.

(4) The analysis must show impacts across all deciles of household income distribution—

- (a) in cash terms, and
- (b) as proportion of net household income.

(5) The analysis must take into account where relevant differing policy contexts in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

(6) The analysis must include an assessment of the impact of this Act on households of different types, including single parent families, larger families, and pensioner households.”

New clause 3—Review of distributional effects—

“The Secretary of State and the Treasury must make a joint assessment of the distributional effects of this Act on—

- (a) rural communities;
- (b) families eligible for free school meals;
- (c) unpaid carers; and
- (d) households in each income decile

no later than six weeks after this Act is passed and must lay a copy of the assessment before both Houses of Parliament.”

New clause 7—Review of public health and poverty effects of the Act—

(1) The Secretary of State must review the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) The review must consider —

- (a) the effects of the provisions of this Act on the levels of relative and absolute poverty across the UK including devolved nations and regions,
- (b) the effects of the provisions of this Act on socio-economic inequalities and on population groups with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010 across the UK, including by devolved nations and regions,
- (c) the effects of the provisions of this Act on life expectancy and healthy life expectancy across the UK, including by devolved nations and regions, and
- (d) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of the provisions of this Act.”

This new clause would require the Government to report on the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of the Act.

New clause 8—Review of distributional effects—

“The Secretary of State and the Treasury must make a joint assessment of the distributional effects of this Act on—

- (a) rural communities;
- (b) families eligible for free school meals;
- (c) unpaid carers;
- (d) households including at least one disabled person; and
- (e) households in each income decile,

no later than six weeks after this Act is passed and must lay a copy of the assessment before both Houses of Parliament.”

This new clause would require the Government to report on the effects of the Bill on different socioeconomic groups.

New clause 13—Payment date—

“The Secretary of State and HMRC must seek to make all payments due under this Act no later than 1 April 2023.”

This new clause is intended to require the Government to make all payments listed in this Bill by 1 April 2023.

New clause 14—Review of coverage of self-employed workers—

“The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament within three months of the date on which this Act is passed an assessment of how many recipients of payments under this Act live in households where at least one earner is a self-employed worker.”

This new clause is intended to highlight that the variable income of self-employed workers may leave them excluded from receiving the Government’s cost of living payments.

Wendy Chamberlain: It is a pleasure to move amendment 4 on behalf of my party.

Additional support for struggling families is much welcomed, and I am pretty sure that no one in the Committee would oppose the provision of more help through the Bill. What my amendment seeks to do is ensure that those struggling families receive that support now, rather than having to wait. It has been a long cold winter, and we are expecting another cold snap this week, so it certainly is not over yet.

While the energy price guarantee has protected families from the worst increases, some households have seen their bills increase two, three or possibly even four times in the past year. We know from the scandal of the forced instalment of prepayment meters that many people have been unable to keep up with those bills, and that for many of them the debts continue to mount up. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of others are walking a tightrope—just managing payments, sometimes late, by making other cutbacks: being cold, eating less, or reducing travel. If we are not just to get those families back on an even keel but to help them to stay there, it is vital for the full cost of living payment that the Government wish to make to be made immediately—especially, I would argue, in the face of the impending increase in the energy price guarantee. We have all seen reports in the media over the last few days that the Government may well choose to extend that guarantee. I am sure you might have some thoughts, Dame Rosie, on whether that announcement ought to be made here before being briefed to the press. We cannot fully assess the impact of this Bill, given that we do not know for definite what is happening with the energy price guarantee, so we are left to make assumptions accordingly.

In any case, whether the guarantee lasts for another month or as, my party wants, for more months than that along with a reduction in the energy price guarantee to the Ofgem cap of £1,971 last April, cost of living support payments must be made now to have any impact. We are seeing a reduction in wholesale gas costs, which is why we argue that the Government can do more than they are outlining because they have the headroom to do so. What is the point in people paying some or even all of their bills, only to start struggling all over again? For people to get all the other benefits of affording the basics—being warm enough and fed enough to work, go to school and stay healthy—support needs to be geared to preventing them from falling below that line in the first place.

Moving on from my amendment 4 to the remainder of the Bill, I am left wondering if this really is it. You do not need to be a politician to know that this country is in crisis, although if you are a politician and have a modicum of responsibility or power, it is critical that you realise the severity of the situation. Just turning on the TV, opening a newspaper, speaking to parents at the school gate or spending any time out and about in our communities makes it very clear what is happening.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

The difficulties felt by different communities vary, and that is what the Liberal Democrats' new clause 8, and to some extent new clause 3, seek to address. For a lot of my constituents living in relatively rural North East Fife, the crisis is exacerbated by their countryside location, without easy access to local services and battling against unrelenting fuel costs. What I hear from them time and again is that they feel they are being let down. Farmers, for example, work long days seven days a week, without let-up and never taking a holiday, to provide the rest of us with the food that goes on our plates, but they are being left with next to no support for their fuel costs, no protection against foreign imports and no ability to plan for the future under the Government's funding streams.

As has been mentioned many times in this House, many rural households rely on heating oil. I have discussed the price guarantee already, but heating oil is not even covered by that. Costs have almost doubled, yet those households have received just one £200 payment—that is if they have managed to receive it at all. We know that the system has been beset by practical difficulties. We have also seen the continued delays in the roll-out of the alternative fuel payment scheme. Applications are now open, but despite reassurances there has been no support for many until now. And when the shop—or too often now, the food bank—is not just around the corner for those in rural communities, they need to travel just for the basics. They cannot avoid getting into the car and paying for petrol, and although petrol and diesel prices have gone up everywhere this year, we always see much faster increases in rural areas.

Those in rural households are not the only group to suffer because of rising energy costs and fuel poverty. As has been discussed in this place before, disabled people have much higher living costs. I recently met representatives of Disability Rights UK, one of the organisations leading the Disability Poverty Campaign Group, as well as representatives from the Liberal Democrat Disability Association, and their message was clear: the additional £150 payment for people on disability benefits is so lacklustre as to be grotesquely offensive. It shows that the Government are taking no interest in, and making no effort to understand, the reality of the lives and expenses of disabled people.

Disabled people are not all the same: they have a wide variety of unique needs, which I cannot cover here, but I shall give just a few examples. Imagine someone needing a hoist to safely manoeuvre between their bed and their wheelchair, but being unable to charge that hoist and having to watch their family risk their own health by lifting them unsafely. Or perhaps think about someone being unable to charge their electric wheelchair and becoming unable to mobilise even around their home to get to the toilet or to fetch a cup of tea.

Perhaps someone's partner has a spinal injury and is incontinent, but they cannot afford to run their washing machine every day or to properly heat their water, so they find themselves washing dirty clothes by hand in lukewarm water. Perhaps someone's child has cystic fibrosis and needs a nutritious high-calorie diet, but with 10% inflation—we know it is worse for food inflation—and shortages, they themselves are having to skip meals to let their child eat instead. It should not take a donation from an international celebrity to reassure

families of the disabled that they can keep their homes warm and essential equipment functioning. There are many ways in which disabled people incur additional costs, all of which are incredibly important and all of which demand support additional to what the Government are offering in this Bill.

Unpaid carers, on the other hand, are not even explicitly considered in this package of support. I will not labour the point, as I have said all this before, but not all unpaid carers receive means-tested benefits, and given that the vast majority of them live on or close to the poverty line, they are also badly in need of cost of living support. I would like to say that they are unsung heroes, but I have been singing their praises and calling for more support since the start of the crisis and I am starting to think that the Government do not want to hear it.

Dame Eleanor, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, and I am sure that everybody in the Chamber will welcome you back.

Overall, my concern about the Bill, as we consider it clause by clause, is that it is just a sticking plaster that will not truly keep our communities afloat during this crisis. Fuel poverty is widening and deepening; meanwhile, energy companies continue to rake in record profits. The Government must make suppliers act responsibly towards consumers. I acknowledge that it is not just the political response that is causing trouble for my constituents, as an astounding number of them have come to me with problems including being charged incorrectly, often more than they should be, and sometimes by companies that they are not even with. Electricity is a vital service, so surely this type of predatory behaviour cannot be allowed.

Food poverty continues to soar. As early as last April to September, before the worst of this crisis and before winter took hold, the Trussell Trust reported its busiest ever spring and summer, with a 45% increase in the number of families needing its support. The figures will only have gone up since then, and I am not convinced that this package will help, especially with the payments spread out so far. We know that when the £20 universal credit uplift was in place during covid, food bank use went down. How we stop families going hungry or relying on food packages is a vital conversation, and one that needs more time for discussion, so I encourage all Members present to come to the report launch of the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks on 22 March to hear more on the outcome of our "Cash or Food?" inquiry.

In the long term, to end the need for additional cost of living payments we need economic growth, we need more people able to work and we need a healthier society. Poverty is the enemy of all those things. Poverty breeds worse health outcomes, it makes people cold and hungry and it drives away hope and drive. That is nobody's fault except those who choose to look away and do nothing, and that is why we need the Government to review reinstating the uplift to universal credit and extending it to legacy benefits. It is why carer's allowance needs reforming, and it is why we need all the cost of living payments at once, now, as a circuit breaker.

I want to end by reflecting on the words of one of my constituents who got in touch with me over the winter. He is a 79-year-old gentleman who struggles to heat his home and who has a mixture of health difficulties. He said:

"Maybe it would be better if I wasn't alive, for everyone else's benefit."

He cannot wait for April to October and then again for months for additional support, so with him in mind, I urge Members to support amendment 4.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): It is a pleasure to see you chairing the Committee this afternoon, Dame Eleanor.

I thank hon. Members for the useful debate on Second Reading and I welcome this opportunity for a more detailed examination of the Bill in Committee. Clause 1 enables the Government to make three separate cost of living payments of £301, £300 and £299 to individuals or couples with a qualifying entitlement to an income-related social security benefit or tax credit. I have listened carefully to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). We have looked in the round at what we have done before, and I want to set out strongly to the Committee that we have worked very hard, whether on the household support fund or on this Bill, to support the most vulnerable through the really tough times that she described. I hope to give the Committee answers that will show that.

To be clear, the clause sets out that the qualifying days for each of the cost of living payments will be specified in secondary regulations, which will help to minimise work disincentives and fraud risks. In response to amendments 4, 5 and 6, it might be helpful if I clarify for the hon. Lady that the dates set out in clause 1 are backstop dates, meaning the latest possible qualification dates that could be set out in regulations. Bringing those dates forward could not achieve the amendment's desired effect, although I understand the sentiment.

In any event, making all cost of living payments by 1 April 2023 would not support our ambition to spread the support through 2023 and into 2024. In fact, we have increased the number of payments from those made in 2022, having listened and engaged with the feedback from MPs across the land. This ensures that as many people as possible will qualify for a payment at some point, including those who become entitled to a qualifying benefit later in the year and those whose earnings fluctuate from month to month. Making all the payments in one lump sum would mean that more people miss out.

I understand the hon. Lady's point, but I must be robust in saying that we simply cannot do what she suggests, as it runs contrary to what we should be doing in spreading out support for the most vulnerable. It is also the total opposite of the Select Committee's request for more payments. I hope she understands that and will withdraw her amendment.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I, too, welcome you back to the Chair, Dame Eleanor.

We continue to support the additional payments covered by this Bill because they will deliver much-needed support to households facing the greatest cost of living crisis we have seen for decades, but we also continue to recognise the limitations inherent in any policy of one-off, flat-rate payments and the extra limitations of the approach taken here.

One of the problems that the additional payments are intended to address is the six-month lag between the value of social security benefits and real-world prices, which can lead to long-term impacts on the real value of

benefits when inflation is high. That problem became critical in the winter of 2021, when it became obvious that annual inflation would reach over 10% by the time benefits were uprated by only 3.2% in the following April, using inflation data running up to the previous September.

We are still dealing with the consequences of the 2021 uprating decision. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies explains,

“in April 2023, the annual uprating of benefits will merely take them back to around the level they were at a year earlier—the shortfall that opened up between September 2021 and April 2022 will still remain unplugged.”

This means that the real value of benefits will be 6.2% lower in April 2023 than before the pandemic, and astonishingly, based on current forecast inflation, benefits will not return to their pre-pandemic level until 2025.

This problem was completely predictable well over a year ago—a year in which the Government could surely have applied themselves to coming up with a better solution than the one before us today. The approach of one-off, flat-rate payments could just about be justified last year by the international situation and the suddenness of the energy price surge, but that does not apply this year.

We know that one-off payments are a crude substitute for ensuring that social security benefits retain their real value. But even accepting the one-off approach, this Bill, while undoubtedly necessary, will lead to rough justice and, in some cases, poor value for money. It does not even attempt to relate payments to need; it sets qualifying conditions and arbitrary reasons; and it creates an arbitrary cliff edge in support based on whether people are receiving a penny of qualifying benefits.

Some households will be shielded from the impact of inflation—indeed, some will be more than protected—but, as these flat-rate payments take no account of household size and composition, which is one of our most fundamental concerns, there is huge variation in the protection that families in different circumstances will receive.

As the IFS has shown, in general it is those without children who are best protected, and larger families and households with disabled members who lose out most. Forty per cent. of families with three or more children, but only about 3% of those without children, would have been better off with a timely uprating of benefits. Seventeen per cent. of households receiving a disability benefit would have been better off had benefits been uprated in real time.

It is obvious that the flat-rate approach is inherently inequitable and poorly targeted, and it is hard to see how it can be justified given the time the Government have had to devise a better solution. That is further compounded by the qualification conditions, which insist that households must have received a positive award of a qualifying benefit within the month leading up to the qualifying dates. One of the issues that universal credit is supposed to address is fluctuating incomes, but fluctuations in income from month to month, the norm for many lower-income families, are simply ignored by this Bill.

The cliff edge in entitlement is well illustrated by the large number of households, an estimated 850,000, that would be better off by reducing their earnings to qualify for universal credit so that they can benefit from the

[Ms Karen Buck]

additional payments. Families on earnings low enough to qualify for universal credit face losing up to £900 if they have a marginal increase in earnings just enough to take them out of receiving UC. It is therefore perfectly reasonable for colleagues to demand a full Government analysis of the distributional and public health impacts of this Bill.

This Bill falls short of what might reasonably have been expected from a Government who had plenty of time to come up with a better solution, but we want this money to go into people's pockets as quickly as possible in what is, for millions, a deepening personal and family financial crisis, which is why we are not seeking to oppose or delay today's proceedings.

6.45 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am delighted, as I am sure everyone is, to see you back in the Chair, Dame Eleanor.

I also do not seek to delay the Bill's progress. New clause 14 is a probing amendment that raises an issue to which the shadow Minister alluded: the failure of the system, however good its intentions, to deal adequately with people who have fluctuating incomes, particularly those who are self-employed.

The way in which the system interacts with self-employed people has always led me to believe that, with all due respect, the vast majority of people advising Ministers, and the government machine as a whole, do not understand the self-employed or how they work. All too often, I am afraid, those who work for the Government in full-time, regular jobs seem to think that self-employment is something to be wary of, and that it can lead to a risk of fraud or a lack of seriousness. There is a fundamental culture gap in the system of government.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Of course, this leads to a differential effect in communities, such as mine, that have a high incidence of self-employment. The disadvantage to my community is quite clear.

Sir Robert Neill: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is right. This can apply to particular communities and to particular sectors. I suspect it is not deliberate, as I do not believe Ministers are looking to treat people unfairly, but I genuinely think there is a lack of understanding in how the system works for the self-employed and the degree to which fluctuating incomes are not captured by the scheme, as currently devised. That is why I urge the Government to review the position.

I particularly ask the Government to review how the minimum income floor interacts with self-employed people on varying incomes. I will explain it as briefly and as swiftly as possible. Eligibility for each of the three cost of living payments depends on receiving a universal credit payment of at least 1p during the corresponding qualifying month, as set out in the Bill. The position was the same for the original cost of living payments set out in the Social Security (Additional Payments) Act 2022.

Equity, which represents self-employed people working in the creative industries and the theatre, challenged the 2022 Act as unfair and detrimental to the entertainment industry, and it seems to me that it presented good

evidence. I refer to my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on opera and as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on theatre. I regret to say that Ministers did not make any changes, and I ask them to look into this in more detail and to think again as more evidence emerges.

When the minimum income floor is applied to self-employed universal credit claimants, their universal credit payments are, of course, reduced. For some claimants, the MIF reduces their payments to zero. The MIF is assumed earnings for UC claimants who are deemed gainfully self-employed, irrespective of whether those earnings are being received in a particular month. It is a calculation based on the national minimum wage and in a typical case the assumption is 35 times the hourly national minimum wage per week. On 2022-23 figures, that equates to £311.85 a week or £1,351.35 over a UC monthly assessment period.

The effects of that are unduly harsh for the self-employed with variable and unpredictable incomes, because it removes UC payments during periods of low earnings. The difficulty for people in the theatre is that, although they may well have periods when they are busy and above the threshold for any benefits, there may be weeks and months when they are not getting paid and the system does not pick that up. During those months when they are not qualifying they are likely to fall into debt, needing to borrow, and into arrears. That cannot be a fair way to deal with this. At a time when the entertainment industry and the theatre have been particularly hard hit during covid and the lockdowns and are still, in some respects recovering, the position seems to me and to many others to be unjust. It particularly hurts those who are starting out in their careers in the industry. I have been self-employed in the past and I know that at least one of the Ministers on the Bench has, but there is a difference between being in an established set of barristers' chambers with a significant workflow coming through and being a young actor, musician or creative starting out. The inability to draw such distinctions and to be more nuanced in approach needs to be looked at, and I ask Ministers to do that.

The figures that have been demonstrated by Equity in looking at the DCMS workforce estimates show, for example, that between 2019 and 2021 the number of young people aged 16 to 24 working in music and performing and visual arts fell by 19%, which compares with a 14% drop among people aged 55 to 64. That was probably largely due to people leaving because of the impacts of the lockdown on that sector, but it is happening more among the youngsters, for the reasons I have set out. The number of black, African, Caribbean, black British people—those with minority ethnic backgrounds—in music, and performing and visual arts has fallen by 39%, which compares with a fall of some 9% among people with white ethnic backgrounds. Again, the people who find it harder to access careers in the arts sector to start with are the ones being most hard hit, because their incomes are more precarious, as it often takes them longer, by the nature of the business, to establish themselves. I am sure that is not an outcome Ministers wish to see, but that is the way the system, without any reform, is currently operating.

That situation is likely to get worse. In the first round of cost of living payments some 80,600 UC claimants were subject to the MIF, of whom 4,860 earned below

their MIF and received a nil payment—that is about 6% of them. We are likely to be talking about a lot more people in 2023-24, because more claimants are now subject to the MIF than they were in the previous regime. That is simply because some 219,000 claimants were in a 12-month start-up period and therefore exempt during the qualifying period for the first payment. That of course has now ended for that cohort, so they will be subject to the MIF. If we were looking at the same percentages, we would be talking about another 13,000 people. That leaves us with the figure that Equity suggests of about 17,000 being affected.

This issue has been raised before, including by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. He raised it with Ministers back in November 2022, and I am grateful to him for doing so. He asked the Secretary of State to consider a way to rectify the position of claimants who had had a nil payment during that period, but I regret to say that the Secretary of State rejected that request. He said that, among other things, simplicity of processing in the timeframe required and an inability to readily identify people affected were the reasons. I am not sure that simplicity of processing is, of itself, a good justification for causing unfairness to people. I thought that the Government were about fairness, more importantly, than they were about administrative simplicity. The suggestion that having the three qualifying periods reduces the risk of someone missing out completely does not work for every sector. It may work in some industries, but it does not work for the theatre and other sectors. The lack of flexibility and the rigidity need to be addressed.

Against that background, I hope that the Government will reflect on this matter. We want to encourage people into our creative industries, which is a thriving sector that does a great deal for this country. They work well for us economically, in social matters and for our cultural heritage, but it is hard for young people, in particular, to start out and this is a precarious life. We ought to have a system that more readily recognises that. It is not, as has been suggested, that the MIF is dealing with cases of fraud here; these are not fraudulent people, and we can sometimes worry so much about fraud that we exclude the honest from the system. We ought to get a balance on that. It has also been suggested that this was to weed out hobbyists who cannot sustain themselves in self-employment. I know lots of people in the creative industries who are not hobbyists. They work immensely hard to sustain themselves in self-employment but their incomes fluctuate to such a degree that they lose out on supplements and benefits that others who happen to be in slightly different forms of work with a slightly different pay structure get. That does not seem to be fair, which is why I tabled my new clause. I hope that the Government will reflect on it and undertake at the very least to review the matter again, look again at the evidence and meet people in the sector. I am not sure how often Ministers have face-to-face meetings. They should meet the people affected. Let us try to find a fairer way of making the Government's objectives work for those people.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is not often that I find myself pleased in this place, but may I say how genuinely pleased I am to see you back in your place, Dame Eleanor? It is just right to see you in that place, so it is great to see you back.

I rise to speak to the amendments and new clauses that stand in my name and those of my hon. Friends. I am also happy to offer support for the amendments tabled by members of the Select committee, namely the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), as well as for new clause 7, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I also support new clause 12, which was tabled by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) but not selected.

The House will recall that when I spoke on Second Reading, I stated my party's support of the broad thrust of what the Bill seeks to achieve but was clear that it fails to address some of the wider issues impacting our social security system, which have only been highlighted further by the cost of living crisis. It is important to remind ourselves that these amendments, and in fact this entire Bill, are the product of the continuing cost of living crisis, which remains the single biggest priority for my east end constituents. We cannot forget that all of this comes against a backdrop of households continuing to face extremely challenging economic conditions. As such, there should be no doubt that my party welcomes the support laid out in this Bill, but we think that it does not go far enough to meet the needs of the poorest households struggling with the cost of living crisis. We have therefore tabled these amendments, in good faith, to try to make the Bill better.

The one-off cost of living payments in this Bill, as set out in the Chancellor's autumn statement, are only a temporary fix, when it is clear that more permanent solutions are needed. Rather than offering one-off payments to shore up the incomes of struggling families, the British Government should reverse the damaging policies that are impacting the most vulnerable in our communities. They should be ending benefit sanctions, ending the benefit cap, ending unfair assessments, ending the rape clause, ending the five-week wait, ending no recourse to public funds. That list sometimes feels endless, but it is not, and the social security system is fixable if we have the political will. The amendments we have tabled today show that and highlight just some of the ways in which the British Government can point the social security system towards the people who actually use it and ensure they have adequate support, perhaps taking a leaf out of the Scottish Government's book.

My amendment 2 ensures that universal credit claimants who have been sanctioned are not denied the vital cost of living payments. As the Bill currently stands, to qualify for the cost of living payment, claimants must be entitled to at least 1p in the month preceding the date specified by the Secretary of State in clause 2. However, if a claimant is sanctioned, their full entitlement could be taken away for a period of time. Many of those who have a sanction imposed will receive a nil award, which means that they do not receive the payment despite having an underlying entitlement to universal credit for that period. I have heard of cases where claimants have missed the bus or had to drop their children off at school, which has resulted, I am afraid, in their being late or missing an appointment at the jobcentre. That in turn has led to their being sanctioned and losing their universal credit for a number of weeks.

7 pm

It is increasingly concerning when Government Members suggest widening further the scope for minor sanctions, such as the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities who, last week, suggested that parents should face cuts to their benefits for their children's truancy. Quite what he was thinking about with that policy I do not know. The "minor failings" that currently exist account for 97.6% of all sanctions in the latest quarter, according to the Department's own data. Being five minutes late to an interview could lead to a claimant being punished twice: first, with the sanction and the loss of their benefits, and, secondly, with the possibility that they miss out on the cost of living payments.

I appreciate that hon. Members across the Chamber have different views to me and my party when it comes to sanctions and conditionality, but surely Government Members can see that it is vastly unfair to claimants to deny them the lifeline of a cost of living payment for a mistake as minor as being late to an interview at the jobcentre. The brutal economic conditions that people face right now take no cognisance of sanctions policy.

In response to a recent written answer, the Department revealed that it estimated that some 6,600 households missed out on the cost of living payment due to a sanction in July last year. These are people who are incredibly vulnerable at the best of times, and even more so during a cost of living crisis. It is a dereliction of duty on the part of the Government to bring forward legislation that actively seeks to punish them twice. The DWP's only explanation for the exclusion of more than 6,000 vulnerable households was that the

"unsophisticated character of the payment system made inclusion impossible."

Dame Eleanor, I have to agree with the Public Law Project that administrative difficulty is not a sufficient reason for excluding vulnerable people from this lifeline support.

The British Government have had a year to fix the problem, yet nothing, as far as I can see, has been done. Sanction rates have risen sharply since the pandemic began in 2020 from 2.5% to almost 7% in record new levels. To prevent the increased number of sanctioned claimants being punished twice, amendment 2 simply seeks to ensure that payments under the Bill are not denied to a person who is subject to a benefit sanction. I do not see what is controversial there, and hope that the House can agree to it when I choose to divide the House later.

New clause 1 explores the impact of bringing qualifying dates forward to the beginning of the school year in Scotland and the beginning of the new year. The Bill as it stands states that the second qualifying day will be no later than 31 October 2023, and the third qualifying day will be no later than 29 February 2024, as may be specified by the Secretary of State in regulations. For many benefit claimants, their lives are marred by uncertainty. It would make a huge difference if the DWP were able to provide clarity about the dates on which the payments will be made and their qualifying period, which would allow claimants to plan accordingly. Although we will not press the amendment to a vote, it would be helpful if the Minister could provide such clarity.

New clauses 2 and 3 address distributional analysis and impact assessment. In essence, they would require the British Government to assess the effect of the

payments made under this Bill to households. The DWP has produced an impact assessment for the Bill and the Treasury has published a distributional analysis in the autumn statement. However, neither of these fully consider distribution and household comparison. New clause 2 would ensure that the British Government also include in their analysis households of different types, including single parent families, larger families, and pensioner households.

Likewise, new clause 3 would look at various socio-economic groups, including: rural communities, such as those represented by my hon. Friends the Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry); families eligible for free school meals; unpaid carers; and households in each income decile. I am not minded to press new clauses 2 and 3 to a vote, but I encourage the Minister to consider the benefits of richer data and fuller assessments on household composition and particular groups. In that context, I and a number of cross-party colleagues are somewhat concerned about the lack of publication of data from the DWP. Certainly, we are finding it very difficult to reach that information. Similarly, under new clause 4, the Secretary of State would be required to assess the effects on household incomes, and especially on food and fuel poverty—a massive issue in rural Scotland—of reintroducing the universal credit uplift and increasing it to £25 per week.

Alongside colleagues from across the House, I have campaigned hard to retain the £20 uplift to universal credit. Indeed, we asked for it to be extended to legacy benefits. It was a great policy from the British Government, which was warmly welcomed, including by my party. It is no coincidence that we saw food bank usage reduce as the uplift was in place. Likewise, it was no coincidence that food bank usage increased as the uplift was taken away.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a telling point about the universal credit uplift. Does he not think that, when it was made, it was a welcome admission that universal credit was not enough to live on, whereas the removal of the uplift has re-established that deficit for people and their families?

David Linden: I agree with my hon. Friend. I tend to take the view that if the British Government concluded in March and April 2020 that social security was inadequate for the then economic climate, social security is indeed inadequate in the current economic climate. I welcome the fact that the Select Committee is looking at benefit provision. The all-party group on poverty, which I co-chair with Baroness Lister, is taking evidence on this separately tomorrow.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey has outlined, it was a huge disappointment when the British Government decided against retaining the uplift. Since its removal, I have heard anecdotally that many people have struggled with the sudden loss of income—the largest drop in support in the modern welfare state. Any of us who interact with our constituents can outline how challenging that has been.

Similarly, new clause 5 would require the Secretary of State to produce an assessment of the impact on household incomes—as well as on fuel and food poverty—of the

Government's failure to extend the equivalent uplift to legacy benefits. As with the previous iteration of the Bill relating to cost of living payments, it is welcome that the British Government have included Scottish payments for disability in the eligibility criteria. Although I wish sincerely that the London Government would look towards Holyrood as a guide for more of their social security policies, I appreciate that Ministers have been working with my colleagues in Edinburgh and have ensured that people in receipt of Scottish disability payments will also get the additional payment.

It is widely acknowledged 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. For instance, I have heard testimony in my constituency, in the Lilybank area, of vital medical equipment—not something that can be turned off or turned down a wee bit to take cognisance of energy prices—leading to extortionate electricity bills. Despite that knowledge, legacy benefit claimants, many of whom are long-term sick or disabled, were unjustly denied that uplift during the pandemic. That was a monumental injustice, and it certainly adversely financially impacted many people throughout the pandemic, which was already causing heightened health anxiety. It is only right that an assessment be made of the failure to extend the uplift to legacy benefit claimants.

We must also consider where inflation will be at the time that payments are made. In January this year, the consumer prices index was still in double digits and near the highest levels in about 40 years, at 10.1%. However, we know that the poorest often experience a high rate of inflation; according to the Resolution Foundation, the poorest tenth of households experienced an inflation rate of 11.7%. What is more, recent Office for National Statistics stats show that food and drink inflation remained close to the highest rates since the 1970s, with the soaring price of milk, bread and other basic essentials pushing prices up by almost 17% in a year.

Recently, the British Government rightly increased social security benefits and the state pension in line with the CPI, so it seems only logical that that should apply to the cost of living payments that the Bill makes provision for. Therefore, our new clause 6 would ensure that

“all payments due under this Act are increased by the rate of inflation as measured by the latest Consumer Prices Index at the time of payment, if that is higher than the original amount.”

We do not know what the economic landscape will be later this year, so the new clause was tabled as an insurance policy in the event that inflation does not fall as has been forecast. It is unfortunate that some of the amendments are not in scope; the money resolution was so restrictive that it prevents our bringing forward amendments that would assist our constituents in a more meaningful way.

However, I have highlighted some of the inadequacies in the UK's social security system, mainly the punitive sanctions regime. Instead of providing a robust safety net for millions of households, the surge in sanctions demonstrates the uncaring approach of a Westminster Government who Scotland did not vote for and who are pushing people further into poverty during a cost of

living crisis. People across Scotland are paying a very steep price indeed for poor economic decisions made in this Palace of Westminster.

It does not have to be like this. We can make better policy if the Government accept that they do not have a monopoly on wisdom. I have tabled the amendments in good faith and I believe they would vastly improve the Bill. I hope the Minister can come to the Dispatch Box later and confirm the Government's support for amendment 2, which I believe can make this legislation much better for not only the people that I represent, but the people that we all represent in this House.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you back in your position, Dame Eleanor. I rise to speak to amendment 3, which stands in my name and the name of the Chair of the Select Committee. It is an attempt to ensure that what the Government are legislating for is consistent with what they are generally trying to do with universal credit and with these payments: to ensure that we do not create a cliff edge and a lumpy system in which people miss out through no fault of their own.

Under the amendment, rather than looking back and seeing whether someone has received 1p of universal credit in the previous month, we could simply check the two previous months and, if they received a payment in either or both those months, they would still get each of the individual £300 payments. It is designed to prevent a situation where somebody misses out on the individual payments because they have had some kind of strange anomaly in their UC record.

That anomaly might be that they are paid four-weekly and happened to get two payments in one assessment period, that they got a bonus or a few extra hours that tipped them out for that period, or that the employer has made a mistake, has not processed their payroll in time and has then managed to process two payments in the same month, as occasionally happens. Those are not really the intended position. I think we all expect that, for most people in a job, their monthly income is relatively stable—subject perhaps to a bit of overtime or the odd bonus here or there—and so their UC claim over a year is not affected; they get a bit more one month, a bit less the next and it all averages out over the year.

With the impact of these payments—not quite one-off payments, but three-off payments—that will not quite be the situation. If someone happens to have a month where they earn a bit too much, they could miss out on £300, which could be a material part of their annual income. That might drive people to be careful about whether they take extra hours and thus enforce the wrong behaviour. Having to plan for whether they will be £300 worse off if they get another £50 of wages or similar is not the behaviour that universal credit was designed to drive. It was designed to make clear that work would always pay, and we are in danger of doing something that goes against that.

I welcome the Government's bringing forward these payments and the fact that we are debating them in March. That means that we have a plan for the year and people know what they are going to get, unlike last year when—perhaps for some good reasons—it was all a bit haphazard and we kept announcing new things all over the place. As some other hon. Members have said, I would have preferred this year to have an increase

[Nigel Mills]

in UC; this £900 works out at just under £18 a week, and with the tapering effect we could have given a higher starting point to achieve the same costs, so those less well-off households got a bit more than the £900 and those who earn a bit more got a bit less. That would have been a better use of funds and a better way of doing it.

7.15 pm

As the Government have chosen to go down this route, however, I welcome the fact that we have gone for three payments this year rather than two, which helps to smooth things out a bit. Of course, this year we get the £400 off our energy bills, which is generally split over six months, so there is already a spreading effect. Having said that I would rather this was done by UC, I cannot support the proposal of the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) to pay it all in one lump sum before the start of April. For a lot of people who are vulnerable and struggle to manage their budgets, spreading the support over the year is probably a better outcome for them.

While people will have budgetary pressures throughout the year, we want them to get some money next winter when the heating bills will be at their worst, rather than having it all almost a year in advance, having had more support this winter than they will get next winter.

I think it would be a mistake to go down the lump sum line, but the Minister could improve her proposal by accepting amendment 3 to allow for a longer period of assessment. On Second Reading there were a few arguments against this proposal. The Secretary of State appeared to suggest that there was some discretion where someone could ring up and say, “I’ve missed out on my £300 through a quirk in the system, can that be fixed?” As I read it, this is primary legislation that sets out the qualifying period, and there would not be any wiggle room or discretion for the Department to make a payment that did not meet the criteria in that situation. I hope the Minister can confirm that would not be a solution.

The second suggested solution was that, if somebody had suffered one of those strange quirks, they could go to the discretionary fund and get the same amount anyway. I am not absolutely sure that someone making an application to the council for a discretionary payment on the basis that they have missed out on a payment provided by law because they did not meet the terms of that law has the strongest case.

Equally, the argument for discretionary payments is that they can deal with situations that we cannot envisage or deal with. The situation where someone misses out due to an unfortunate quirk was envisaged a year ago; it happened on a fair number of occasions in the first round of these payments, and we can find a solution to it. It is far better practice to make the laws we pass work, than to have discretionary funds to try to fix things. There is a readily available fix—not least because these are automatic payments. People do not have to claim them or check them; they do not have to work out why they have not had them and then try to work out who to make a claim to. They get their money without any of those issues. The idea of having a discretionary payment system as a fallback to get equivalence just does not work. I suspect most people who do not get

one of these payments may not realise they did not get it, and if they do realise, they will not understand why or what they should do about it, so they will not get the same level of income as other struggling households. Since we have a ready fix, I urge the Minister to adopt it.

The other argument against the amendment was that it would result in people who are now earning too much and are not entitled to the payment getting it because they were earning the right amount a month previously, and that that is not the best use of funds. First, choosing a flat-rate payment gives people who earn a very small amount of UC every month the same as somebody whose sole income is from UC. The Government have chosen a very lumpy system—that is their choice.

Secondly, I cannot imagine there are many households who are earning below the UC level in one month and then suddenly disappear from it the next month, and so get the £300 that they would never have been entitled to. I suspect that is not the case for the vast majority of people, and that the few people who benefit from that will be outweighed by the large number of people who are genuinely claiming UC, genuinely struggling and will lose this payment through no fault of their own. I urge the Government to accept that this is the least bad of those two alternatives in that situation. There is no perfect answer, given that the Government have chosen not to do this on a monthly UC award—if they were worried about that situation arising, they could have made the payments that way.

This is my final point. People end up in a very different position if they are on UC compared with tax credits, because tax credits do not have a monthly assessment in this situation. Therefore, if people have not earned too much over the year, they do not look back and start to work out whether they had too much in one month and whether they should have got the £300. Somebody on tax credits who, on average, does not earn too much over the year will get all three payments. For people in that situation, UC and tax credits are meant to do the same thing. Somebody should not be left materially worse off because they are on universal credit.

I urge the Government to accept this simple amendment, which I suspect would not cost very much. It is entirely consistent with the policy intent of providing support to households who desperately need it. It is more consistent with the overall aims and objectives of universal credit to ensure that work always pays. I commend the amendment to the Minister, and I hope that she will accept it when she speaks again.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I add my very warm welcome back to you, Dame Eleanor; like everyone, I am delighted to see you back in the Chair.

I will make a few brief remarks. Initially, I will follow up the speech from the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) in favour of amendment 3, which I have signed alongside him. The amendment relates to an intervention that I made on Second Reading, when I highlighted—the hon. Member just mentioned this—that people who are paid every four weeks instead of monthly, of whom there are quite a large number, receive 13 payments a year rather than 12. That means that in one month of the year, they receive two salary payments instead of one. Very often, that means that even though they will normally receive universal credit, they will not in that particular month, because their income is deemed to be

too high for them to be eligible for universal credit. If that month happens to be one of the months when eligibility for the cost of living payment is assessed, they will lose their payment. No one is going to argue that they should not receive a payment, because their annual income is exactly the same as it is in every other month of the year. However, because of universal credit's rigid approach to assessing people on a monthly basis, they will miss out. By arguing that eligibility should be based on looking at two months, not one, the hon. Member's amendment entirely overcomes the problem for people in that situation.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) made some telling points about the situation for self-employed people. He was right to query how the minimum income floor works. There did not need to be a minimum income floor in tax credits. The Department for Work and Pensions introduced that innovation into universal credit and the case for it is, at best, debatable. But again, I do not think anyone would argue that the operation of the minimum income floor should deprive people of a cost of living payment when they would otherwise be entitled to receive it.

The hon. Member made a telling case for musicians and actors. Self-employed people may well have a good month and receive a significant amount of income, so they would perhaps not receive universal credit in that month. However, if they did not receive anything like as much in the month before or the month after, they would receive universal credit in that month. Most would agree that people in that situation—self-employed people with very fluctuating incomes, as he described—should receive a cost of living payment if their income across the year made them eligible. Therefore, looking at two months instead of one would help in that situation as well.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made some telling points about people who have been sanctioned. It is very hard to argue that someone who happens to have had a sanction in a particular month, and therefore does not receive a penny of universal credit in that month, should not be entitled to a cost of living payment. A lot of sanctions last for a month. If we looked at two months, that would help to overcome that problem. I note from the briefing that 7,000 people lost out on the previous cost of living payments because they were subject to a sanction when their eligibility was assessed.

The Minister may say in response that people who are in this difficult situation can apply to their local authority for a payment from the household support fund. However, as we all know, the reality is that the household support fund is very little known by our constituents. It is extremely unlikely that anyone in the situation that I described would know that they should apply to the local council for a payment from the household support fund. It would be much better and simpler to extend the assessment of eligibility from one month to two months. It would mean adding an extra line of code in the computer system, which is a very easy thing to do to deal with a significant part of this clear unfairness in how the system works.

I want to make a point to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who tabled the amendments on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. My worry about saying that all the payments should be in one would be that the whole assessment for eligibility

for that therefore annual payment would be based on receiving universal credit in one month. There is a benefit in dividing this across three months, as the Government have: if someone misses out on the payment in one month, at least they will still get the other two, whereas if it was all done at one time, there would be a danger of losing the whole year's payment.

I will say a few words in support of new clause 7, which my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) tabled. I commend her contribution to the work of the Work and Pensions Committee. Indeed, all the amendments that I have spoken in favour of are tabled by members of the Committee. My hon. Friend correctly highlights the public health impacts, for better or for worse, of our social security arrangements, and it is absolutely right to take account of them.

At present, the headline rate of social security benefits—the typical universal credit standard allowance—is the lowest in real terms that it has been for four decades. As a percentage of average earnings, it is probably the lowest that it has ever been. It is certainly much lower than it was when Lloyd George introduced unemployment benefit in 1911. He did so at a significantly higher proportion of then average earnings than the standard allowance of universal credit today. There are significant public health impacts of this low level of social security support, making a contribution, for example, to the mental health crisis, which has hit so many people of working age in the UK since the pandemic. The hon. Member for Glasgow East referred to the fact that the Work and Pensions Committee will conduct an inquiry on the adequacy of benefits and the question of what the level of benefits should be. Public health impacts are a very important part of that debate.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Let me add how wonderful it is to see you back in your place, Dame Eleanor.

I rise to speak to amendment 4, which was tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I will also comment on one or two other amendments and clauses that have been mentioned, because this has been a very worthwhile debate.

Before I do so, I want to qualify the reason why I am here speaking to the Bill. I am doing so because in my city of Peterborough the Bill will impact and benefit so many of my constituents. It will benefit 21,900 people in my constituency, and that is a significant number of people. The difference that these payments and this legislation will make to their lives is considerable. On top of that, we are looking at 13,100 individuals who will be eligible for the disability payment.

This Government are committed to supporting families, and this legislation will be a good thing. It will get many, many of our constituents through, let us be honest, a difficult time, and that should be applauded. The people of Peterborough will benefit from this. It is a sign that the Government are doing exactly what they said they would do, supporting families across the UK during a global cost of living crisis.

7.30 pm

I understand exactly why the hon. Member for North East Fife tabled new clause 13. She is absolutely right that a lot of people are struggling and need this money

as soon as possible, but I would also like to say—following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) has said—that a lot of the time, what people want is certainty. They want to understand, and I think that spreading these payments across the year will benefit my constituents more than they would if they came in one lump sum. As my hon. Friend said, the first payment of £301 will be paid in spring 2023, a second payment of £300 will be paid in autumn 2023 and a third payment of £299 will be paid in spring 2024. The fact that households in my constituency will not have to go through the pain of applying is absolutely a good thing. They will just come automatically, which is incredibly important.

I have a lot of sympathy with the argument put forward by my hon. Friend. I, too, have had constituents come to see me at my constituency surgeries who are paid four-weekly—13 payments in 12 months—and I understand that that often causes complexity when it comes to other parts of the system. My hon. Friend identified one example of that today, and I hope the Minister will listen carefully to what he has said.

But as I have said, this payment will change the lives of my constituents. I think it is worthwhile, for the final minute or two before I sit down, for me to tell the House a little bit about what constituents have said that these benefits will mean to them. I met a family from Ravensthorpe, a husband and wife both working part time with two children. They want to do more—they would like to work full time—but with childcare, elderly relatives and some of the problems they have, they cannot. That family told me by email that this payment will be the difference between getting by and getting into debt. That is what we are doing here today, and it is an incredibly important thing. Sometimes, in hon. Members' eagerness to improve legislation, we forget the overall impact that it will have on so many people's lives.

In another family, from Bretton in my constituency, just one person in the household works full time, for just over the living wage. This payment will make the difference, making sure that they are able to look their neighbours in the eye and that their children will not go without—again, this is a good thing that we are doing. Finally, I heard from a pensioner who lives in Paston, a proud man who worked all his life. This payment will allow him to put the heating on this year with confidence. This is an inherently good thing that we are doing. These are proud people—Peterborough people, working people—and what we are doing here today is something that they will welcome.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I add my voice to those welcoming you back, Dame Eleanor. It is so lovely to see you back in your rightful place.

I rise to speak to new clause 7, which stands in my name. As the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), has already said, new clause 7 is about reviewing the public health and poverty effects of the Bill. It requests that the Secretary of State

“review the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of this Act and lay a report...before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.”

The reason why we need to do so is that we know our health, how long we live and how long we live in good health are driven by the social, economic and environmental

policies that we in this place enact. Given that we now have a declining life expectancy in our country, addressing this issue cannot be delayed any further.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on health in all policies, I authored in 2021 a report that looked specifically at the health effects of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. That report pulled together the evidence on the reduction in support since 2012 by successive Administrations—some £34 billion in support to working-age people has been cut since 2010—and the impact that that reduction has had on social security-driven poverty and, in turn, on health. If I may, Dame Eleanor, I will read out a section of that report:

“Each 1% increase in child poverty was significantly associated with an extra 5.8 infant deaths per 100 000 live births”

and

“about a third of the increases in infant mortality between 2014 and 2017 can be attributed to rising child poverty”.

Earlier in that report, it set out how significant those changes in social security were, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham mentioned. That reduction in value has not only been the worst in the UK but, I think, the worst in the OECD and the worst in the EU. As for its impacts, I have just mentioned the relationship with infant mortality. When Michael Marmot published his 10-year review of the impact on inequalities, he mentioned the contribution of the declining value of social security support, and the lack of protection that it provided to the most financially vulnerable. In turn, he related that to the contribution of the UK's flatlining life expectancy—it was flatlining in 2017, although in my part of the world, in Oldham, it was actually declining. Now we are seeing declining life expectancy across England, and the reduction in the value of social security support is a major contributor to that.

I hope that the Minister will take a look at my new clause 7, which is about developing good policy that will benefit the constituents we serve. I also add my support for amendment 3, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham and the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and for amendment 2, on sanctions, tabled by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden).

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is great to see you back in the Chair, Dame Eleanor.

We are all broadly united in this Chamber today, in that we recognise that our constituents need additional financial support, but the reality is that we are here today because of 12 years of Tory austerity. The cost of living crisis has occurred because of Brexit and because of the policies of austerity, so it is welcome that we are having a debate on this Bill if even so we can go over broader DWP failings and mismanagement.

One example is that a very recent 38 Degrees poll found that 20% of my constituents fear that they may have to use a food bank. I am not convinced that these payments will help with that figure at all. This Government are giving our constituents the additional payments outlined in the Bill, yet they still impose the benefit cap, the bedroom tax, the rape clause and cuts to universal credit. Naturally, the British Government will sit here today hoping for a round of applause for these additional payments, but frankly, these pennies are nowhere near enough to make up for the grossly flawed benefit system that this Government preside over. This support is a

start, and it needs to be just that. In the face of a Tory-made, Brexit-induced cost of living crisis, we need this Government to step up and step up more, again and again.

I have previously spoken in this House about my constituent Stacey, who I met in hospital while we recovered from our strokes together. Stacey and her family struggle to make ends meet. The Government will be aware of the significantly increased costs that disabled people face, so I would be keen to hear exactly what difference the Government think this £150 payment will make to them. I also echo the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) that an assessment should be made of the fact that legacy benefits were not uplifted during the pandemic in the way that universal credit was. It would be revealing to see the impact that has had, particularly on disabled people.

My constituents and people across Scotland are being failed by this Tory Government. Week by week, this Government try to steer conversation towards one topic or the next, but when I speak to my constituents, the issues caused by this Government's failing, broken social security system are consistent. Dignity and the basic living conditions of our constituents are simply not a priority for this Government but an afterthought, hence them not bringing forward the uprating of benefits to before April. The House of Commons Library has published information showing that inflation is being felt worse than ever, and also that it is usual or the norm for this uprating to occur in April, but that no Government are bound by that; it is just common practice. These are not normal times we are living through, and support should be accelerated, instead of civil servants' time being wasted applying the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. I would also appreciate some clarity on the timing of these additional payments—that should have been laid out before now.

Amendment 2 would fix a flaw in the Bill as it stands. It seems utterly unreasonable that any one of our constituents could miss out on this additional support because they have been sanctioned under this Government's cruel sanctions regime.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My hon. Friend speaks about sanctions. Does she share my concern that in probably one of the grimmest league tables around, my constituents are No. 4 in Scotland for the number of people being sanctioned? Some 10% of claimants are being sanctioned, and one reason is public transport. We have significant challenges with public transport, because we cannot get enough bus drivers, and we cannot get enough bus drivers because of Brexit. Those constituents are facing a triple whammy—from the cost of living crisis, from being sanctioned because they cannot get there, and from the increasing cost of living and energy costs—because of the policies this Government have pursued.

Amy Callaghan: Unfortunately, my constituency of East Dunbartonshire rivals my hon. Friend's and has a similar statistic for sanctions. It is not a position we want to be in, especially when we know that many of our constituents are sanctioned due to legitimate reasons, such as transport issues or potentially having to take their children to school.

Any Member walking through the Lobby tonight to vote against amendment 2 is condoning the Government's sanctions regime—in fact, they are breathing more life into it by denying the most vulnerable much-needed support. We on the SNP Benches always welcome additional support for our constituents, especially in these times, but will the Government consider whether they are offering enough? What about the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign? Those women have been continuously let down by the failings of this British Government. They have run an incredibly powerful campaign so that politicians will listen. Are they supposed to be appeased by this additional payment? I know with certainty that they will not be.

What about UK pensioners living overseas? Will their pensions be uprated this time around? Will they receive this additional support? What about our pensioners who have remained in the UK? Additional support for them is of course welcome, but it highlights a glaring need for a concerted effort, or a more concerted effort, around the uptake of pension credit, of which £3 million goes unclaimed each year in my constituency of East Dunbartonshire alone. Hopefully that will be less this year, given the effort by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). When will we see a much more active campaign directly reaching out to pensioners, encouraging them to sign up for pension credit?

What about single-parent families, already discriminated against by the British Government's child maintenance system, which charges them to access money they are entitled to and places vulnerable women at further risk of manipulation and abuse? Where is the relief from their deductions? What about young parents on universal credit? They face the young parent penalty, denying them the same level of social security as parents over 25. Where is the relief from their deductions?

These additional payments are welcome, particularly against the backdrop of this Tory cost of living crisis and a fundamentally broken social security system, but these payments need to be made with the highest degree of urgency, and a timescale would be much appreciated. If the Government wanted to make a real difference, they could reintroduce the uplift to universal credit and extend it this time to legacy benefits. I urge Members to vote for our amendment 2 tonight, to stop our constituents missing out on this much-needed support due to sanctions being imposed upon them.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Welcome back, Dame Eleanor. You can gauge from the warmth of the response how much you have been missed. Pass on my thanks also to that young whippersnapper they appointed to act on your behalf, the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale). I say that, but then I realise that *Hansard* has no irony, does it?

7.45 pm

I want to speak briefly in support of amendments 2 and 3 and new clauses 7 and 14. Unfortunately, at this stage of a Bill we are not able to move amendments that significantly increase the benefits, but because we are within a week of a Budget, we can send a message from this debate to the Chancellor. The message is to acknowledge the background to this legislation, which is fuel poverty rising in the past year from 4.5 million households to

6.7 million—a 50% increase. We welcome the legislation today, but in that context, and as others have said, it clearly does not go far enough, and my worry is that if the energy price cap is lifted to £3,000, fuel poverty will rise to 8.4 million.

My hint to the Chancellor—all Chancellors like to pull a rabbit out of their hat on that last day—is not to raise the cap to £3,000. In fact, a reduction could be in order and an increase in the level of benefits support could be provided fairly rapidly, too. In that way, we would have, alongside this legislation, some real impact on fuel poverty. The Chancellor, because of the reduction in energy fuel prices, and also because of the increase in income tax receipts he has received recently, is in a beneficial position to enable that to happen. Alongside this legislation, action in a week's time from the Chancellor could have an immediate impact on lifting people out of poverty.

My second point is in support of amendment 2. Many of us have constituents who have been penalised, and this Bill will double-penalise them. It is almost like they are now placed in a form of double jeopardy. As others have said, sometimes those penalties have been for trivial reasons—often for understandable incidents that have occurred with people not being able to fulfil all their responsibilities for claiming the benefit. A bit of flexibility is definitely needed.

Moving to new clause 14, I claim philistine status on this; I am not a member of the all-party parliamentary group on opera or the all-party parliamentary group for theatre—I will join immediately—but I am a member of the performers' alliance all-party parliamentary group. Like the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), I was also briefed by Equity and the Musicians Union about what is happening, particularly in the arts sector, for those people in and out of work and employment, because that is part of life in that sector, particularly for youngsters. The new clause simply asks the Government to stand back and look at how they are treating the self-employed, particularly this group of people.

In that briefing from Equity, I was shocked by the recent impact. I did not realise that 40% of that group have not received any support throughout the pandemic. They never qualified for any of the support mechanisms, which surprised me. I looked at the impact that was having on Equity's members. It did its survey, and these are some of the results, which demand a response from the Government. Some 60% of respondents anticipate difficulty in meeting essential costs—we are talking about housing, rent, food, childcare and utility bills. Some 33% have seen their level of personal debt increase in the past year, 41% feel negative about their prospects for work in the entertainment industry over the next 12 months, and, as the hon. Member said, 19% are considering having to leave the entertainment industry. That is an immense loss of talent.

As the hon. Member said, the minimum income floor largely affects young people, but it also impacts on different parts of society. Black and ethnic minority communities are impacted in particular. The Government need to stand back and undertake a short, sharp exercise on the implications of the minimum income floor on the self-employed, particularly in this sector. I am sure we can come to a reasonable response that can be agreed on a cross-party basis.

I come to my third point. I support new clause 7 because we desperately need to stand back and see where we are, after the panoply of legislation that we have introduced. We need to assess whether any of it is working and having the impact that it should. On Second Reading, we went through some of the issues facing our constituents. That debate impressed on me, and I think many others, exactly why the new clause is important. Now is the time to review the implications of poverty in our society.

Mention was made of unemployment benefits. We have discussed this before; all of us believe that if a person can get into work, that should help them to lift themselves out of poverty. The problem is that for some people, it is difficult getting into work, so they are dependent on benefits. Unemployment benefit is at its lowest in real terms since 1990-91. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) mentioned, as a proportion of average earnings, it is 14% of what it was in the 1970s. People cannot survive on an unemployment benefit at that level, so it is no wonder that the relative poverty rate among working-age adults has risen from 8% in 1961 to 20% now. No wonder there has been a 135% increase in food bank usage between 2016 and 2020.

When we discussed this earlier, what shocked us all was what has happened with regard to poverty and children. There are 4 million children in poverty; that means that they live in households with less than 60% of median household income. That is up from 3.6 million in 2010-11. According to Action for Children, there are 400,000 more children in deep poverty than in 2010-11; 2.7 million children—20%—are in deep poverty and 1.4 million children are in very deep poverty. That is 10% of children in the United Kingdom. We see many of those children in our constituencies, when their parents come to try to get advice and assistance; we are usually the place of last resort for that help.

That is why it is absolutely critical that the Government take up the challenge of new clause 7. It is a simple request. A review, in addition to the impact assessments that the Government have published, would enable us to stand back and look at where we are. What has been the cumulative impact of numerous pieces of legislation? What has worked, what has not, and what could work? Could we perhaps agree across the House on a new strategy for tackling poverty? It is clear from this legislation, and the legislation that preceded it, that the strategy is not working. The increases in poverty have been staggering. It is a disgrace to the country that we have these levels of poverty.

I want to speak up for one more group. I congratulated the Government on introducing the triple lock on pensions, but nevertheless 20% of single pensioners live in poverty; 1.7 million pensioners live in relative poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has advised the House that pensioner poverty is forecast to rise again. I supported the triple-lock legislation, but it has not had maximum impact. That is why new clause 7 is important. It would enable us to stand back, see where we are, recognise the problems, and recognise that we have significantly failed, and need to move forward with a new strategy, on a new basis.

Hywel Williams: May I state my delight at seeing you back in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? I support new clause 14. My constituency has a very high level of

self-employment, as I indicated in my intervention on the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), but it also has a large and active television industry, surprisingly to some people, considering that it is at the far end of Welsh-speaking Wales. Most of the TV is in Welsh. The new clause is on an issue that has an impact on us.

I mainly want to speak in favour of new clause 2, which is in the name of my hon. Friends in the Scottish National party, and in favour of the amendments that they have proposed. I support the requirement for an assessment of the latest cost of living support package that the Government have announced. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) said that the cost of living payments, although necessary, are a sticking-plaster, and I would repeat that. The payments are inferior to ensuring that benefits keep up with the real cost of living. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that almost half of all families with three or more children on means-tested benefits would have been better off if the Government had not introduced cost of living payments, but had instead just ensured that benefits kept pace with inflation.

Benefit-receiving households where people were in receipt of disability benefits, or were in paid work, were less likely to have been properly compensated for the failure to uprate flat-rate cost of living payments in good time. That is another matter that needs to be looked at. I understand that the cost of living payments will result in the Government spending around £2 billion more on recipients of means-tested or disability benefits in 2023-24 than would have been needed simply to raise ordinary benefits in line with inflation. We really do need a full, detailed analysis by the Government, showing why they think that these ad-hoc payments are an appropriate way to distribute support fairly.

When it comes to living standards and social security, it is important that we recognise the differential effect across the nations of the UK—a point I referred to earlier. The Bevan Foundation's latest research shows that even before the pandemic, around one in eight people lived in deep poverty in Wales. Around one in 30 has such low income that they live in destitution. New clause 2, proposed by my hon. Friends in the SNP, would require an analysis of the cost of living payments that considered the differing policy contexts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In Wales, we have the shameful record of having the highest proportion of children living in poverty of any nation in the UK. An analysis of how the cost of living payments will play out in Wales might reveal significant differences between the system in my country and the partially devolved benefits systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland. For instance, the Scottish child payment of £25 was a bold step towards tackling child poverty. It was one of the wider reforms that the IFS said was part of a trend in which the Scottish Government are using their devolved income tax and benefits powers to increase the progressivity of the tax and benefit system. That is something that we dearly need in Wales. Had we a similar payment in Wales, our tragically high levels of child poverty would surely be reduced. We also have a higher proportion of disabled people in Wales. An analysis by the disability equality charity Scope estimates that the extra costs faced by disabled people average £583 a month.

These are just a few examples showing why we need a Wales-specific analysis of the cost of living payments and how they interact with wider social security policy. Such an analysis would most certainly strengthen the argument for devolution of social security to Wales, I believe—understandably so, as that is my party's policy. I am told that new clause 2 will not be pushed to a vote tonight, but I hope that the Government accept its logic, and provide for a proper analysis of changes to social security—an analysis that specifically takes into account the impact in Wales.

Mims Davies: It is a pleasure to respond to points made this evening. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and discussions. I take this opportunity to fully, strongly assure all Members that policy officials in my team at DWP and I have looked roundly at the cliff edges and the challenges in getting these payments out swiftly. This will very much link to the household support fund, and the learnings from that. I can reassure the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), that there will be strong communications and engagement with local authorities for anybody who may be missing out. I hope that reassures my hon. Friends and colleagues.

Clause 2 sets out in more detail the eligibility criteria and the means test for the cost of living payments. I have covered much of clause 1, but I will come back to that briefly, if I may. The eligibility criteria, as we have heard, are similar to those in the Social Security (Additional Payments) Act 2022. We know from making those tens of millions of payments last year that keeping the policy simple is essential to delivering the payments successfully and to those most in need.

8 pm

I now turn to amendments 2 and 3, tabled by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), respectively. Amendment 2 asks us to change our eligibility criteria to include those who have no benefit payment due to a sanction. I want to reiterate to the Committee and to anybody listening that people are only sanctioned if they fail, without good reason—and we have heard tonight some that sound like good reasons—to meet the conditions they have agreed to.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will just make a little progress, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to jump in again shortly.

Ultimately, this is about parity between taxpayers and those people who are seeking support. As I say, we have targeted communications in place to make it clear to customers that our work coaches are there to help, whatever their circumstances. Whether it is getting advice, boosting people's skills, or identifying opportunities for progression, anybody looking for support should speak to their work coach to access all the help that the DWP can offer.

David Linden: On amendment 2, the fact of the matter is that people have already been punished once by being sanctioned. This is a cost of living payment in recognition of inflation and high energy bills. Why on earth does the Minister think it is appropriate for 6,600 households to have been sanctioned and punished twice last year,

[David Linden]

and why is she allowing legislation to go forward that allows people to be punished twice again? That is the simple question.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making his points, and I simply do not agree with the point about punishment. Conditionality works on both sides, and I think it is important that people play their part. I will come on to further comments about that shortly.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome the additional payments, but Conservative Members know that employment is the best way out of poverty, and part of getting people back into employment is the conditionality of universal credit. One key benefit of universal credit is that there is a clear incentive for claimants to get into work, preventing them from becoming trapped in welfare, which then creates a dependency. I know the Minister will explain this to the Committee, but I want to stress the importance of this in Hastings and Rye where, at the moment, one in five people—20%—are on out-of-work benefits by choice. I reiterate the importance of conditionality in gaining employment.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend, and she makes the point extremely eloquently. This is much more about getting people into work and progressing; it is not about some punitive sanctions regime. This is about individuals being supported to best progress. On those people who engage with us during the qualifying period, as long as they attend, we will be supporting them if there is any particular reason that they cannot engage with us, if they have good cause.

Amendment 3 would extend the qualifying period for universal credit over two months rather than one. I understand the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley. Keeping the eligibility dates as close as possible to payment reduces administrative challenges such as out-of-date contact or bank details, and including two assessment periods extends the amount of time between eligibility and payment. [Interruption.] Sorry, but the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) was speaking. In this time, individuals will have the opportunity to—

Amy Callaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will let the hon. Lady intervene, because she is making a racket.

Amy Callaghan: On sanctions, I appreciate the Minister giving way, and I thought she might enjoy a second just to reflect on some of the guff that she has been spouting. [Interruption.] I would say “guff” is a suitable word. I am absolutely scunnered by what she is saying, and I know my constituents will be too, given the high rate of sanctions in my constituency.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady, and I think the point here is that this is not solely about sanctions. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), this is about getting cost of living payments to the people most in need at this challenging time. SNP Members are continually talking about sanctions, and never talking about getting people into work and progressing. It is a continual bleating,

and I think it is right that the hon. Lady reassesses the word “guff” in relation to fairness between the taxpayer and those people who of course need to be engaging with work coaches. It is important that we know what is happening with our claimants. Leaving people to their own devices and not seeing what is going on is no way to support them, and I do hope that SNP Members will look at that.

I am going to talk a little more about sanction cases: 97.6% of sanctions in the quarter up to October 2022 were applied for failing to attend a mandatory appointment at a jobcentre. These cases can often be resolved quickly by engaging with claimants, so that they turn up to the next appointment. If someone with no universal credit award due to sanctions re-engages with us, they could get one of the later cost of living payments. That is why it was so important that we look at those hard edges, and as I have told the Committee, we did look at them.

Clause 3 sets out the eligibility criteria for each cost of living payment, based on the entitlement of child tax credit or working tax credit. This clause ensures that only individuals who have been paid tax credits by HMRC in respect of a day in the qualifying period will receive a cost of living payment. Clause 4 is applicable to those who are entitled to more than one social security benefit or tax credit, so that they do not get duplicate cost of living payments.

Clause 5, on the additional payment for disability, means that there is a cost of living payment of £150 for people who receive an eligible benefit, and this will enable us to make payments to up to 6 million people. I fully recognise that disabled people may be likely to face extra costs to deal with the impact of higher inflation, as we have heard in the Chamber this evening, so I am pleased that we can make this additional payment. I can also confirm that many will qualify for both the disability payment and means-tested benefits, to a maximum of £1,050 in total in what is covered by this Bill.

Let me make a little progress in trying to whip through the clauses. On the administration of the payments, clause 6 makes appropriate arrangements for the recovery of overpaid cost of living payments. This means that, where a cost of living payment is overpaid, including as a result of fraud, recovery rules that apply to its qualifying benefit will apply to the cost of living payment. Cost of living payments are paid automatically, without the need to claim, and there is no separate right of appeal against a decision on entitlement. Individuals can, of course, exercise their right of appeal against the decision on entitlement in relation to the relevant qualifying benefit.

Clause 7, on the co-operation between the Secretary of State and HMRC, allows for relevant data to be shared to ensure that cost of living payments reach the right people, and to avoid the duplication of payments. In the event that a payment is made by HMRC when it should have been made by the DWP, or the other way around, this clause allows us to treat the payment as if it was made by the correct Department, and it avoids the need for recovery of cost of living payments in these circumstances.

I am pleased to confirm to Members that clause 8—on payments to be disregarded for the purpose of tax and social security—ensures that any additional payments made are exempt from tax, will not affect a person’s entitlement to social security benefits or tax credits, and

are not subject to the benefit cap. This means that every person who is entitled to a cost of living payment will receive every penny in their pockets.

Clause 9 amends the Social Security (Additional Payments) Act 2022 to ensure that provisions relating to overpayments and recovery of the qualifying disability benefit also apply to disability cost of living payments. This clause also amends regulations made by HMRC to simplify and clarify their position on the recovery of overpaid cost of living payments in the next financial year. These are essentially tidying-up provisions that modify existing legislation to clarify our policy intention.

Clause 10 sets out the definition and interpretation of certain terms used in the Bill. Clause 11 explains the procedure for the laying of regulations. Clause 12 defines the territorial extent of the Bill and specifies that its provisions extend to England, Wales, Scotland and now to Northern Ireland. These are standard clauses.

I will briefly respond to new clauses 1, 2, 3, 7, 8 and 14 laid respectively by the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill).

New clause 1 appears to require the Government to publish analysis of the impact on household incomes of an earlier backstop date for the second and third qualifying day. New clauses 2, 3, 7, 8 and 14 require the Government to publish analysis on the impacts of the Bill on various groups, and I would point to a number of existing analytical publications. The Treasury has already published a distributional analysis of the autumn statement decisions; this shows the impact of the cost of living payments on households across the income distribution. Alongside this Bill, we have published an impact analysis which uses administrative data to look at the characteristics of those receiving the cost of living payments. This includes consideration of different characteristics such as age, gender and geographical location, including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. My Department's annual "Household below average income" publication looks at numbers in both relative and absolute low income and covers a wide range of characteristics, as I have mentioned.

I am pleased to say that my Department is planning an evaluation of the cost of living payments. In addition, we will consider what further information we can release in future. I hope, given the amount of data we are making available, hon. Members will withdraw these amendments.

Sir Robert Neill *rose*—

Mims Davies: Finally, I would like to mention the minimum income floor, which I think my hon. Friend wants to raise. He has spoken this evening to the Minister for Employment about fluctuating earnings; I entirely understand the challenges that he has set forward in Committee and I know that he will be meeting the Minister. I worked in media where there are fluctuating earnings and fully understand the points he and others have made; we do not think, however, that it is right for the state to provide indefinite support through the welfare system for those who persistently declare low earnings from self-employment.

Sir Robert Neill: I am glad that the Minister recognises that that was not the point made in relation to creative industries. I am grateful for the constructive approach by her colleague the Minister for Employment towards a meeting. I hope that we can have a meeting with the relevant all-party groups so that Ministers can directly hear the views of those who work in the sector and, as suggested by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), find a constructive way forward which we can all sign up to.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend and agree that it is right that we raise the situation of that sector. He has made his point and we have heard from other Members across the House about the same scenarios.

New clause 13 tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife requires us to make all payments under this Act by 1 April. As I previously stated, we have deliberately staggered payments over the course of the next year to ensure that as many people as possible will qualify for a payment at some point. I therefore ask the hon. Member to withdraw the motion.

I think I have made all my points.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am grateful to the Minister for giving me a short time to reply. I accept that amendments 4, 5 and 6 are fairly blunt instruments, but during the debate I heard from both sides of the Committee, including the Government side, that we want to get money to people as soon as possible. The purpose of our amendments is to ensure we can do that. Giving people in need cash gives them dignity as well; it gives them choice, as I have heard in my role as co-chair of the all-party group on ending the need for food banks. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) raised inflation, too, and giving people money now would help them ameliorate that. Amendment 4 merely asks the Government to make a payment at the start, rather than the end, of April, so I will not withdraw it.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 9, Noes 281.

Division No. 183]

[8.14 pm

AYES

Chamberlain, Wendy
Edwards, Jonathan
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Hanna, Claire
Jardine, Christine

Lake, Ben
Lucas, Caroline
Williams, Hywel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Helen Morgan and
Daisy Cooper

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baynes, Simon

Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex

Butler, Rob
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian

Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit

Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maynard, Paul
 Hall, Luke
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant

Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Anderson and
Fay Jones

Question accordingly negated.

8.29 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 21 February).

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

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2QUALIFYING ENTITLEMENTS:
SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

Amendment proposed: 2, page 2, line 27, at end insert “or—

- (ii) the person would have been entitled to a payment of at least 1p in respect of that period if the person had not been subject to a benefit sanction.”—(*David Linden.*)

This amendment is intended to ensure that, in respect of universal credit, payments under this Bill are not denied to a person who is subject to a benefit sanction.

The Committee divided: Ayes 154, Noes 283.

Division No. 184]**[8.30 pm****AYES**

Abrahams, Debbie	Foord, Richard
Ali, Tahir	Fovargue, Yvonne
Amesbury, Mike	Foxcroft, Vicky
Anderson, Fleur	Foy, Mary Kelly
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Furniss, Gill
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Gardiner, Barry
Bardell, Hannah	Gibson, Patricia
Barker, Paula	Gill, Preet Kaur
Begum, Apsana	Glindon, Mary
Benn, rh Hilary	Grady, Patrick
Betts, Mr Clive	Greenwood, Lilian
Black, Mhairi	Greenwood, Margaret
Blackman, Kirsty	Griffith, Dame Nia
Blake, Olivia	Gwynne, Andrew
Blomfield, Paul	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Bonnar, Steven	Hanna, Claire
Brennan, Kevin	Hardy, Emma
Brock, Deidre	Hayes, Helen
Brown, Alan	Healey, rh John
Buck, Ms Karen	Hendry, Drew
Burgon, Richard	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Byrne, Ian	Hollern, Kate
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara</i>)	Hopkins, Rachel
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Howarth, rh Sir George
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hussain, Imran
Chapman, Douglas	Jardine, Christine
Charalambous, Bambos	Jarvis, Dan
Cherry, Joanna	Jones, Darren
Cooper, Daisy	Jones, Gerald
Cowan, Ronnie	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Crawley, Angela	Jones, Ruth
Cummins, Judith	Jones, Sarah
Cunningham, Alex	Keeley, Barbara
Daby, Janet	Khan, Afzal
Dalton, Ashley	Lake, Ben
David, Wayne	Leadbeater, Kim
Davies, Geraint	Lewis, Clive
Davies-Jones, Alex	Lightwood, Simon
Day, Martyn	Linden, David
Debbonaire, Thangam	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Lucas, Caroline
Dixon, Samantha	MacAskill, Kenny
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Madders, Justin
Dodds, Anneliese	Maskell, Rachael
Doogan, Dave	Mc Nally, John
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara</i>)	McDonagh, Siobhain
Dowd, Peter	McDonald, Andy
Edwards, Jonathan	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Eshalomi, Florence	McDonald, Stuart C.
Esterson, Bill	McDonnell, rh John
Farron, Tim	McLaughlin, Anne (<i>Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara</i>)
Ferrier, Margaret	Mishra, Navendu
Flynn, Stephen	Monaghan, Carol
	Morden, Jessica

Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Rayner, rh Angela
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick

Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Sarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Peter Grant

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dines, Miss Sarah
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin

Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryll
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie

Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Stuart Anderson and
 Fay Jones

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, not amended, reported.

Bill, not amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

8.42 pm

Mims Davies: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill legislates for two key elements of the substantial package of further support that the Chancellor announced in November. It builds on our £37 billion package to help with the cost of living last year, demonstrating our continued commitment to the most vulnerable during these challenging times. This hugely important legislation lays the foundations for cost of living payments to millions of households. It underpins the Government's commitment to supporting people across the country who we know face increased financial pressures over the next year. We have legislated to uprate benefits and pensions by 10.1%, have extended the household support fund and are supporting people with energy costs.

I am delighted by the spirit in which the Bill has been received, for which I thank Members across the House. Frankly, I do not agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) about sanctions and conditionality, but I appreciate his arguments; I can promise him that we always look at individual circumstances and are fully focused on positive engagement with our claimants and on always being fair to the taxpayer. Despite the spirit in which the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) pressed her amendments in Committee,

it simply was not possible to deliver what she asked, so I think we are absolutely right to have moved forward in a different way this evening.

I thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for raising issues around larger families. She feels that perhaps there could be a better solution. I can say honestly that we looked very strongly at whether there were any better solutions, but unfortunately we could not find them. I take her point, however, and fully appreciate the points about the flat rate with respect to larger families.

Let me reiterate that these payments are being made through the DWP's ad hoc payments system, which does have some limitations. For instance, it can only make one type of payment of a single value at a time. However, for the families whom the hon. Lady describes who need additional help, we are extending the household support fund in England throughout 2023-24, while the devolved Administrations will receive Barnett consequentials to spend at their discretion, with the benefit of their local knowledge. I know that Opposition Members feel strongly about that. I ask all Members to look at the benefits calculator on gov.uk and at the Help for Households website, which can help all their constituents.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out the Government's priority, which is to see inflation halved this year. It is, of course, good news that we have already seen small decreases, with greater decreases forecast for later this year. However, we have recognised the need to act to support people now, which is why, through this Bill alone, we are providing additional support of up to £1,050 for low-income and vulnerable households across the UK. Last year we delivered, successfully and at an unparalleled pace, tens of millions of payments to people throughout the country. We were able to achieve that because we deliberately kept the eligibility criteria for the payments as simple as possible, avoiding the complexity that could lead to delays and unacceptable levels of fraud or, indeed, error. These are the key principles that have guided our approach to the Bill.

I thank all Members for their contributions to, and engagement with, today's debate and the Second Reading debate last month. I am grateful to Opposition Members who do not agree with the finer detail of the Bill for supporting the overall package that the Government have presented to Parliament. We have looked at all the feedback about how people can best be supported through difficult times. I am grateful, in particular, to the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), for his measured interventions and his scrutiny of the Bill. I pay tribute to my policy officials—the Bill team—for making all these key payments possible, and for all the other work that they have done.

Let me end by underlining the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), who is not currently in the Chamber. The Bill will enable the Government to start making additional payments soon to millions of families throughout the country to help them to become better off, and I commend it to the House.

8.47 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On behalf of the Official Opposition, I thank the Clerks and the Bill team for their support. While it is always a delight to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, I think I speak on behalf of the whole House in saying

how delightful it was to see the Chairman of Ways and Means back in her rightful place. She chaired our deliberations with typical skill and good humour.

I was pleased that the Minister attempted to answer questions from Members on both sides of the House with courtesy, but I am afraid that some of her answers did not clarify the points put to her. The fault was not particularly in her or in the briefing that she was given; it was because of the way in which the Bill is structured. The Bill has problems because, as has been mentioned, it does not deal with the fluctuation of universal credit payments month by month. The Bill has problems for those who happen to be sanctioned when the payments are made. The Bill has problems for those who are self-employed. The Bill does not take into account larger families either, because this is a flat payment.

We will not be dividing the House, because we understand that our constituents are in desperate need of help and we recognise that the Government are spending about £11 billion on this cost of living payment, but of course we still do not know whether the Chancellor will maintain the energy price freeze at £2,500 or whether our constituents will be faced with average bills of £3,000 from April. Our constituents are losing the extra support that they have been receiving with their monthly bills as well.

The reason that the Government have had to spend £11 billion is that there is less resilience in our constituencies and our constituents are facing greater hardship than ever before. There is despair in the faces of many people that Ministers do not often meet and in communities they seldom visit, because for 13 years we have had Conservative Ministers telling us that they were going to balance the books by cutting more deeply and more brutally into social security. That is why, today, child poverty is up, pensioner poverty is up and in-work poverty is up. This Bill is welcome as far as it goes, but there are fundamental problems with the social security system. Our safety net is ever more threadbare and there is ever more desperate need and hardship in our communities. We will not divide the House this evening, but so much more needs to be done to give our constituents a better chance.

8.50 pm

David Linden: In rising to conclude this Bill, I also want pay tribute to the Clerk of Legislation and to Linda Nagy and Nansi Morgan from my own team for their help with the amendments. My position on the Bill remains that it is welcome but could have gone further. I say to the Minister—whom I genuinely respect; we have robust debates in this place, but they are just that—that the reality is that last year 6,600 people who should have had a cost of living payment did not get one because they were sanctioned. All that the amendment was trying to do was to ensure that the law had a safety net, which is the very purpose of social security, and it is regrettable that the Government voted against that tonight. I hope that, when the Minister and I are jousting about this in a year's time, we will not look back and see an even higher figure of households that have been sanctioned. As much as the Minister and I can have robust debates, we should never lose sight of the fact that the legislation that we pass in this place, imperfect though it is, impacts some of the most vulnerable people in our constituencies, and I fear that the Government will come to regret rather hastily rejecting amendment 2 tonight, because those people will be at the Minister's surgeries on a Friday

[David Linden]

morning, as I am sure they will be at mine. On that basis we will let the Bill go off, and look forward to the progress that it will make for those that it does include.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

GENETIC TECHNOLOGY (PRECISION BREEDING) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 15 June 2022 (Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill (Programme)) as varied by the Order of 31 October 2022 (Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.

Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 1

PRECISION BRED ORGANISM

8.52 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 17.

Mark Spencer: These amendments aim to provide clarity as to which genetic changes produced through modern biotechnology are acceptable in a precision-bred organism, particularly with regard to changes that are similar to those that could have resulted from natural transformation. To achieve this, these amendments remove references to “natural transformation” in the Bill. We included this term originally to acknowledge that exogenous DNA can be present in plants and animals as a result of natural transformation. In addition, there was a clause that would strictly limit which features of this type could be present in precision-bred organisms if they resulted from the application of modern biotechnology.

Our policy ambition has not changed. However, after further discussions with our scientific advisers and with experts in the other place, we have introduced these amendments to achieve this desired outcome more effectively. Rather than referring to “natural transformation” in the Bill, we have focused on the features that can be present in a precision-bred organism resulting from the use of modern biotechnology. These are features that arise from the application of traditional processes listed in clause 1(7), which has not been amended. It is also important that the definitions of “modern biotechnology” and “artificial modification technique” in the Bill align with corresponding terms in the genetically modified organisms legislation. These Government amendments ensure that these can remain aligned, if there are technical updates, in the GMO legislation.

Through these amendments, we are maintaining our intention that precision-bred organisms contain only changes that could also have arisen in the gene pool through natural variation or through the kinds of directed breeding programmes already in use today. I am confident that the changes we have introduced are more effective in delivering the scientific approach to which we have committed when defining a precision-bred organism.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this important Bill could release vital technological innovation and demonstrates that the United Kingdom can regulate more effectively when we make decisions in our own national interest than when we were a member of the European Union?

Mark Spencer: Of course. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who was an excellent Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. She had the same ambitions as this Bill is delivering.

Amendments 7 to 13 and 15 will increase the scrutiny of the secondary legislation set out by the Bill. In response to the report from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, amendments 7 to 9, 12 and 13 change the parliamentary procedure from negative to affirmative for clauses 4(3), 6(2) and 18(1). Amendments 7 and 13 ensure that clauses 4(1)(b) and 18(6) remain subject to the affirmative procedure. We considered these recommendations closely and accepted the Committee's view that the clauses contain matters of significant public interest. Regulations under these clauses will therefore need to be debated and approved by both Houses of Parliament via affirmative resolution before they come into effect.

Amendments 10, 11 and 15 increase parliamentary scrutiny of clauses 11(5) and 22(3) while retaining the flexibility for the Secretary of State to designate the most appropriate body for the role of the animal welfare advisory body. We recognise it is essential that the animal welfare protections under this Bill command strong public and stakeholder confidence, which is why we tabled these amendments.

Alongside these amendments, which provide an opportunity for both Houses to debate and agree the provisions before they come into effect, we commissioned Scotland's Rural College to run an independent research project to help us develop criteria for the animal welfare assessment and the accompanying evidence that will be required.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): We have traditionally used other methods of crop breeding, such as induced mutation using gamma radiation or chemicals such as colchicine. Can the Minister reassure me that, although we are making changes for this keyhole surgery type of genetic modification, or gene editing, it will not affect traditional methods that have been used for many years to produce varieties such as Golden Promise winter barley?

Mark Spencer: This technology should accompany and enhance the possibilities of plant breeding and, later, animal breeding. I think it is an exciting opportunity, and who knows where the science will take us? It may well lead to world-changing developments that help to feed the growing world population.

The research by Scotland's Rural College will involve experts from the Animal Welfare Committee and a wide range of organisations with expertise in animal welfare, genetics and industry practice. Following the Bill's passage, we will continue to work with experts and other stakeholders to develop measures to safeguard animal welfare before we bring the measures on animals into force.

Finally, I will speak to the minor and technical amendments. Amendment 5 is a technical amendment that ensures clause 1(8) reflects the definition of "artificially modified" inserted into part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 2002, which is expressed in relation to genes or other genetic material rather than organisms. The amendment will make no substantive change to the Bill.

Amendment 14 replaces the reference to a "relevant obligation" in clause 21(3)(a) with a reference to a "part 2 obligation", as defined in clause 21, for clarity.

Amendment 16 similarly replaces the reference to a "relevant obligation" in clause 29(4)(a) with a reference to a "part 3 obligation", as defined in clause 29, for clarity.

Amendment 17 aims to make it clear in the clause on interpretation that references to the term "notifier", which is defined in clause 6(1), may in certain circumstances be modified by regulations under clause 11(9).

I hope the House is confident in accepting these amendments.

9 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to follow the Minister, who is, by my accounting, the fourth Minister at the Dispatch Box on this Bill. We had two in two days during the Committee stage, but I am still here, as is his colleague on the Treasury Bench, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). I thank her for the inclusive way in which she introduced the Bill at the beginning. It is a complicated Bill and she gave us access to officials, which was very helpful.

I take this opportunity, in case the Minister missed it, to remind him of the mantra that has guided the Opposition's view on the Bill. Labour is pro-science and pro-innovation, but we also know that to secure both public and investor confidence, a strong and robust regulatory framework is required. Disappointingly, that is the part the Government have failed to provide.

Sir Robert Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman represents a city that is full of science, particularly in its universities, so does he agree that we can bring forward this legislation only because we have left the European Union and that new wheat varieties that are 50% lower in acrylamide, a chemical that can induce cancer, is good news for both farmers and consumers of wheat?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for that. We have had this discussion before and I have to disappoint him slightly, in the sense that of course the EU is moving as well on this. I suspect we will probably end up in a similar place at a similar time. However, he is absolutely right to point out the potential advantages.

The amendments before us are all Government amendments, because, despite the excellent learned and erudite arguments put by my colleagues in the other place—I pay tribute to Baroness Hayman, Baroness Jones and Lords Winston, Krebs, Trees and Cameron, among others—not much has changed, and that is genuinely disappointing. However, some improvements have been made. A number of the amendments move regulations to the affirmative procedure, as the Minister explained, and that allows some, if limited, further scrutiny, which is welcome. Amendment 1 to clause 1 is the Government's further attempt to codify a particular knotty problem that we discussed at length in Committee. So the Minister will be pleased to know that we will not be opposing their amendments tonight. We will merely pointing be out how much more improved the Bill could have been had they had the confidence to embrace our positive suggestions.

I say that not least, Mr Deputy Speaker, because if you had the chance to peruse the Sunday newspapers, as I hope you had the time to do and enjoy, you would have seen comment on today's gathering of international experts on human gene editing. Although the techniques

[Daniel Zeichner]

such as CRISPR-Cas9 may be similar, this is of course a different issue from those under consideration today. However, I would argue that many of the ethical issues around animals are not dissimilar. That is why the Government's refusal to adopt our suggestion of an overseeing authority to look at these very complicated and challenging issues is so disappointing. We have a great chance to be genuinely world-leading in this area. We have brilliant people such as those at the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, yet the Government are, apparently, not interested. That is a wasted opportunity.

Let us look at these amendments in more detail. As I have said, on a number of issues the Government have bowed to informed argument in the other place and agreed that regulations should be subject to the affirmative procedure: on the release or marketing of genetically edited organisms; on information that must be included in the register; on the animal welfare declaration that has to be made; and on the body to be designated as the animal welfare advisory body. That is all welcome. But one of the most powerful and consistent criticisms has been the vagueness of the Bill on many issues and the lack of detail, particularly relating to the proposals regarding animals and when regulations might take effect. I am afraid that these amendments do not seem to help us on this, and I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on it. The promise at the outset was that nothing would be done on animals until the science was further advanced; it has been described as a "step-by-step approach". Will the Minister reconfirm that commitment today and tell us what timeframe is actually envisaged? As for companion animals or primates, can he give any reassurances on that today? Many people will be keen to hear what he has to say on it.

As I have already indicated, the most significant amendment is to clause 1, as the Government seek once again to explain what they consider to be a natural process. We had an interesting and extensive discussion in Committee on this point, both with those giving evidence and between members, and it was discussed at length in the other place. I fear that the Government have struggled with this, and I am not sure the new wording takes us much further forward. In general, the Government have sought to define a new category, "precision breeding" which many expert witnesses doubt has much meaning. The particular concern is whether the definitions accurately describe gene editing, without allowing gene modification in through the back door, with one of the key issues being whether exogenous material is included.

The amendment before us introduces yet another term—modern biotechnology. This is also ill-defined, and, as argued by Lord Krebs in the other place, may not stand the test of time, or, more importantly, as we heard in expert evidence, legal scrutiny and challenge. I appreciate that this is difficult territory and hard to define, and almost any sentence fails to capture the complexity, but we were promised at the outset that GM is excluded, and it would be helpful to have the Minister confirm that clearly again today.

I am conscious that you do not want lengthy speeches, Mr Deputy Speaker, so let me conclude. The learned and lengthy discussions in the other place showed just how complicated this subject is. Sadly, the Government

have made only limited changes in the light of those discussions. Those changes are welcome, so we will not oppose them, but we think that this is a missed opportunity to set out the strong regulatory framework that would have reassured the public, and given investors the confidence that the sector needs.

There is significant opportunity for good here, but there are also risks—risks we may not fully understand. It is also worth bearing in mind that one mistake could tarnish the entire technology. As so often, the Government have gone for the short-term quick fix—the sticking plaster. How much better it would have been to have set up the robust long-term framework that could have established the UK as the setter of the standard that others will follow. That is unfinished business, and it is for another day.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise

again in support of this important Bill. I declare a strong professional interest as a veterinary surgeon. I am passionate about animal health and welfare, and strongly believe that the Bill will help in that area.

The Bill has been strengthened and improved in the other place. Its definitions are also tighter. I am pleased that the Opposition amendment to remove animals from the Bill was withdrawn and has not been carried forward. It is so important that both animals and plants are included in the Bill. I was also pleased that the amendments that would have phased in animal provisions were not successful. That has strong benefits for animal health and welfare, and it is important that animals are included.

I very much welcome the Government's allaying of concerns expressed by the Opposition about exogenous DNA, therefore preventing any exogenous DNA that was outside the range of an organism's existing gene pool from remaining in the organism. Amendments 3, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 have been very helpful in that regard. It is important to reaffirm to the public and the world at large that this Bill is to do with gene editing, which is very, very different from genetic modification. That is where genetic material from exogenous or unrelated species can be introduced. That will not happen in this gene editing Bill.

I very much welcome the Government amendments that have removed reference to natural transformation. Some clarity was needed in that regard. I also welcome the fact that the Bill introduces more parliamentary scrutiny to help protect animal health and welfare, which strengthens the safeguards. This increased scrutiny will also allay some of the fears that people had put forward.

The Bill has huge benefits to animals, plants, the environment and people in, for example, helping to develop resistance to diseases such as avian influenza. A lot of work is being done to make birds resistant to this horrific disease. A huge outbreak has gripped this country and others across the world and that is firmly in our minds. This sort of technology will help us in that battle. It will also help us to develop resistance to other diseases, such as porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome in pigs. It will help reduce the need for medicines, help combat antimicrobial resistance and, indirectly and very directly, help public health. It will also help us as a country and as a world in our fight to

preserve and strengthen food security by being able to develop more climate-resilient and disease-resistant crops, reducing the need for pesticides and reducing the need for fertiliser as well. That will also benefit the environment.

In summary, I strongly support the Bill. I welcome the Government amendments. I thank the other place for refining and improving the Bill and I wish it well as it completes its passage.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I will not detain the House longer than a moment or two, but I want to put on record that, although we in the SNP do not intend to oppose the Lords amendments, our opposition to the entire Bill has been well documented throughout its passage. The Bill, alongside the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, attacks the integrity of the powers of the Scottish Parliament in specifically devolved areas such as agriculture, aquaculture and animal welfare.

The intended scope of the Bill may be England only, but the Bill documentation is clear that it will have significant impacts on areas devolved to the Scottish Parliament. In particular, the impact assessment for the Bill recognises that,

“products entering the market in England would also be marketable in both Scotland and Wales.”

It is outrageous that this Government did not see fit to work more closely—or at all—with the Scottish Parliament, to give that institution the respect it is due through this process and to listen to the concerns expressed. As a result, this entire Bill does not have the support of my party.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate; I have spoken to the Minister before, so he knows my thoughts on the Bill, and I am very pleased to add my support to what we have before us tonight. It is also good to hear from the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who brings a wealth of personal knowledge to the debate—I thank him for sharing that with us.

I have been supportive of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill for some time now, having spoken with a number of farmers in my constituency who have expressed to me their willingness to engage with and support it when they learned how exactly it could help their work. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union and also as a landowner.

To my reading, the Lords amendments simply provide clarity and clarification. The Minister was very good to share his response, which highlighted the use of the terminology “natural transformation”, and I thank him for that. Five of the amendments serve the purpose of removing references to natural transformation.

The amendments were made following concerns raised by MPs and peers regarding the potential for misinterpretation of the term as allowing the stable integration of the functional transgenic DNA, through the use of modern biotechnology, in an organism that is considered to be precision-bred for the purposes of the Bill. That is not in line with the Government’s policy intention, which is to allow only genetic features similar to those present in the gene pool or that might arise naturally through existing breeding processes.

As that clarity has been furnished, it is clear that our farming industry can benefit without dangerously interfering with genetic structure. I am encouraged by that, and I believe that the information from the National Farmers Union, which outlined gene-editing applications in 46 different crop species, with rice, tobacco, wheat and soybean among the most cited, is an indication of the clear benefits of the ability to use precision breeding.

A broad range of products with market-oriented traits are being developed, and not just those with agronomic traits such as yield and disease resistance, but foods with consumer-facing traits such as lower allergenicity, reduced contaminants, higher antioxidants, longer shelf life, vitamin enhancement and heart-healthiness—all things we would wish to see in foods. There are also those with climate-resilient traits such as drought and salt tolerance.

No one can ignore what is happening and what we have before us. It is not gene modification in livestock, but instead gene editing applications being developed and researched, including on resistance to porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome. These technologies are exciting, innovative and challenging and I believe they give the United Kingdom a chance to lead the way. For example, if the problems of African swine flu in pigs or bovine tuberculosis in cattle could be sorted out, my goodness, we could all put our hands up and clap hard for that. Mastitis resistance, hornless cattle, chickens that cannot spread bird flu, elimination of milk allergens and increased lean muscle—how would that not be good news for our farming sector? It could only lead to more efficiency and higher standards and make our farming industry even stronger.

It is clear that this Bill solidifies what farmers and indeed many of our grandmothers have done for years with their roses and their peas. I well remember in Strabane back in the ’60s my grandmother being one of those people doing things with roses and peas, making changes even in those days. My grandmother called it splicing, but this is splicing made technical, and it is past time we legislated to protect it. I very much welcome what the Minister is bringing forward tonight.

9.15 pm

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to hon. Members who have assisted not only in this place, but at the other end of the corridor, and particularly to my right hon. Friend Lord Benyon for steering the Bill so ably through the House of Lords.

It is worth putting on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice)—I see him in his place behind me—who was the originator of the Bill. He saw the benefit of this technology and brought in the Bill, ably assisted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) indicated, was one of the Ministers he jostled with over the Bill.

The shadow Minister was broadly supportive, but he had one little concern about animal welfare; I understand those concerns and I will try to reassure him. Animal welfare concerns were raised in both Houses and by non-governmental organisations. The Government are committed to maintaining our already high animal welfare standards and we want to improve and build on

[*Mark Spencer*]

that record. That is why we are taking a step-by-step approach, with regulatory changes first for plants, followed then by animals. That is why we have also commissioned Scotland's Rural College to carry out our research.

One reason why I was a little disappointed by the comments about Scotland from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) was that even she must be proud of the fantastic establishments in Scotland. Not least, the James Hutton Institute in Dundee and the University of Edinburgh are world-leading in some of this research. We need to embrace that research and bounce forward.

This is a fantastic Bill. I am glad to see it progress through the House and I look forward to its receiving Royal Assent.

Patricia Gibson: It is right and fitting that the Minister pays tribute to the hub of scientific excellence that we find in Scotland in a range of different areas, but surely he is not suggesting that that, in itself, and using that expertise in Scotland is a reason for his Government to legislate by the back door in devolved areas in Scotland.

Mark Spencer: Not at all. This is an England-only Bill; it is there in black and white. I was expressing my disappointment on behalf of Scottish farmers who will not be able to use this technology. That will leave them at a disadvantage commercially, and I hope that she will listen to those Scottish farmers.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Perhaps the Minister might be reassured by the fact that the Scottish National party seems to be against the Bill on political rather than scientific grounds. In fact, I think it is on the record as saying that if the European Union adopts the legislation—as the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), said—it would immediately adopt it. Surely the SNP is taking the lead from Europe, not from the people who elected them.

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. It was my intention to slowly glide the Bill through its process, but we seem to have stepped into a

bit of a hot potato. The Bill is a fantastic opportunity for scientists around the UK, particularly in England, to embrace this new technology.

Jim Shannon: Other Members have spoken about Scotland and Wales. I know that the Minister has a very close working relationship with the Minister responsible for farming in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots. Has this Minister had any opportunity to discuss these matters with him, so that we in Northern Ireland can take advantage of what will happen here?

Mark Spencer: Of course, our door is always open for those conversations with the devolved Administrations. I look forward to speaking to Minister Poots at the earliest convenience, so that Northern Ireland can embrace this technology, as soon as we get Stormont up and running, of course. I know that the hon. Gentleman is as keen as I am to see that. With that, I commend the Bill to the House.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 17 agreed to.

ANIMALS (LOW-WELFARE ACTIVITIES ABROAD) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Ordered,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Special Immigration Appeals Commission (Procedure) (Amendment) Rules 2023, which were laid before this House on 2 February, be approved.—(*Robert Lagan.*)

Question agreed to.

Offshore Wind Farms: Health and Safety

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

9.20 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): A just transition was proclaimed when COP26 was held in Glasgow in 2021. While that global jamboree may have underwhelmed in so many respects, it was at the forefront in one aspect, for as we transition from fossil fuels to renewables, not just countries but businesses, communities and workers were to be supported. Entire industries require to be run down or forsaken and decent jobs given up, even lifelong careers; however, financial support was to be given to assist nations in that journey. As for workers, assurances were made that in the transition to net zero, they would be protected and long-held rights would be assured—justice for workers, as well as for our planet.

Those assurances were echoed outwith the global gathering, endorsed by the UK Government—they have since been championed by them in the green jobs taskforce—and chorused by the Scottish Government in their just transition commission. The rhetoric has been fairness and equity for those whose work would require to change. In Scotland and in the UK as a whole, the sector most affected is in the North sea. Though extraction of oil and gas is still required, we are on a journey to decarbonise and to transition to renewables; it is a transition, but it must be a just one. That sector has provided huge wealth and benefit to our society, and many who worked hard in those difficult and often dangerous conditions are now moving into renewables. Where once it was oil and gas, it is now becoming wind, wave and tidal—let us not forget that we recently had a Prime Minister who championed the UK as the Saudi Arabia of wind. It is a move that matters for our nations and will create wealth, as well as provide hope for our planet.

However, recent events in the North sea have revealed that while there is a transition in the economy, there is no just transition for those working in that new and growing sector—primarily in the maritime sector, where minimum wage law does not apply consistently and immigration law is used as a crude instrument to profit from seafarer exploitation. That, though, is a debate for another day. Tonight, I want to raise the issue of employment rights, especially the effectiveness of health and safety legislation that is too easily avoided. The lack of consistent and effective offshore safety legislation has been brought to light by a recent tragedy. We must hope that from that sorrow there will come some solace, with the existing legislative gap being remedied.

That legislative gap affects hundreds if not thousands of workers in the offshore energy supply chain, sailing out of not just existing offshore hubs such as Aberdeen or Dundee but Eyemouth, Montrose, Fraserburgh, Wick, Buckie, and other Scottish ports involved in delivering a successful offshore wind industry. It also affects those in England servicing energy installations in the North sea from Humberside, Tyneside, Teesside or East Anglia, along with those who will be embarking from Holyhead, Milford Haven, Mostyn and other ports in Wales. At present, the framework of statutory employment and seafarer rights on which that workforce will depend for their health and safety is not fit for purpose. A just

transition was promised, and a just transition there must be for our maritime and offshore workers, as well as our planet.

Let me detail the tragedy which brought those failures to light. On Sunday 22 January, a man went missing from Valaris 121, a mobile offshore drilling unit being towed to Dundee and located some 98 miles from Aberdeen. Police Scotland investigated and while satisfied that no criminal investigation was required, had concerns regarding wider health and safety issues, which they referred to the Health and Safety Executive. This is something that the HSE would not normally investigate. That it did so here is perhaps indicative of the concerns that the police had raised, for it is not the same as an industrial accident on land. Neither is it similar to that on an oil or gas rig on the UK continental shelf, or even on a fixed or floating wind turbine in the UK exclusive economic zone.

HSE legislation has rightly been extended to cover workers' rights, but it is incomplete and, as a result, workers are at greater risk. Mobile drilling units such as Valaris 121 are classified as a ship or a vessel when towed, meaning that they fall outwith HSE jurisdiction and within that of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. Accordingly, while the HSE could and very likely would have carried out a full investigation had this incident been on land, a rig or even a turbine, it is restricted in what it can do in this instance. Likewise, a report that may have seen a fatal accident inquiry in Scotland or a coroner's court hearing in England and Wales will not happen. Why is that? It is because it is not classified as a health and safety issue, giving the HSE authority. Instead, it is considered a maritime safety matter, and the MCA has authority and leads these investigations through the marine accident investigation branch.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. When it comes to health and safety, we are all concerned. Given the fact that the offshore energy created comes on land in Scotland and England, is there some role for the Health and Safety Executive, even though, as he has clearly outlined, the MCA takes precedence? If the energy is coming here and the workers work out of Scotland and England, is there not a responsibility?

Kenny MacAskill: As I will come on to say, the HSE does a good job onshore, on oil and gas and on turbines, but we require that its powers be extended. It is the agency. The MCA and the MAIB do a wonderful job in preserving life and ensuring wider maritime safety, but they are not qualified in industrial accidents; neither are employment laws within their remit. Fundamentally, and worsening that handicap in expertise, the MCA does not even have responsibility for the investigation, or jurisdiction over this incident. That is because it occurred outwith UK territorial waters, which extend to 12 miles. Beyond that distance, even when within the UK exclusive economic zone of 200 miles and on the UK continental shelf, incidents are subject to international maritime regulations, which prescribe that the investigating agency is to be from the vessel's flag state. That is the country where the ship is registered.

Valaris 121 is registered in Liberia, a flag state managed in Virginia, USA. Accordingly, we have the absurdity of responsibility for an investigation and jurisdiction in enforcement for an incident leading to the death of a

[Kenny MacAskill]

UK worker resting not with police or Crown, HSE or MCA, or even with an organisation based in Edinburgh or London, but in the flag state of Liberia, a country located on another continent. That country is one of the world's largest shipping registers and is categorised by the International Transport Workers Federation as a flag of convenience. That means that employment and safety standards are at the international minimum and ship owners pay no tax to the Liberian state. That alone is a concern, as questions are sometimes raised regarding registration, let alone supervision.

Despite my asking numerous questions, the Government are unable to tell me how many vessels operating in the UK sector are foreign flagged. That should be a concern, as anecdotally it would seem that the vast majority are not registered under the red ensign, despite the Government's obsession with wrapping things in the Union Jack.

The Lord Advocate advised that a multi-agency meeting took place to discuss the incident; it involved representatives of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Health and Safety Executive, Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the Republic of Liberia. They discussed who would have primacy in the various investigations. I do not know this, but I assume that it was a virtual meeting; likewise, I do not know who the representative from Liberia was, or what level of seniority they had. The Lord Advocate explained further that Police Scotland remains in charge of the missing person enquiry, though, sadly, the body may never be recovered.

The Lord Advocate confirmed that the HSE remained the lead agency for the investigation in Scotland and the UK—but doing what, and enforcing which laws? Is that because there is no one here from Liberia to do it, and because the only folk nearby are from the HSE? Will we simply see a report filed and no further action taken? More importantly, how does this address the failure to extend health and safety legislation for the oil and gas sector to the new world of offshore wind, other renewable energies and nascent green technologies such as hydrogen, carbon capture and storage and liquefied natural gas?

Leaving aside the good intentions of the Lord Advocate and the diligent work by the HSE, let us recall where jurisdiction and enforcement lie: with the flag state, Liberia. Let me again set out why that is—all this has been confirmed through repeated parliamentary answers from several Government Departments.

Health and safety legislation applies to workers on land and operating in UK territorial waters, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned; those territorial waters extend for 12 miles. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (Application outside Great Britain) Order 2013 applies to oil and gas, and even turbines, but that is insufficient for the new sector, as I shall detail. Valaris 121 is classified as a vessel or ship, which means that it is not subject to that legislation. As the tragedy happened outwith UK territorial waters, it is classified as a maritime incident—hence the involvement of the flag state, and the absurdity of Liberian jurisdiction. The issue of the absence of health and safety rights goes far wider than this incident or this vessel. It goes to the very heart of how the new sector to which we are transitioning operates.

As disclosed in parliamentary answer 139284 from the Department for Work and Pensions, under the 2013 order, health and safety protection applies to those operating in the offshore wind sector when on a “structure or machine”; the provisions apply to

“structures for the production of energy from wind”, and to

“the operation of a cable for transmitting electricity from an energy structure.”

All well, one might think, but no; the legislation goes on to specifically state:

“Ships are not defined as energy structures for the purposes of this legislation.”

Therein lies the injustice of this North sea tragedy. It also shows that current provisions are incapable of providing the protections required for workers in this new sector. There are two clear reasons for that. First, few people work on a turbine; it is accessing, maintaining and supporting turbines that matters. Workers do not live on them, as they do on oil and gas rigs—or at least not yet, and if that changed, living accommodation would likely be confined to flotel, special operation vessels and other entirely separate solutions. If protection is provided only when people are physically working on the turbine, that totally ignores the nature of both the job and the sector.

Secondly, Valaris is classified as a vessel or ship, but she is not what most imagine a vessel or ship to be, as she is designed as a working platform. Some workers will be drilling, and others will be working while attached to a turbine. If they are physically attached to the turbine, then they are covered, but when they are travelling to the turbine or back, or even if they are proximate to it but not physically attached to it—that will likely be the bulk of the work—they are not.

The current legislation fails to take account of the operation of and working practices in offshore wind. It is an expanding and developing sector, which means that people are being denied cover in aspects of the work that lack protections. The danger is that this tragedy might be replicated, and oft times more, given the expansion of the sector. Health and safety protections that apply for oil and gas must be available for offshore wind and other renewables.

I have had discussions with Offshore Energies UK, which takes safety extremely seriously, as the House would expect, and it has indicated an acceptance of the gap and a willingness to assist in resolving the situation. To address it, the definition of energy structures under the 2013 order needs to be extended, and legislation to protect seafarers operating in the offshore wind sector needs to be enacted, but so far the DWP has failed to show any interest. Will the Minister agree to meet me and worker representatives to discuss this? There must be a just transition for our planet, but there must also be a just transition for workers, and this most certainly is not a just transition in the offshore wind sector.

9.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I am grateful to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) for bringing this important debate to the House, and I appreciate and understand the passion and conviction he brings to this debate. The UK Government take very seriously

health and safety on offshore wind farms in Great Britain's territorial sea and the UK continental shelf, and I am keen to reassure the hon. Gentleman that my officials at the HSE confirm that we have a strong and appropriate existing regulatory regime, which applies the protection afforded by the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to people working on offshore wind farms.

On the hon. Gentleman's concerns, let me spell out that the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (Application outside Great Britain) Order 2013 applies the provisions of the 1974 Act. This covers certain activities offshore, including work associated with offshore wind farms, as well as other offshore installations such as those for oil and gas. Therefore, the 1974 Act applies to offshore wind farms in the territorial sea and, within the UK continental shelf, to renewable energy zones, which are also defined in the 2013 order. The 2013 order also applies the provisions of the 1974 Act to offshore oil and gas installations in designated areas in the UK continental shelf—I really hope that pacifies the hon. Gentleman. I will say more about that and come on to some of his other points later.

Furthermore, the 1974 Act places a legal duty on employers to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of workers and others to ensure that they are kept safe, whether they are working on oil or gas or, as I said, wind farm installations. In addition, other legislation that applies to work on offshore wind farms includes the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015. This helps employers to ensure that their work is planned and that risks are assessed and managed. Those regulations also ensure that employers consult and engage with workers and make sure that information is communicated to all those who need to know it.

The Health and Safety Executive enforces the 1974 Act and subsidiary health and safety legislation on offshore wind farms. The HSE does not have the legal basis to enforce activities that are not specifically covered by the 2013 order. In those situations, however, other regulators and organisations will enforce health and safety legislation or investigate accidents. For example, in a situation where a ship is in transit and the HSE's regulations do not apply, such a ship will still need to comply with national and international maritime standards.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is responsible for enforcing all merchant shipping regulations in respect of occupational health and safety, the safety of vessels, safe navigation and operation. This includes manning levels and crew competency. Merchant shipping health and safety regulations extend to all those working on the ship and any work activities undertaken on board. These powers of the MCA extend to UK ships anywhere in the world and to non-UK ships that are within UK territorial waters.

The marine accident investigation branch investigates marine accidents involving UK vessels worldwide and all vessels in UK territorial waters. Its role is to help prevent further avoidable accidents from occurring, not to establish blame or liability.

For foreign flagged ships in the UK continental shelf, the responsibility for investigating accidents lies with the flag state. A memorandum of understanding between the HSE, the MCA and the MAIB ensures effective collaborative working. Each organisation has differing

responsibilities for health and safety enforcement and accident investigation. An operational working agreement provides clarity and consistency where the jurisdiction of the HSE, the MCA and MAIB overlap. It outlines the key and supporting principles to be adopted when selecting the lead organisation for health and safety enforcement and accident investigation.

The HSE's energy division has a team of inspectors dedicated to the regulation of work activities at offshore wind farms. They are supported by various onshore and offshore specialists who provide technical advice on a range of relevant subjects during inspection, investigation and enforcement of high-risk activities. This addresses poor health and safety performance and provides reassurance that there is good health and safety management of such activities.

Kenny MacAskill: I spoke earlier with Offshore Energies UK and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, and this is not a criticism of any existing or past Government. There is a legislative gap because technology has moved so fast and nobody anticipated it. We now, however, have a situation, which I think is accepted by employers and employee representatives, where those working in the sector are not getting the proper coverage that should apply. Does the Minister not accept that there is something wrong here in primacy resting with Liberia, and that we need to extend the 2013 order to the new operations as they exist now, and indeed as they may be in a few years?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I will make some further points, and I hope we can then come to a mutual arrangement and I can reassure him on the issues he raises. The points he makes can come into the conversation.

I have spelled out that the HSE energy division has inspectors dedicated to the regulation of work activities at offshore wind farms, but I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that a lot is going on in this sector and there needs to be reassurance. I have spelled out some of the regulatory activity. The HSE works with industry bodies and UK regulators to ensure that sensible solutions are found to emerging risks.

On shipping standards, where the HSE regulations do not apply to work activities on ships because they fall outside the scope of the 1974 Act and the 2013 order, international shipping regulations provide a broadly equivalent level of safety to international shipping. International conventions on shipping, such as the international convention for the safety of life at sea, the international convention for the prevention of pollution from ships and the maritime labour convention 2006 set a level playing field, as all ships are surveyed by their flag and can be inspected by port states against the internationally agreed standards. Under this regime Valaris was inspected by the MCA when it reached port in the UK, but I do appreciate the hon. Gentleman's points on that.

On Valaris 121, the Health and Safety Executive has served an improvement notice on Enesco Offshore U.K. Ltd relating to incorrectly installed gratings on Valaris 121 when it was in port in Dundee.

On the flag state investigations of accidents occurring on the UK continental shelf, the flag state of the ship involved is responsible for ensuring that an investigation

[Mims Davies]

is conducted and completed in accordance with the casualty investigation code. The code mandates that certain incidents set out in chapter 1, part A, of the 1974 international convention for the safety of life at sea—or SOLAS—are investigated.

The hon. Member for East Lothian mentioned flags of convenience. Open registries can pose a challenge to maritime security and the enforcement of laws on the high seas. That is because some flag states do not, or cannot, exercise effective oversight of the ships on their registers, as I think the hon. Member pointed out.

While there is some evidence of poor practice taking place under open registries, there is no direct correlation between poor-performing ships and open registries. However, Liberia, the Bahamas and the Marshall Islands are all open registries and in 2021 were in the top 15 countries for low detention rates under the Paris memorandum of understanding on port state control.

It is an important issue that some flag states do not have independent investigation bodies that may investigate accidents in UKCS. The marine administrations for the Isle of Man, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands and Gibraltar do not have independent investigation bodies, and therefore have difficulty in ensuring that safety investigations are impartial and objective. A memorandum of understanding has therefore been reached, which the UK's Marine Accident Investigation Branch has agreed to, to investigate incidents involving ships registered with those marine administrations. The procedure for those investigations set out in the legislation in force in the relevant marine administration's territory will apply.

I will cover two other points, then hopefully start to conclude. The hon. Gentleman will be keen to know that the responsibility for regulating the health and safety of workers travelling to and from offshore workplaces—wind farms or oil and gas installations—rests with the MCA within the territorial sea and for UK-flagged vessels.

The responsibility for health and safety enforcement activities and accident investigation is described in the MOU between HSE, the MCA and the MAIB. That is supported by an operational working agreement that provides clarity and consistency where the jurisdiction of the respective agencies overlap.

In terms of those transiting to and from offshore workplaces, the responsibility for regulating those transits rests with the MCA within the territorial sea and for UK-flagged vessels. Again, the responsibility for health and safety enforcement activities and accident investigation is in the MOU between HSE, the MCA and the MAIB. Again, that is supported by an operational working agreement that provides clarity and consistency where the jurisdiction of the respective agencies overlap. I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman was making. Does he want to come in on that?

Kenny MacAskill: I hope the Minister would accept that the technology is changing and that most of the new turbines will be outwith UK territorial waters in many instances, which changes the nature of the jurisdiction.

The organisations she referred to, the MAIB and so on, have skills, but they are not skills relating to health and safety at work. The fundamental difficulty is that the nature of the operation is not attached to the physical turbine. The nature of the activity is either accessing it or working in close proximity to it. This man went off a ship that had been doing that and yet we are faced with Liberia. It is on that basis, because of the new world we face, that I seek for the Government to extend the 2013 order. We are anticipating a new world and we do not know what the North sea will look like, but it will be a very busy workforce and a very busy workplace that is very different from what we have at the moment.

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about learning from what happened and ensuring it is fit for purpose, and, above all, ensuring that he and the workers involved feel reassured. I want to reassure him that the HSE works closely with G+ Offshore Wind Health and Safety Organisation and its members to promote an understanding of the offshore wind farm regime and the regulations I have spelled out tonight.

On EU retained law, which the hon. Gentleman covered, the HSE remains focused on ensuring that regulatory frameworks maintain the UK's high standards on health and safety protection, while continuing to reduce burdens on business. The HSE's approach closely aligns with the Government's pledge to do more for businesses to promote growth by removing disproportionate burdens and simplifying the regulatory regime. Our standards of health and safety protections are among the highest in the world. The HSE will continue to review retained EU law to seek opportunities to reduce those burdens and promote growth, but not reduce health and safety standards.

In conclusion, I have, I hope, set out the regulatory framework in place to ensure the health and safety of people working at offshore wind farms, and have detailed that the HSE is one of a number of regulators and organisations that work together to ensure that employers maintain health and safety standards in this sector and protect their workers. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government continue to take health and safety on wind farms very seriously, and recognise the contribution made by this sector to energy security and the net zero programme. I hope that that goes some way to reassuring the hon. Gentleman that the current regulatory regime and framework in place is sufficiently robust to protect the health and safety of workers, but I appreciate—he has made some excellent points this evening—that it is a complex, growing and challenging picture. I offer to facilitate a meeting between him and HSE officials, along with other relevant Departments and officials, so that we can further reassure him, the sector, employers and those who work in it that his concerns are fully understood and addressed.

Question put and agreed to.

9.53 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 6 March 2023

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Prescription Charges: People Aged 60 or Over

[Relevant document: Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on prescription charges for people aged 60 or over, reported to the House on 27 February 2023, HC 73.]

4.30 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 594390, relating to prescription charges for people aged 60 or over.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Edward. The petition I am presenting touches on a number of incredibly important issues in healthcare from access to treatment to public health and preventative care, all within the context of how the NHS adapts to an ageing population. Although the petition focuses on prescription charges, it must be considered in the broader economic context of the cost of living crisis, with months of rising prices and inflation where even the most basic necessities are becoming luxury items for many.

The steady rise of pensioner poverty since 2015 shows no sign of stopping, continuing a trajectory that will see millions of us face a retirement dominated by debt and hardship. That context means we are duty-bound to look beyond figures on spreadsheets and examine what the proposed scrapping of free prescriptions for that age group would mean for those who would be impacted by it. It is those impacts that the petition creator Peter had in mind when he set it up.

When I spoke to Peter about why he started the petition, he shared his concern about the impact these changes would have not on him, but on his local community—the men and women who are already struggling with costs and are making difficult choices about what to prioritise. It is people like him who have spent a lifetime working in industry and those who, because of that work, now suffer from a variety of medical conditions, each needing different medications. It is those women, including his wife, who had their lives upended by the callous way the Government implemented the equalising of the state pension age. WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women, who were born in the 1950s and live in England, have further issues to deal with compared with those in devolved countries.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Uprating the age when prescriptions become free in England to be in line with the state pension age, as the Government consulted on, would be harmful given the cost of living crisis, as the hon. Lady said, and the growing economic activity in those over 50 for various reasons, including their health. Does she share my concern about what this could mean for ease of access to medical treatment for the older generation?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. It is, indeed, a huge concern that people with multiple health problems are facing extra difficulties in accessing prescriptions and are having to make those difficult choices about how they spend their money.

For Peter, it seems that something has gone incredibly wrong to get us to this point—something broader than this planned introduction of charges, but something encapsulated by it. It is the breaking of a promise—the promise between citizen and state and the promise that a lifetime of contribution, whether financial through tax and national insurance or through the unpaid labour of care that enables our economy to function, means support in retirement. Peter kept his part of the bargain. It was great to have a conversation with him. He could not believe that his petition was being debated in this place, and it is so important that his voice and the voices of others are heard in this place. He kept his part of the bargain, first in the shipyards on the Tyne and then working on aircraft. He paid in and did what was expected, as did hundreds of thousands of others, but the Government have not held up their end of the bargain. They have changed the rules, and it looks like they will do so again. That unfairness is the reason why we are discussing the matter today.

The plan to introduce charges seems particularly unfair when Peter does not even have to look that far from home to see a better way. England is the only nation in the United Kingdom without free prescriptions and, as colleagues may have guessed from my accent, I am Welsh. I have the great pleasure of representing Gower, one of the three Swansea constituencies, which is beautiful. If anyone ever wants to visit, please do.

Swansea and Newcastle have a lot in common: both are port cities with a proud industrial heritage; both are famous for an excellent night out. It seems the height of unfairness to many in Newcastle and across England that they alone in the United Kingdom pay for prescriptions. I am sure that the Government will tell us that several conditions are exempt and that pre-payment certificates cut costs, but, as I said earlier, we must look beyond the briefings to the reality of the system actually. The exemptions list is not only woefully out of date but, apart from the addition of cancer in 2009, it has not been reviewed since 1968. It also does not cover several life-changing conditions, such as Parkinson's, arthritis, asthma, Crohn's disease, cystic fibrosis, lupus or motor neurone disease.

That is the tip of the iceberg. People with those conditions, and other complex, lifelong conditions, still pay for their prescriptions. For those with multiple, co-existing conditions, the cost is even higher. Evidence from the Prescription Charges Coalition, a group of 50 organisations calling on the Government to scrap prescription charges for people with long-term conditions in England, shows that people with long-term conditions struggle to pay for their medication. A third of respondents in England with long-term conditions reported that they had not collected a prescription item due to the cost. Nearly a third admitted that they are skipping or reducing medication doses, with cost concerns a key factor for more than four out of 10. As a direct result of reducing or skipping medications, nearly three in five—59%—became more ill, and 34% needed to visit their GP or hospital. In fact, the Government's own impact assessment on the introduction of charges highlighted that issue and noted the potential effect on people's health.

In 2018, thousands of over-the-counter medicines were taken off the list of those that GPs are able to prescribe, leaving those with long-term conditions facing

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

additional costs for their conditions and to stay well. Those worrying health outcomes come with a cost to the NHS. Several member organisations of the PCC conducted research last year. They found that, of those surveyed, one in six of those with asthma and lung disease had cut back on using their potentially life-saving inhalers, as they were worried about the cost; 29% of respondents with cystic fibrosis reported that they had skipped their medication due to prescription charges; and one in five people with multiple sclerosis say that they do not have enough money to pay for the medication or treatment they need.

One lady who lives with kidney disease was hospitalised twice because she had to wait until payday to collect a prescription. In hospital, she had to have a lumbar puncture and an MRI scan, which cost the NHS thousands of pounds more than the prescription would have. As colleagues can see, the impact is vast and, when meeting campaigners prior to this debate, I heard far too many stories like that one. The lived reality of those impacted by this proposed change and the issues caused by the current dysfunctional exemptions system are best understood through that lens.

I work closely with Parkinson's UK, which is one of the many organisations deeply concerned by this proposal. Medication is the only way to control the symptoms of Parkinson's disease; most have to take a cocktail of medications to stay well. Research shows that Parkinson's cost households over £19,000 a year in 2021, due to loss of work; and additional health and social care costs. As Parkinson's progresses, it becomes more complex. Among people eligible to pay for prescriptions who are aged 60, in any year 5.5% will die within five years and 23.8% will need support to live independently—that is within only five years of being diagnosed. However, they would still have to pay for their essential medications for Parkinson's.

I want to tell the Chamber a little about Denise. She is 59 and was diagnosed with Parkinson's in April 2019. She has had to reduce her working hours from 37.5 to only 12 per week, due to her symptoms. She uses a prepayment certificate for her prescriptions, because it is cheaper than purchasing them individually. If the exemption age rises to 66, however, she will have to continue paying for them.

Denise told Parkinson's UK about the impact that that would have on her:

"I always thought I would work until I was 67, because I would be able to. However, as my Parkinson's advances I worry about whether I physically will be able to. My employer is really understanding, allowing flexibility to start later in the mornings until my medication has kicked in, but I have already had to reduce my hours by 60% and I'm already noticing the impact of this reduced earning capacity on our household.

I have to pay for my prescriptions, and this is eating into the diminishing amount I can contribute towards the household bills. If they were to increase the age at which I become exempt, it would be really tough because we haven't allowed for more years of these additional charges.

It feels like the Government is once again penalising those living with a long-term condition like Parkinson's that anyone could get and for which currently there is no cure."

Denise's story is not an isolated one. Parkinson's is not the only condition whose sufferers will be further disadvantaged by the change, but this is not a problem that will be solved by changing the exemption list. An

exemption list has winners and losers baked into its design, and the complexities of managing chronic conditions mean that any approach that is not universal is not fit for purpose.

Furthermore, the Government need to answer why the change is being prioritised now. What evidence is there that it will have any kind of positive impact? We cannot see one. Even if the Government make savings in the short term, the long-term impacts could be catastrophic, leading to greater illness and to more GP and hospital visits.

A poll published in *Pulse* found that 40% of GPs linked prescription charges to adverse patient outcomes, also indicating that those could lead to far greater costs and more adverse outcomes down the line. Initial results of the 2023 survey by the Prescription Charges Coalition showed that nearly 10% of respondents had not collected medicine due to cost. Of that group—I have more data—30.74% said that they now have other physical health problems, in addition to their original health condition; 30.33% said that they had to go to their GP; 17.32% said that they had to go into hospital for treatment; and 8.32% said that they had to go to A&E.

Research published in 2018 by York Health Economics Consortium highlighted how ending prescription charges for long-term conditions could save money and reduce pressure on the NHS. That comes from preventing avoidable health complications that occur when people do not take their medication. The research identified net savings of more than £20 million per year if the NHS scrapped prescription charges for people with Parkinson's and inflammatory bowel disease alone. Instead, the Government are discussing introducing additional charges. That flies in the face of common sense.

We know that the NHS is under pressure, but that is the case across the United Kingdom, and the devolved nations are not even discussing removing universal free prescriptions. I urge the Government to follow that lead, to look to the future and not to engage in short-termist, quick fixes that will not be a fix for all, and not for the petition creator.

4.44 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing such an important debate.

As a cancer pharmacist, chair of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group and somebody who still volunteers at a local hospital—I was there this morning—I have seen at first hand the difference that free access to medication makes to those over the age of 60. For years, I have treated patients whom the prescription proposals will make worse off. I know just how anxious they are at the prospect of having to fork out another monthly expense that they simply cannot afford. When the choice is between heating and eating, which is a day-to-day reality for thousands of people in my city, we cannot sit idly while health is incorporated into the mix. It should not have to be spelt out that, as people age, they will develop long-term healthcare needs, and those needs will need to be treated by prescription drugs.

Margaret Ferrier: Prescription charges have been described by pharmacies as attacks on the sick. As we have heard, pharmacies have reported a significant increase

in the number of patients not collecting their prescriptions because they simply cannot afford them. Does the hon. Member agree that that is worrying for all age groups, but especially for over-60s, who are more prone to sickness and to requiring that medical aid?

Taiwo Owatemi: I agree. Sadly, we look at the pharmacy shelves and see that many patients are not picking up their prescriptions, or patients come to the pharmacy counter, realise how much a prescription costs and that they cannot afford it because they have not financially planned for it. I will speak about that later in my speech.

The Government's impact assessment concluded that 52% of people between the ages of 60 and 64 will have at least one long-term health condition, so by aligning medical exemptions with the state pension age, the Government are hitting the people in my community who have the greatest need for medication but simply cannot afford it. What do the Government expect to happen when people in their 60s decide that they can no longer afford their prescriptions? If saving money is the Government's aim, I question whether they have considered the reality—that the proposals will simply shift the costs from primary to urgent care. Health conditions will inevitably worsen, and patients will be forced into overcrowded A&E units—adding to the already overwhelmed health service.

I support some of the points highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower regarding long-term health conditions, especially unchanging health conditions such as asthma, motor neurone disease and sickle cell anaemia. As she highlighted, the York Health Economics Consortium estimated that £20 million would be saved each year if the NHS scrapped prescription charges for people with Parkinson's and inflammatory bowel disease. That is because fewer people would be forced into A&E, which would mean fewer hospital admissions and fewer GP visits. If we want to save the NHS money and reduce the burden on the NHS, prevention is key, and medicines play an essential part in preventing patients' healthcare conditions from worsening and preventing patients from developing other health conditions. It is concerning that the Government can consider the proposals as a way of reducing the burden on the healthcare system. That is a hugely irresponsible decision for the Government even to consider making. It is essential that the Government engage in some form of cumulative impact assessment. People over the age of 60 with long-term conditions will be disproportionately affected.

My older constituents in Coventry North West are anxious and stressed. They tell me that they simply do not know how they will make ends meet at the end of each month, especially when they have to deal with soaring energy bills and food costs. They ask why the Government continue to attack elderly residents during the most severe cost of living crisis for a generation. I hope that the Government will answer that. I especially worry that making our ageing population pay for medication will leave huge numbers of people unable to afford essentials and force them into further hardship. I add my support for the Prescription Charges Coalition, which is calling for a freeze in prescription charges for 2023 and has said that the Government must scrap the alignment plans. I recognise that the Government are planning to support the proposals.

Every year, especially on 1 April, I find myself helping patients to fill out prepayment card applications or to navigate the increase in NHS charges, because many do not even realise that those changes are coming. I therefore first ask the Government to notify patients of the increase way before 1 April so that they are able to financially plan; otherwise, the increase may mean that many do not have access to their medication when they need it. Secondly, will the Government review the long-term exemption list for patients with medical conditions that, due to their nature, we know will not change?

I want to make a final important point. Older people have contributed to our society their whole lives, and they have trusted that if they work hard and pay their taxes, they will be looked after. That is the deal we make with them, and it is what they expect from us when they get older. The Government's proposal will break that trust. We cannot afford to abandon older people now simply because the Government have decided that this is the best way forward. Doing so will impact trust in the long term.

Lastly, will the Minister, who is responsible for primary care, come to the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group meeting from 1 pm until 3 pm on 29 March in Room S, Portcullis House, and speak to pharmacists? We would like to continue the debate and to talk about the current pressures facing pharmacy as a whole.

It has been a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I look forward to hearing from other colleagues.

4.51 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank all the previous speakers; some of what I say will be a repetition, but in this case I do not think repetition is unwelcome.

Under the SNP Scottish Government, prescription charges were abolished in Scotland in 2011. Scotland gets free prescriptions because the Scottish Government believe that mitigating the costs of illness is in the best interests of the population of Scotland. The SNP has led the way in delivering progressive and forward-thinking public health measures, which people across Scotland continue to benefit from. I speak from experience, as I was honoured to be part of the call for the new generation of cystic fibrosis medications to be released in Scotland, which was first place to get them. I declare an interest, because my granddaughter Saoirse will continue to benefit from those new drugs for the rest of her life, and they will extend her life expectancy quite considerably.

All credit to the Scottish Government: inhalers, antibiotics, life-saving medicines such as insulin for diabetes and many other treatments are provided at no cost at all to the patient at any stage. Scotland receives no extra funding for this decision and does not take money from other areas of the United Kingdom to pay for it. England is out of step with the rest of the UK. For more than a decade, NHS prescriptions have been free in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Yet the Tories, who have been in power in England for 13 years, have not replicated this approach, instead penalising those wishing to collect medicines; and, as we have already heard, the cost of living crisis has increased the non-collection of prescriptions.

[*Marion Fellows*]

When the NHS was founded in 1948, there were no prescription charges, but fees were introduced in the early '50s to help with funding. Labour's position in 2019 was to roll back charges for England—that appears to have been dropped under the present leadership. Unequivocally, the SNP has used the powers we have to ensure that people in Scotland benefit from the most generous social contract in the UK. The cost of NHS prescriptions can be mitigated in England if people use a prescription season ticket—a prepayment card. However, many people in England are still unaware of the system. Is the Minister prepared to advertise it more than is currently the case?

I used the example of cystic fibrosis medication, but the hon. Member for Gower has done really good work in the area of hormone replacement therapy over the years. After the arguments she has forcefully put in this place, it is incredible that women going through the menopause still have to pay for their HRT. The most recent announcement committed the Government to reduce the cost from April this year so that women can receive a year's supply of HRT for the cost of two single NHS prescriptions in England, but in the rest of the UK they get it free. Although cost reductions are welcome, charging menopausal women less seems inadequate—they should get it free because the amount of work they can then do will increase, and that is a benefit to the whole economy.

People who have asthma are sometimes afraid to collect their prescriptions, as we heard from the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). A small survey of pharmacists published by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society last month found that a rising number of patients in England are failing to collect their medicines, because they cannot afford them. Some 51% of the pharmacists surveyed reported an increase in patients not collecting their medication, and 67% saw a rise in patients asking whether there was a cheaper over-the-counter substitute for the medicine they had been prescribed. That is appalling in this day and age, and it leads to more hospital admissions and more expensive care being required in the longer term. It defies common sense to allow that to continue.

The three devolved Governments have taken a preventive approach to mitigate poorer health outcomes by providing free access to medicines for those who need them. In England, the tax on sickness reduces access to medicines and leads to poorer health, time off work and potential hospital admissions, offsetting any costs gained from prescription charges. The UK Government should scrap prescription charges. To introduce them for people who are working until 67 is absurd. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said, we are more likely to need medication as we get older.

The Government's public consultation document ominously states:

"Anyone aged 60 and older can get free prescriptions for medicine. We are thinking about changing this."

The change would mean that prescriptions would be free only when people get to pension age. Today's pensioners have no need to worry, but they will worry—people worry even more during a cost of living crisis.

Is the Minister prepared to heed what is happening in the devolved nations and to equalise access to medicine across the United Kingdom?

4.59 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I want to start by thanking the Petitions Committee for facilitating this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for the passionate way in which she put forward the arguments of Peter, Denise and many others who find themselves in the predicament of having to pay for prescriptions or who worry that they might have to pay for them as pensioners.

It is a pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of the shadow Health and Social Care team, but also as the Member of Parliament for Denton and Reddish, and I know that many of my constituents are concerned about this potential policy change. As we have heard, we are in the middle of a cost of living crisis, when many people face unsustainable rises in their energy and household bills. It is little surprise that the Government's decision to consult on scrapping free NHS prescriptions for the over-60s will be of profound concern to many people already struggling to make ends meet. That anxiety has been compounded by characteristic delay from the Department of Health and Social Care.

The Government first announced the consultation to scrap free NHS prescriptions for the over-60s in July 2021, meaning that there was little or no time for Members of this House to sufficiently scrutinise the proposals before that year's summer recess. The consultation closed in September 2021 and, two and a half years on, we are still none the wiser about where the Government are on the issue.

A quick glance at written parliamentary questions shows that many Members from across the House have asked the Government for clarity, only to receive a boilerplate response that an announcement would be made "in due course". In his response, will the Minister set out precisely when that announcement will be made and why there has been such a delay in the Government addressing their own consultation?

That is important, because the Government's own impact assessment raises several potential problems with the proposals. Notably,

"some people towards the lower end of the income distribution may struggle to afford all their prescriptions",

which can result in

"future health problems for the individual and a subsequent cost to the NHS."

That is precisely the point made in their interventions by my hon. Friends the Members for Gower and for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who is not in her place. Therefore, if the Government do decide to opt for this policy, we need to know what steps they will take to support people—especially those over 60 and with long-term conditions—with their prescription fees.

Prescription charges have already increased by 30% since 2010 and, given the financial context we are in, there are really valid concerns about people being priced out of accessing vital medicines. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society recently conducted a survey of 269 pharmacies,

with half of respondents saying that patients were asking them which medicines they could do without. Half of pharmacies surveyed also said that they have seen a rise in people not collecting their prescriptions at all. That is incredibly concerning.

Last year, Asthma & Lung UK found that 15% of surveyed people with respiratory conditions were rationing the use of their inhalers to make them last longer. Some 5% of people said they were being forced to borrow medicine from others, which really frightens me, because someone's prescription is pertinent to them and them alone. I had hoped that we had moved away from a world where we lend medicines to others. Frankly, these statistics should be ringing alarm bells in the Department of Health and Social Care and, for that matter, in the Department for Work and Pensions, but unfortunately we have had radio silence.

I would like to impress on the Minister the simple fact that if people are not taking vital medication, they could be living in extreme pain, and in some cases they will be at risk of serious medical complications as well. Have the Minister and his officials made any assessment of the number of people in England who are currently unable to afford medicine, and of the knock-on impact on NHS services, which are already at breaking point thanks to this Government's mismanagement of the NHS?

Last year, the Government froze prescription charges in a move that was welcome to many in England. The next review is due to take effect in April, and I am sure I do not need to remind the Minister that that will come at the same time as the implementation of Ofgem's new energy price cap. Will the Minister provide an update on that review? Does he anticipate another rise in the cost of prescription charges, or will the Government do the right thing and freeze them again, for another year?

While he is at it, perhaps the Minister will also nudge his colleagues in the Treasury to do the decent thing and implement a proper windfall tax on energy and gas giants to extend energy support, so that those on the lowest incomes are protected against astronomical price rises. In the 21st century, here in the United Kingdom, no one should be forced to choose between accessing vital medication, heating their home or feeding their family.

The final point I wish to make is connected to this issue. The Government seem to have no vision or appetite to prioritise preventive public health. In the context of an ageing population, it is important that we build healthier communities. That is important not only morally, but practically, especially if we want to reduce reliance on prescriptions and primary care. What steps is the Minister taking to prioritise preventive health? On that note, will he set out why the public health grant allocation has still not been announced for local authorities in England? Many local authorities that have already set their budgets still do not know what their public health grant allocations will be in three and a half weeks' time.

The next Labour Government will give the NHS the tools, staff and technology it needs to treat patients on time and to put prevention right at the heart of everything it does. Coming back to the issue before the Chamber, I really hope that the Government understand the concern, worry and anxiety of those over 60 in England, who are concerned that their free prescriptions may come to an end.

I want to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who was here at the start of proceedings. As a member of the shadow Cabinet, he cannot take part in these deliberations, but he wanted me to highlight some of the work he has done in his constituency. He and his local team collected signatures against the proposed scrapping of free prescriptions for the over-60s. His story can be told 650 times over to the Minister, because there are elderly people across England who are concerned about this issue and who want answers from Ministers. They want their concerns to be heeded, they want assurances that the Government get the reason why prescriptions are free for the over-60s and they want the Government to understand why it is important that that remains the case. They also want to know that the Government are on their side on this issue, that their free prescriptions are not at risk and that we will not face people who cannot afford their medication with the dilemma of whether to heat their homes, feed their families or get the medication they so desperately need. Britain is better than that, and I hope the Minister has some positive news for us.

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for opening the debate so effectively on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and I thank all Members for their constructive contributions. I also thank the 46,000 members of the public who signed the petition.

The Government provided their initial response to the petition in January 2022, and I am pleased to be able to respond again today, having listened to hon. Members' important and interesting contributions. The context, of course, is the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the high energy prices, inflation and cost of living pressures that it has unleashed. It is worth situating the debate in the context of some of the things we are doing to take action on that, some of which hon. Members have already referred to.

This winter, we are spending a total of £55 billion to help households and businesses with their energy bills—one of the largest support packages in Europe. A typical household will save about £900 this winter through the energy price guarantee, in addition to £400 through the energy bills support scheme. We are also spending £9.3 billion over the next five years on energy efficiency and clean heat, making homes cheaper to heat. Some of that is being paid for by the windfall tax; at 75%, it is one of the highest in any of the countries around the North sea, and it is enabling us to do more on the cost of living, such as the £900 cost of living payment for 8 million poorer households, and the largest ever increase to the national living wage, which will help 2 million workers. In total, we are spending £26 billion on cost of living support next year.

Turning specifically to prescription exemptions, I should start by trying to manage expectations about what I can say today, for reasons on which I will elaborate. It is clear that the outcome of the consultation on aligning the upper age exemption for prescription charges with the state pension age is very important to many Members' constituents. However, I can only say at this point that no decision has been made yet to bring proposals forward.

[Neil O'Brien]

We received over 170,000 responses to the consultation—a testament to the strength of feeling on the issue. We want to ensure that everyone across the country, especially those affected by the cost of living pressures caused by the Russian invasion, can afford their prescriptions. That is why we have thought long and hard about how best to balance the needs of those in the affected age group, many of whom will find that they have additional health needs compared with when they were younger, with the pressures facing the public finances. I can, however, assure Members that we will respond to the consultation in due course.

Hon. Members will be aware that the petition calls on the Government to protect free NHS prescriptions for all over-60s. We value our older members of society, and we recognise their social care and health needs. On the one hand, we recognise that families up and down the country are facing unprecedented pressures with the cost of living; on the other, we have to recognise that in the light of the covid pandemic, which has tested the NHS like never before, and the challenging economic landscape, we must ensure that public sector spending represents the best value for money for the taxpayer. As we look to the future in a post-pandemic world, there is no shortage of challenges ahead of us: an ageing population, an increasing number of people with multiple health conditions, and deep-rooted inequalities in health outcomes, which we are tackling. That is all in addition to the challenges of the pandemic and the elective backlog.

Charges have been around in the NHS for over 70 years, and prescription charges provide a valuable source of income for the NHS, contributing £652 million in 2021-22. That significant funding helps to maintain vital services for patients, and it is particularly important given the increasing demands on the NHS.

It is for those reasons that we consulted on aligning the upper age exemption for prescription charges with the state pension age. Historically, the initial exemption for prescriptions was for people aged 65 and over. The exemption was then extended to women aged 60 and over in 1974, and to men aged 60 or over in 1995, based on the state pension age for women at that time. The state pension age has subsequently increased to 66 for both men and women, with legislation already in place to increase it to 67, and then 68, in future years.

The Government have abolished the default retirement age, meaning that most people can continue to work for as long as they want and are able to. That means that many people in the 60 to 65 age range can remain in employment and be economically active, and therefore more able to meet the cost of their prescriptions. Indeed, more than half of people aged between 60 and 65 are economically active, with a further 20% receiving a private pension or some other income.

As increasing numbers of people live longer, work longer and so on, there are more people claiming free prescriptions on the basis of their age. It is projected that by 2066 there will be a further 8.6 million UK residents aged 65 and over, and that they will make up about a quarter of the total population.

It is important to know that over 1.1 billion prescription items are dispensed in the community each year, with nine out of 10 currently dispensed free of charge. The exemptions that allow that may be based on the patient's

age, certain medical conditions, or income. We estimate that if we were to make the proposed change, around 85% of 60 to 65-year-olds would be minimally affected by it. As I have just noted, more than half of them are in employment, with about another 20% retired with a private pension, so they have a higher income, while others would continue to qualify for free prescriptions on the basis of their particular conditions.

It is also worth noting that there are extensive arrangements in place to help those who are most in need of support with prescription charges. People who are on a low income but do not qualify on the basis of an automatic exemption, such as being on universal credit, can get help through the NHS low income scheme, which provides either full or partial help with health costs on an income-related basis. Anyone can apply for the scheme if they or their partner, or they jointly as a couple, do not have savings, investments or property totalling more than £16,000, not including the place where they live. A person will qualify for full help with their health costs, including free NHS prescriptions, if their income is less than or equal to their requirements.

To support those who do not qualify for an exemption due to one of the many other reasons, such as their age or their condition, or for the NHS low income scheme, prepayment prescription certificates, which were mentioned earlier in the debate, are available to help those who need frequent prescriptions to reduce the cost. The prescription charge is currently £9.35; a three-month PPC is £30.25; and a 12-month certificate is £180.10, which amounts to just over £2 a week. PPCs can offer significant savings, and an annual PPC can be paid for in 10 direct debit payments, to allow people to spread the cost over the year.

Andrew Gwynne: I am a little concerned about the tone of what the Minister is communicating. He seems to be accepting that there will be a change on prescriptions for pensioners, but does he acknowledge the challenge with pension credit, whereby a large number of pensioners who are eligible for it do not apply for it, because they are fearful of the means test? What will he do to ensure that that does not happen when it comes to prescriptions?

Neil O'Brien: Perhaps I can set the hon. Member's mind at ease. I said earlier that no decision had been made, and I reiterate that now. I have talked about the different measures that cause people either to be exempt from charges or to have the cost of their prescriptions cut, and I talked about PPCs as a final step, which can reduce the cost of prescriptions for those who do pay them.

It has been mentioned several times that prescription charges have been abolished entirely in the devolved Administrations. Health is of course a devolved matter, but it is worth noting that spending is £1.25 in Scotland and £1.20 in Wales for every £1 in England, so there is that additional budget. Those devolved Administrations, with the record increases in their spending settlements, have full discretion about how they choose to spend those budgets.

Several hon. Members asked me quite specific questions about the outcome of the consultation. I can only reiterate that we continue to consider, long and hard, the many responses that we received, trying to balance the cost of living pressures with the need for increasing

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funding for the NHS, and we will respond to the petition in due course. I thank hon. Members for their contributions today.

5.19 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank Members for participating in the debate and the Minister for his response. I am sure that the people I have met will not be reassured by that response, but it is difficult, with no decision having been made about the reduction in prescription charges. That needs to be done, and the Minister needs to confirm it.

I feel for the many unpaid carers—mostly women—who look after children or partners, given of the impact of this situation on them. People see that as unfair, and the system is not perfect, so we hope that change will come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 594390, relating to prescription charges for people aged 60 or over.

5.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 6 March 2023

HOME DEPARTMENT

Alcohol Licensing

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government are today launching a consultation on alcohol licensing regulatory easements. Our objective is to support businesses as they deal with ongoing economic and financial challenges and the effects of the pandemic, cutting red tape while making sure that local authorities can recover their costs without an additional burden on central Government finances.

The Licensing Act 2003 allows premises licence holders to sell alcohol for consumption on site, off site or both. The holder of an on-sales licence can apply to their licensing authority for a variation if they wish to add off-sales to their licence. Provisions in the Business and Planning Act 2020 enabled on-sales premises licence holders to automatically also do off-sales, without any need to amend their licence.

The Licensing Act 2003 also allows licensable activities to be carried out on a one-off basis without the need for a premises licence or any other authorisation, by means of a temporary event notice. Provisions in the Business and Planning Act 2020 temporarily increased the annual number of temporary event notices that a licensed premise user can have in respect of a premises from 15 to 20.

We are consulting to understand whether there is support for making the regulatory easements permanent, in some form, or whether to return to the provisions in the Licensing Act. We will at the same time carry out a survey of local authorities so that we can better understand their actual costs for processing and enforcing licensing legislation.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and the Government will publish their response in early summer 2023. We intend to make any changes related to the consultation as soon as parliamentary time allows thereafter. A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS601]

Coronation: Extended Licensing Hours

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government have consulted on, and will be proceeding with, the proposal to make a licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 to relax licensing hours in England and Wales to mark His Majesty the King's coronation. The order is intended to enable people in England and Wales properly to celebrate the constitutional, historic, and momentous significance of the coronation of the King and the beginning of his reign.

The order will apply to premises already licensed until 11 pm for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises, for the provision of late-night refreshment—only where there is also the sale of alcohol for consumption

on the premises, and for the provision of regulated entertainment in England and Wales. The order will extend the licensing hours for such premises from 11 pm to 1 am the following day, on Friday 5 May, Saturday 6 May and Sunday 7 May.

An economic assessment is being prepared and will be published alongside the order on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS602]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Science and Technology Update

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): February marked a watershed moment for science, innovation and technology in the United Kingdom. For the first time in our history, we created a Government Department that concentrates our best minds around a single mission: making Britain a science and technology superpower—one that uses discovery and innovation to solve the problems that are priorities for the British people.

Our vision for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology starts from an extraordinary position. This is a nation that last year joined only China and the United States by having a tech sector worth \$1 trillion. We beat China, Japan, Korea, France and Germany in the global innovation index—and attracted more tech investment than the latter two combined. On average, our universities have produced a Nobel prize winner every year for the last two decades, and four of our universities make up the global top 10.

We have an incredibly unique and powerful platform from which to grow and innovate for the benefit of the British people, which is why I plan to take a ruthlessly outcome-focused approach to this new Department—ensuring that, in both the short term and the long term, our work is improving people's daily lives in ways they can feel and see around them.

This Government's vision for the future is an NHS that uses artificial intelligence to find, treat and reduce illnesses such as cancer and heart disease so that we have more time with our loved ones. We should have local transport services that allow us to travel faster, safer and cleaner than our parents did. The schools of the future should be powered by the kind of technology that unlocks hidden talents in every child no matter where they live. As the "Department for the future", our focus will be on how we can use science, technology and innovation to ensure that the British people live longer, safer, healthier and happier lives.

Such an important goal requires immediate action, which is why my first few weeks as Tech Secretary have been focused relentlessly on action and delivery. I see this as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to send a clear signal around the world that Britain plans to lead the way in science, innovation and technology.

Today I have published "The UK Science and Technology Framework", which sets out the Government's goals and vision for science and technology in an enduring framework that will see us through to 2030. It has been developed in close collaboration with the UK science

and technology sector, and represents a commitment to scaling our ambition and delivering the most critical actions needed to secure strategic advantage through science and technology.

The science and technology framework is the strategic anchor that Government policy will deliver against, and which the Government will hold ourselves accountable to. We will have a clear action plan for each strand of the framework in place by summer 2023 and delivery will be overseen by the National Science and Technology Council.

Immediate investments to get us started delivering against the framework will include:

£250 million for technology missions in AI, quantum and engineering biology. This is part of our commitment to the five key technologies found in the science and technology framework, which also includes semiconductors and telecoms.

A £50 million uplift for UK Research and Innovation's world-class laboratories fund. This will help research institutes and universities get on with the cutting-edge scientific research that saves lives, supports our economy and society, and protects our planet.

The Government are investing in the most powerful form of computing, the formidable "exascale", which has the ability to solve massive societal issues such as energy sustainability and support thousands of businesses. This is complemented by a new dedicated public compute programme for AI research of scientific importance.

We are providing £10 million in the UK innovation and science seed fund—UKI2S—an early-stage venture fund providing patient capital and support for businesses emerging from the UK's publicly funded science and knowledge base.

Further still, we are investing in a research data cloud pilot, to enable us to help ensure that our researchers can access the information they need to develop the transformative technologies of the future. The pilot will test methods for improving data sharing for research, and harnessing its value for science and innovation.

This is also a Government that are looking for opportunities to test different models of funding science, to support a range of innovative institutional models, such as focused research organisations, known as FROs, working with industry and philanthropic partners to open up new funding for UK research. For example, we are working with a range of partners to increase investment in the world-leading UK Biobank, to support the continued revolution in genetic science.

On top of this, the Government are investing up to £50 million to spur co-investment in science from the private sector and philanthropy to drive the discoveries of the future, subject to business case approval. We are delighted to confirm that we are already talking to Schmidt Futures, a philanthropic initiative of Eric and Wendy Schmidt, about additional support of up to \$20 million.

I am also delighted to announce the return of PsiQuantum to the UK. Supported by £9 million in Government funding, PsiQuantum's decision to establish a quantum computing research centre in Daresbury in the north-west marks a vote of confidence in the global competitiveness of the UK's quantum sector, built up over the years of Government investment, and a vital boost to the regional economy.

These are just some examples of what will be a constant drumbeat of delivery and action from my Department. However, this will also be a Department that understands the importance of forward, strategic planning for achieving enormous goals, such as gaining superpower status. That is why we have published, or are very shortly publishing, responses to key reviews that will help to inform our work. These include:

Publishing Sir Paul Nurse's landscape review of research, development and innovation. This sets out how our R&D organisations can work together to drive discoveries and innovations that will improve the lives of the British people.

Publishing the "Independent Review of The Future of Compute", led by world-leading AI expert Professor Zoubin Ghahramani. Our response will ensure that we harness the power of compute to boost economic growth and address society's greatest challenges. We are announcing today that we will be implementing two of the most important recommendations with immediate effect and Government will respond to the remaining recommendations in due course.

And the Government have just published our consultation response on cyber-physical infrastructure—CPI. This response outlines our plan to put Britain right at the forefront of the increasing convergence of the physical and digital worlds, helping our researchers and entrepreneurs to solve real-world problems in everything from transforming our energy systems to enabling sectors from agriculture to manufacturing to be more efficient and innovative, securing sustainable growth in these sectors.

These will form the basis of clear, decisive and forward-thinking plans that will be coming out of my Department, underpinned by our science and technology framework, which sets out our clear strategic approach in a 10-point plan. These points can be summarised as: identifying critical technologies; signalling the UK's strengths and ambitions; investing in research and development; creating a pipeline of talent and skills; financing innovative science and technology businesses; using procurement to drive innovation; seizing international opportunities; improving access to physical and digital infrastructure; pursuing innovative, regulation and influencing global standards; and making the public sector more innovative. The Chancellor recommitted in his autumn statement to the largest ever increase in public R&D funding over a spending review period, with annual spend rising to £20 billion by 2024-25. This significant underpinning investment will be geared towards delivering the framework.

Of course, forming a key part of that framework and sitting at the heart of my new Department will be people and skills. Britain is home to some of the best scientists in the world, but this is no reason to be complacent; if we want to carry on punching above our weight in an increasingly competitive world, we must do more to secure better jobs for British people and attract international talent. That means making Britain the best place in the world to carry out cutting-edge scientific research, or to start and grow a technology business.

Take artificial intelligence. We are focusing on training more specialists, proactively attracting them from around the world and ensuring that they have the resources and equipment to innovate. We are investing an additional £117 million distributed by UKRI for centres for doctoral training, which will double the number of AI researchers we are training and comes on top of the existing commitments we made in the AI sector deal and continued in the national AI strategy, including the initial £100 million

in the AI centres for doctoral training, £46 million in Turing AI fellowships, and up to £30 million AI and data science conversion course scholarship programme, all of which will help us develop the best and brightest right here in the UK.

AI can speed up the discovery and development of life-saving drugs, and help us to monitor air pollution in our communities and find new ways to cut it. That is why the Government have today tasked our trade commissioners, ambassadors and the wider global talent network with finding the next generation of AI leaders from around the world, showcasing our fantastic offer, and matching them to specific opportunities. We will find and attract talented people before they have won a Nobel Prize or created the next unicorn and help them to achieve those goals in the UK. We will also be delighted to welcome exceptional young people to the UK in July, as part of the global RISE programme, an initiative of Schmidt Futures and the Rhodes Trust.

I am also cognisant of the fact that Horizon and the UK's position on it is an important issue to get right. Colleagues from across the House have raised it with me and I am grateful for the engagement so far. Our research community needs to see that the Government understand their need for stability, clarity and confidence. That is why I am announcing a further extension of the Horizon Europe guarantee to protect thousands of researchers from uncertainty.

This extension will support eligible, successful applicants, covering calls that will close on or before 30 June 2023. It will ensure that eligible, successful UK applicants will continue to be guaranteed funding and will receive the full value of their funding at their UK host institution for the lifetime of their grant, supporting them to

continue their important work in research and innovation. Successful awardees do not need to leave the UK to receive this funding.

Our position has always been one of openness to discussions on research and innovation collaboration and that very much continues to be our position. We welcome the EU's recent openness to discussions, following two years of delays. The EU has not yet made any proposals to address the financial terms of UK association, given that we are now over two years into a seven-year programme. We continue to be ready to work swiftly and constructively together on a range of issues including UK association.

Finally, I want to extend an invitation to Members across the House. With the agenda being set, immediate actions already being announced and a commitment to delivery, there is one final important element that will help ensure that these ambitious goals are achieved: your input and support.

My approach will be guided and shaped by an open-door policy, where I invite colleagues to raise issues, concerns and ideas with me at any time. Government achieve at their best when we collaborate and give everyone a voice in setting the priorities and plans for the future of our country. I look forward to working with you closely to deliver life-changing results for your constituents and for the future of the United Kingdom.

I will deposit a copy of "The UK Science and Technology Framework", the "Independent Review of the UK's Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape", the "Independent Review of the Future of Compute" and the "Cyber-Physical Infrastructure Consultation Response" in the Library of the House.

[HCWS603]

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