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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 2 May 2023

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. RISHI SUNAK, MP, OCTOBER 2022)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD 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 732

NINETEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Tuesday 2 May 2023

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the King has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees) Act 2023

Ballot Secrecy Act 2023

Employment (Allocation of Tips) Act 2023

Pensions Dashboards (Prohibition of Indemnification) Act 2023

Public Order Act 2023.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Horizon Europe

1. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on association to the EU's Horizon Europe programme.

[904711]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

We are in discussions with the EU on the UK's involvement in EU research programmes. We are doing this in good faith, and we hope that the discussions will be successful. We are determined to secure a fair deal for researchers, businesses and taxpayers.

Martyn Day: Owen Jackson, the director of policy at Cancer Research UK, has said that Pioneer, the Government's proposed replacement for the EU's science programme, does not "match up" to association to Horizon Europe. He has warned that if we do not rejoin, we

"will be at the margins, rather than at the centre, of these important opportunities"

to win funding. Now that the Windsor framework is in place, will the Minister update the House on recent meetings between the UK Government and the European Commissioner responsible for Horizon Europe?

Leo Docherty: We have always been at the centre of scientific innovation. I will not give the House a running commentary on the negotiations, but we do have optimism. We are confident that we will be able to secure that fair deal for researchers, businesses and taxpayers, with the kind of important research that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Britain's outstanding contribution to Arctic and, indeed, Antarctic science has been greatly aided over the years by Horizon Europe. Can the Minister reassure me that our huge contribution to the High North will be replicated, and soon, and can he tell me when the negotiations will finally end?

Leo Docherty: I can assure my hon. Friend that the High North will be at the centre of all our scientific work, and I acknowledge and praise his important role in that region.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Thousands of jobs in some of our key technological and scientific research institutions throughout the UK are now at risk. We are leaching talent and competitive advantage, and the Government have been dragging their heels. The Minister says that negotiations are ongoing. How long will those key institutions have to wait for an answer—days, months, or yet more years?

Leo Docherty: As I have said, I am not going to give a running commentary, but we are negotiating in good faith, we have optimism, and we are determined to secure a fair deal that recognises the researchers whom the hon. Gentleman has described. We are expectant that the negotiation will conclude in good order.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I am puzzled by the UK Government's approach. There is cross-party unity in the House, and the Minister is missing an opportunity for a great deal of support. We all want to see our universities back in Horizon Europe, and we all want to see the thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of pounds guaranteed. Just a couple of weeks ago, Professor Iain Gillespie of the University of Dundee was in Brussels drawing attention to the £900 million that Scotland's universities secured from the last funding programme. There is a willingness in Brussels, and there is a willingness in Scotland; when will the UK Government match that ambition?

Leo Docherty: We are willing, and we are negotiating in good faith. Scotland's scientific future will, of course, be a part of that, which is another reminder of why Scotland is better, and will flourish, within the Union.

Israel and Palestine

2. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine.

[904712]

4. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with his Israeli counterpart on the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

[904714]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Our strong bilateral relationship with Israel means that we can speak frankly with the Israelis, and whenever I do so I encourage them to ensure that security operations are carried out proportionately and in accordance with international law. I call on all parties to find opportunities to de-escalate tension. On 7 April, I condemned the indiscriminate rocket attacks directed at Israel, and I also condemned the horrific murder of Lucy, Maia and Rina Dee by a terrorist. My deepest condolences go to Rabbi Leo Dee and his family. The UK remains committed to a two-state solution, and we consistently engage with Israel and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority to support that goal.

Alex Davies-Jones: I share the sentiments of the Foreign Secretary, but last year was the deadliest year for violence in the west bank since 2005 and the cycle of violence continues. There are some trailblazing organisations working in the region using cutting-edge science and artificial intelligence technology to encourage peace and an end to the bloodshed. What recent conversations have Ministers or the Secretary of State had with their colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology about the value of those collaborative projects and their impact on a two-state solution?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Lady for the points she has put forward. I will endeavour to speak with the Secretary of State or Ministers in that Department. We will constantly explore opportunities to enhance peace and strive towards a sustainable two-state solution, whether through the most traditional people-to-people approach or through the use of AI. Whatever it takes, we are willing to consider it.

Tommy Sheppard: The Foreign Secretary mentioned the two-state solution. Now that it is the policy of the Israeli Government not to pursue a two-state solution, can he explain how the discussions on trade with Israel will be used to pursue that policy objective and to uphold human rights and international law in the occupied territories?

James Cleverly: The UK enjoys a trade relationship with Israel; indeed, we have a trade agreement with the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well. We will always put human rights and the pursuit of peace at the heart of our foreign policy when it comes to Israel and the OPTs. We will continue to hold our position on the desirability of a two-state solution and we will continue, in our interactions with the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, to pursue that aim.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the Abraham accords are a huge breakthrough in diplomatic dialogue in the region, that they are a force for good and that they are creating conversations between people who previously did not speak and join together around the same table? Is it not the case that the Palestinian leadership should recognise that the region is changing and that they need to get on board and work with their friends, allies and partners in the region to try to understand the differences of opinion across the region?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point about the changing dynamic in the region. I am very pleased that the Abraham accords were signed. More than being just a single point in time, the accords have unlocked a series of dialogues between countries in the Arab world and Israel. They have also formalised relationships that perhaps would have been informal up until this point, and they are a fantastic stepping-stone towards wider regional security and that peaceful, sustainable two-state solution.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Aside from the violent incidents that my right hon. Friend has referred to, does he agree that the fact that more than 1 million worshippers were able to visit the Temple Mount during Ramadan and that the month of April

saw the great festivals of Easter, Passover and Ramadan being celebrated so freely throughout Israel marks Israel out as a remarkable example of religious freedom and tolerance in the middle east?

James Cleverly: On my visit to Israel, I saw people of all religions living their lives freely there, and that is to be commended. Through this rare period when the three great religions celebrate these significant events at the same time of the year—I think these festivals converge once every 33 years—I had extensive conversations with the Israeli leadership, the Palestinian leadership and leadership in the region. I am pleased that opportunities were taken to de-escalate and to support religious freedom. That will always be something that we champion in our relationships.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Last week, the British Consulate General in Jerusalem, joined by other European missions, visited Jubbet ahd-Dhib school near Bethlehem, which along with 58 other schools in the west bank and Jerusalem is at risk of demolition, and implored the Israeli Government to “reverse the demolition order and protect the right to education for all.”

Considering the possibility of violence occurring as a result of such demolitions and the impact of demolishing schools on children in the west bank and East Jerusalem, will the Secretary of State join the calls to demand that Israel reverse these demolition orders? Can he also tell me what steps he is taking to protect the viability of a two-state solution?

James Cleverly: As I said in answer to an earlier question, one of the advantages of the strong bilateral relationship that we have with Israel is that we are able to speak regularly about such sensitive issues. Israel knows the UK’s long-standing position on settlements, evictions and demolitions, which is clear: they are illegal under international law and they limit the chances of success of a two-state solution. We raise that directly with Israel, and Israel listens when we do.

Iran: Human Rights Abuses

3. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help tackle human rights abuses in Iran. [904713]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Human rights issues in Iran remain at the heart of the UK’s strategy towards Iran. We raise violations at all appropriate opportunities, as well as via our embassy and directly with the Iranians here in London. In response to the regime’s most recent crackdown on protests, we have announced more than 70 new sanctions, and we continue to work with our partners to hold Iran accountable at the UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly.

Nicola Richards: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is responsible for grotesque human rights abuses, with reports of 582 executions last year and chemical attacks against 90 girls’ schools in recent months. Vahid Beheshti is on his 69th day of hunger strike and was

recently supported by 125 cross-party parliamentarians in his campaign to proscribe the IRGC. Does the Foreign Secretary acknowledge the sense of urgency that so many parliamentarians have about the IRGC’s proscription, which would improve and protect lives both in Iran and here in Britain?

James Cleverly: Mr Beheshti has met ministerial colleagues in both the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I worry about his health and would urge him to stop his hunger strike. We have responded to Iran’s completely unacceptable behaviour by sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety and certain of its leaders specifically. We will always take action that we believe to be in the best interests of the safety of British nationals at home and abroad, and of course we always keep options available and under review.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Professor Javaid Rehman, the UN special rapporteur, recently published his report on the human rights abuses in Iran. There are no surprises in it. We know that what is happening in Iran is atrocious, but we also know that the Iranian regime is doing pretty similar stuff right across the world, including here in the United Kingdom, where it is using the IRGC to bear down on people who condemn Iran in this country. Why will the Government not do what people on both sides of the Chamber want and proscribe the revolutionary guards? That is needed now.

James Cleverly: As I say, we do not discuss or speculate about future proscriptions. I remind the House that the IRGC is sanctioned in its entirety, as are certain individuals within its leadership. The FCDO of course works closely with the Home Office, which is the Department responsible for such decisions. Any decision of this nature will inevitably be cross-governmental. We always keep our options under review, and we will always take the action that we believe to be in the best interests of the safety of British nationals at home and abroad and in pursuit of our wider objective, which is to put pressure on Iran to improve its human rights record.

Erasmus and Erasmus Plus

5. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on association to the EU’s Erasmus and Erasmus Plus programmes. [904716]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): We fully recognise the benefits of international educational opportunities, but we have decided that it is not in the UK’s interest to seek continuing participation in the Erasmus or Erasmus Plus programmes. Of course, we have our own scheme, the Turing scheme, which supports global access to education and had more than 41,000 participants in the last academic year.

Richard Thomson: There is a real willingness across the House and the European Union for the UK once again to participate in Erasmus and Erasmus Plus, so that answer is incredibly disappointing. If the Minister genuinely believes that we are better together, surely our

academic and scientific communities would be even better together if we were back exactly where we belong: at the heart of those hugely beneficial European programmes.

Leo Docherty: Many students are, of course, still going to receive an education in Europe. The Erasmus programme was financially unbalanced on our side, and the advantage of the Turing scheme is that these opportunities are now global.

Chagos Islands: Sovereignty

6. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in Mauritius on the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands. [904717]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): My written ministerial statement on 17 March noted that the UK and Mauritius are continuing negotiations on the exercise of sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos archipelago. I met Foreign Minister Ganoo on 1 March, when we discussed a range of issues, including of course the British Indian Ocean Territory.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. At the invitation of the Foreign Office, some of us went to the British Indian Ocean Territory in 2019 and inspected the extraordinary naval and military installations on the islands. The Secretary of State will agree with me that the British Indian Ocean Territory is vital for our AUKUS agreement with America and Australia. Why are we negotiating with Mauritius—a third-party country 2,000 km away from the British Indian Ocean Territory? Why are we not putting at the forefront of this issue something that is essential for all British overseas territories, which is the right of self-determination? When will the Chagossians—the indigenous people of these islands—finally get their say?

James Cleverly: The UK is committed to the agreements made in 1965, and while there are no plans for a referendum, we do of course consult with the Chagossians, among whom there is a range of views. I assure my hon. Friend that the issues that he raised in his question remain at the heart of our thinking during the negotiations.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am sure that the Foreign Secretary accepts that the Chagos islanders were disgracefully treated in the 1970s by the British Government of the day, and that they were forcibly removed from the islands that they love so much. They have fought all these years to be able to go back. They have won international law recognition of their case, as the Mauritian Government won international law recognition for the relinking of the archipelago with Mauritius. As the Foreign Secretary correctly points out, it was agreed in 1965. Will he assure the House that the negotiations with Mauritius will go forward rapidly and in a positive frame of mind, and that he will welcome and endorse the international legal decision on the determination of where the islands should be in the future?

James Cleverly: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are pursuing the negotiations in good faith and with energy. We have held three rounds of negotiations to date, and we will meet again soon to continue the negotiations on the terms that we have discussed.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In addition to respecting the right of self-determination of the Chagos islanders, will my right hon. Friend agree that the military importance of Diego Garcia means that the islands should remain under British sovereignty?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. I can reassure him and the whole House that their importance to global security has been very much at the forefront of our minds throughout the negotiations and will remain so in whatever outcome the negotiations get to.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Chagossians were indeed treated terribly by the British Government in the 1970s, but in the negotiations that are coming up, will the Foreign Secretary do everything in his power to ensure that we protect the marine protected area that we have set up? There are 220 coral species, 855 species of fish and 355 species of mollusc, and this food chain is vital to protect food sources for the whole of the eastern side of Africa. Will he make sure that that is preserved, whatever situation we end up with in terms of sovereignty?

James Cleverly: I assure the hon. Gentleman that, as one of the leading voices in 30 by 30, we pay close attention to marine environments and habitats around the British Indian Ocean Territory, and more broadly we raise regularly the protection of maritime and marine environments when we speak to small island nations and those other countries around the world that have an influence in the oceans.

Africa: Sovereign Debt

7. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help low and middle-income African countries with restructuring sovereign debt. [904718]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We are playing our part in ensuring timely treatment where the UK is a creditor, such as in Zambia and Ghana, and pushing for improvements to the G20 common framework and other debt relief processes.

Kate Osamor: In Somalia in 2020, a staggering 98.9% of Government revenue was spent on debt financing. Clearly, it is impossible for a state to tackle poverty in those circumstances, but the Government's most recent international development strategy largely omits debt relief. While the Government are currently considering the International Development Committee's report on debt relief, please will the Minister commit to prioritising this issue in the future?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is quite right to raise the issue of Somalia, which is one of only three countries, I think, that has not yet received its heavily indebted poor countries settlement. She will be pleased that Britain is in the lead on the climate-resistant debt clauses, which will mean that, when a disaster strikes or when there is a

specific event, countries will be able to delay all capital and interest payments for two years, which will then be added to the back end of the loan. Therefore, Britain is in the forefront of addressing this very important problem, which is rising in Africa.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the Minister said:

“A time when crises are everywhere, but leadership is not. When we can save a bank in California in three days, but Zambia waits more than two years for debt relief.”

I agree. However, the Minister knows that 90% of international bonds owed by countries eligible for the common framework are governed by English law, so what leadership is he demonstrating to ensure vulture funds cannot block debt-restructuring processes by simply refusing to come to the table?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I am flattered that she has read the speech I gave at Chatham House last Thursday. We are extremely concerned about the use of vulture funds, and Britain has been the lead country in trying to clamp down on them. I assure her that we will continue with that work.

Arctic Council

8. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the operation of the Arctic Council. [904719]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials continue to engage actively with our Arctic partners on the future operation of the Arctic Council. We look forward to working with the incoming Norwegian chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 11 May.

Philip Dunne: With the two-year Russian presidency of the Arctic Council coming to an end this month, as my hon. Friend has just said, and Norway taking over the presidency, what role can the UK play over the next two years in supporting the vital climate change research in the Arctic, which members of the sub-committee of the Environmental Audit Committee, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), witnessed at first hand in Svalbard before Easter?

David Rutley: We very much welcome the work of the sub-committee. The UK will continue to contribute expertise and research to the Arctic Council’s working groups under the incoming Norwegian chairmanship, including on climate change. We also continue to support UK-based Arctic researchers studying these key issues through funding from the Natural Environment Research Council, including partners in Canada, Greenland and elsewhere in the region.

Climate Change

9. **Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to help ensure that the UK plays a global leadership role in tackling climate change. [904720]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The refreshed integrated review places tackling climate change, environmental damage and biodiversity loss as our first thematic priority.

Anna McMorrin: It has been revealed that the role of the UK special representative for climate change has been scrapped, following the decision not to replace the departing climate envoy, Nick Bridge; that oil and gas licences are being granted in marine protected areas; and that Rosebank oilfield, which would single-handedly exceed the UK carbon budget, may be given the green light. That is not taking climate change seriously. Does the Secretary of State agree that this Government’s actions are destroying our international credibility as a climate champion?

Mr Mitchell: With the greatest respect, I think that the hon. Lady is slightly going over the top on this issue. We are making climate change a key part of all our bilateral relationships. We are building on the legacy of our COP multilaterally, and within the Foreign Office, we have more than 100 staff working full-time on climate change. She should also bear in mind that we were the first major economy to sign net zero emissions by 2050 into law, and that the UK has cut its emissions faster than any other G7 country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Last week, the Minister talked about climate as a driver of poverty and hunger. He knows that I agree. Sadly, however, his Government lack the ambition to drive forward a net zero transition and they give succour to climate deniers on their own Benches. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) is right that new coal and oil licences are being granted. The odour of hypocrisy hangs over us in Kinshasa and Pretoria and Beijing. Are those Tory internal divisions the reason that our climate leadership is frankly so lacking?

Mr Mitchell: I do not think there are any climate deniers on the Government Benches. I am extremely flattered that it seems that more than one person on the Opposition Front Bench has read my Chatham House speech from last week. I point out to the hon. Lady that the Government have made an unprecedented commitment to spend £11.6 billion by 2025-26. We are focusing an enormous amount of effort on our technical expertise and, although the international community has promised to double adaptation spending by 2025, Britain has promised to triple it.

Strategically Important Non-aligned Countries

10. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase diplomatic engagement with strategically important non-aligned countries. [904721]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): In December I made a speech in which I committed to a long-term “effort to revive old friendships and build new ones”, reaching beyond our traditional alliances, to ensure that we have sustainable, engaged relationships with countries

that will make the weather in the forthcoming decades. I have travelled to a number of countries that fall into that category, as have my ministerial colleagues and friends.

Marco Longhi: Does the Secretary of State agree that we should have strong international relations with countries such as Brazil, which has non-aligned observer status, but is a country with huge wealth in food, energy and precious minerals and is therefore strategically important for a global UK on an increasingly volatile planet?

James Cleverly: I commend my hon. Friend on the work he has done in building not only trade links but a strong bilateral relationship between the UK and Brazil. I will be seeking to reinforce his efforts on my forthcoming trip to Brazil because, as he says, it is an important and influential country, which has huge natural resources and is the lungs of the world.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): One of the fastest ways we could transform our influence with non-aligned countries is to step up and help to lead the debate about the availability of green and development finance. One thing the Foreign Secretary could do this year is to make the case that if we are to give our multilateral institutions a bigger task, we must give them a bigger balance sheet as well. We could be using the money we get back from the European Investment Bank, all €3.5 billion of it, to help to lead the argument for a bigger World Bank. Is that an argument that the Foreign Secretary is prepared to lead now?

James Cleverly: We are, and my right hon. Friend the Development Minister is personally leading the conversation on behalf of the UK Government about international financial institutions' being more active in that very field, to ensure that they look again at their risk appetite so that we can unlock the trillions of dollars of available finance to help countries to transition from hydrocarbon, high-emitting sources of energy to renewable sources. That is a conversation we have regularly, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and I am proud that the UK is one of the leading voices on that agenda.

Foreign Affairs Committee Report: Consular Response to Covid-19

11. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken in response to the recommendations of the Foreign Affairs Committee's third report of Session 2019-21, "Flying Home: The FCO's consular response to the COVID-19 pandemic", HC 643, published on 28 July 2020. [904722]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): As set out in our consular and crisis strategy 2022, we have an extensive programme of lessons learned from previous crises. We continue to improve our crisis response capability systems and structures.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Well, it clearly did not work, did it? The Select Committee report in 2020 showed how the FCDO was well behind other countries in getting people home when covid hit, and the Sudan crisis seems to show that those lessons have still not

been learned. Although our defence forces were ready to move rapidly, the Foreign Office was still dragging its feet, once again ignoring those with leave to remain in the UK, who often have crucial roles in the NHS. When will the Minister get a grip of his Department?

David Rutley: The safety of all British nationals in Sudan remains our utmost priority. We on the Conservative side, and many across the House, will welcome the successful evacuation of more than 2,300 passengers.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

12. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. [904724]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The UK values our relationships with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and we work together on shared interests to advance regional stability, security and prosperity. There is no military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We continue to urge the parties to engage in substantive negotiations to secure a sustainable and peaceful settlement.

Giles Watling: I recently attended the wreath-laying ceremony at the Cenotaph commemorating the Armenian genocide 108 years ago. I was with His Excellency Varuzhan Nersisyan, the Armenian ambassador. With that in mind, can my hon. Friend tell me why the United Kingdom has not yet formally recognised the genocide, as many other countries have done?

Leo Docherty: Of course, it is a very sensitive subject, but the policy of the UK Government is that recognition of genocide is a matter for judicial decision rather than for Governments or non-judicial bodies. When an international legal body makes a judgment that the crime constitutes a genocide, that is a deciding factor in whether we use that term.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): In Nagorno-Karabakh, the humanitarian situation is deteriorating rapidly. More than a dozen non-governmental organisations, including Genocide Watch, have stated that the conditions are ripe for ethnic cleansing. That is a very concerning situation for the 120,000 Armenians who live there. What further pressure can the Government bring to bear to end the blockade of the Lachin corridor?

Leo Docherty: We take this extremely seriously. We have urged all parties to return to the negotiating table and to reopen the Lachin corridor. I have spoken directly to the Foreign Ministers of both nations about this. Of course, we are very pleased that we have provided £1 million of humanitarian assistance to the International Committee of the Red Cross following the 2020 conflict.

Sudan: Emergency Situation

13. **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking in response to the emergency situation in Sudan. [904725]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The long-term viability of Sudan relies of course on a permanent end to the conflict. In addition to undertaking the longest, largest evacuation mission of any western nation—bringing more than 2,300 people out of Sudan—we continue to push for a permanent end to the conflict and a resumption of civilian rule, and we will continue to work with the countries in the region and beyond to pursue that. The Minister of State with responsibility for Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), will make a fuller statement to the House later today.

Anne McLaughlin: Earlier today, I spoke to someone from the Sudanese community in Scotland, who are all desperately worried. She was one of the organisers of an event at the weekend raising money for the Sudan Doctors Union in the UK. They will use that money to funnel much-needed medical supplies directly to the doctors union in Sudan, where, amid the violence, an alarming 75% of hospitals are currently closed. She wanted me to ask this: what will the Government do, and when, to get food, water and medicine to Sudan, and how can we ensure that it actually gets to people given that supply chains from Khartoum have all but broken down?

James Cleverly: I commend, through the hon. Lady, the actions of her constituent. She makes an important point about the difficulties in getting humanitarian aid to people in the midst of conflict. That is why we have called—both directly with military leaders in Sudan and via organisations and neighbouring countries in the region—for a permanent cessation of violence. We will, of course, add to the humanitarian support that we already give Sudan, and we will do so in close co-ordination with organisations such as the United Nations World Food Programme and with other donations from around the world.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Several constituents, mainly with military backgrounds, and I were concerned to hear of British citizens being beaten and robbed on the way to the airport to get out of Sudan. Being an ex-soldier, I would have thought that our military forces, who are superb, would be sent out to escort those citizens to the airport. Did that happen, or were British citizens told to get to the airport with no escort at all?

James Cleverly: The military practicalities of providing what would, to all intents and purposes, be an armed escort from multiple points around Khartoum and the surrounding areas to a single point of exit, proved insurmountable. That was true for our international partners as well as ourselves—no country in the world was able to provide that level of security arrangement. We kept under review the safety of the various routes from within Khartoum to Wadi Saeedna, and we advised on that accordingly. I have a huge amount of admiration for the military personnel who sustained the longest airhead of any western nation at Wadi Saeedna and are currently supporting British nationals and others in their evacuation through Port Sudan.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the BBC's pop-up service for Sudan, acknowledging the huge importance of factually reporting and explaining events, but BBC Arabic radio, which already had millions of listeners in Sudan, was closed in January, so this announcement rows back on a bad mistake. BBC Persian radio was closed five weeks ago, even though 1.6 million Iranians relied on it for news of the women-led uprising, and now 382 journalists' jobs are being cut in the BBC's language services. Will the Foreign Secretary commission a rapid impact assessment of these cuts, which appear more capitulation to tyrants than providing a lifeline to the people who need it most?

James Cleverly: The BBC, including the World Service, despite being a recipient of direct Government funding, is autonomous. It makes its own decisions, and those closure decisions were made by the leadership of the BBC. I was uncomfortable with those. I negotiated a package whereby we were able to give the BBC World Service a degree of financial predictability, and in return, it was able to give me assurances that there will be no further closures for the life of this Parliament of any of those language services. We value what they do incredibly highly, and I am very pleased that the BBC's Sudan service has been able to relocate and continue broadcasting to that war-torn country.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In congratulating the Foreign Secretary on the evacuation, could I ask him to look at the state of the airport? My understanding is that so many heavy vehicles were evacuated that there has been damage to the airport runway, which means it will not be suitable for the World Food Programme and others bringing in humanitarian aid. Could he see what the excellent British military could do to resolve that problem, if indeed those rumours on the ground are true?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the state of the runway. I do not pretend to be a military logistics expert, but my understanding is that the British military were doing repairs while they were using the runway to keep it serviceable. He is right that what is basically a military runway has taken an exceptionally high level of air traffic. My understanding—and I am willing to be corrected on this once we have an update later today—is that we have been able to hand back that airfield to the Sudanese armed forces in a usable state, having done repairs as the airfield has been used.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am hugely grateful to our armed forces and civil servants involved in the evacuation of Sudan. With the operation now ended, it is right to examine whether all the correct decisions were made. We know that the evacuation effort was initially stood down once diplomats were out, while other countries continued, and that national health service doctors resident in the UK were initially turned away. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that every national health service doctor who asked to be evacuated was evacuated, regardless of whether they were British citizens or residents?

James Cleverly: The right hon. Gentleman, who I have a huge amount of respect for, is factually wrong in the points he made in his question. After the initial evacuation of our diplomatic staff—which is not only our moral duty but our legal duty, because they are our employees—we continued the planning for a wider evacuation operation for British nationals, their dependants and others. We planned for a whole range of eventualities, including if there was a ceasefire or if there was not a ceasefire, both through air and by land.

When the opportunity arose, we took full advantage of that opportunity to conduct the largest and longest airlift of evacuees, both British nationals and their dependants and other nations, of any western country. I am incredibly grateful to our civil servants across Government and the military for facilitating that. We maintain a presence at Port Sudan to facilitate the onward passage; we maintain a presence at the border regions, both in Ethiopia and in Egypt, to do so; and of course, we will continue to find opportunities to evacuate people where we can.

Mr Lammy: The Foreign Secretary did not answer my question, so let me try again. Last week, “Newsnight” reported that there were at least 24 National Health Service doctors who were British residents, but who were not yet on evacuation flights. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that all 24, and any other NHS doctors who would be evacuated—the Africa Minister is helping the Foreign Secretary—were taken safely back to the UK, so that they can do their jobs in the creaking National Health Service that we now have?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend the Africa Minister has given me the most up-to-date figures on this. My understanding is that 22 of the 24 who were identified have been directly evacuated by us. It should be remembered that just as British nationals and others may well have made their own routes out of Sudan, they may well have done so. We keep in close co-ordination, both through the NHS and through direct conversation with us, to ensure that we provide as full a service as possible for those seeking evacuation.

Occupied Territories: Ban on Imports

14. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will have discussions with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on the potential merits of implementing a ban on importing goods produced in occupied territories. [904726]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The UK has no plans to ban imports from the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, goods imported from the settlements are not entitled to preferential treatment under the UK-Israel trade and partnership agreement, and the UK also supports accurate labelling of settlement goods so as not to mislead the consumer. The UK’s position on settlements is clear: they are illegal under international law and present an obstacle to peace.

Mr Carmichael: I think it would be uncontroversial to say that we would not import goods from Crimea, so why it should be any different when we are dealing with the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I simply do not

understand. Looking forward to any future trade agreement with Israel, can the Minister assure me that any such agreement would include a clear territoriality clause to specify that it applied only to the sovereign state of Israel, and not to any part of those territories occupied by her in 1967?

David Rutley: Only Israeli goods originating from the state of Israel will be covered by the new UK-Israel free trade agreement.

Topical Questions

T1. [904737] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Since the last set of oral questions, we have evacuated British nationals from Sudan, and we are pushing both multilaterally and bilaterally for a lasting peace settlement. I want to reassure the House that this does not detract from our ongoing support to Ukraine in its self-defence against the brutal invasion by Russia. I delivered a major speech on how the UK will engage with China, and I visited our Pacific partners and attended meetings of NATO and G7 foreign ministers. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Africa delivered a keynote speech on our international development policy, and other Ministers in the Department have visited allies across Europe, Africa, South and North America and the middle east, including key visits to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cameroon, Azerbaijan, Australia, Guatemala, the World Bank in Washington and The Hague.

Mr Dhesi: Under the new Israeli coalition Government, which contains far-right elements, violence against Palestinians has escalated, including Israeli forces attacking Muslim worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque and attacks against Palestinian Christians at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We must condemn all forms of violence, including the devastating murder of three British Jewish citizens, but does the Secretary of State agree that the cycle of violence will not end and there will be no prospect of a lasting peace if the occupying forces are busy building more illegal settlements and trying to evict and oppress an entire people?

James Cleverly: I am not sure the hon. Gentleman was in his place during my earlier response, but our position on settlement demolitions is long-standing. We believe they are illegal under international law and undermine the best possible chances of a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution.

T5. [904742] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): President Zelensky has said that Tehran has provided Moscow with around 2,000 drones, which are being used to devastate Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the IRGC’s complicity in international aggression, and does he agree with me and many other Members that it is now time to revisit the proscription of the IRGC?

James Cleverly: We have sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety. We have also put in specific sanctions on the supply of those military drones to Russia, which have

been utilised to attack civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. We will continue to keep our deterrent posture towards Iran under review. As my hon. Friend will know, it is not common practice to speculate on what further action we might take in response, but I take the point he is making very much on board.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Scottish Government Minister Neil Gray MSP along with the agencies Scottish Development International and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have proved that direct foreign engagement works for Scotland by securing a £300-million manufacturing investment for subsea cables in the renewables industry, working with Sumitomo in Osaka. It is a game changer that has been welcomed across the highlands, so why does the Foreign Secretary seek to sabotage such vital economic activity by instructing UK diplomatic staff to hinder Scottish Government direct engagement?

James Cleverly: The competences of the Scottish Government and the reserved position of the UK Government are absolutely clear. I would say to the hon. Gentleman and the House that Scotland has an excellent advocate overseas—it is me.

T7. [904744] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): The humanitarian situation in Sudan is extremely serious and is spreading to affect neighbouring countries, as many thousands of people are fleeing Sudan. Many of those neighbouring countries themselves are very fragile. What are the UK Government and other international partners doing to support humanitarian efforts, not only in Sudan, but in neighbouring countries?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; the situation is simply appalling. The head of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is expecting to be in the region within the next day or so. The essential fact that is required is a ceasefire. Without a ceasefire, the consequences—particularly the humanitarian consequences—are unconscionable.

T2. [904738] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Following the adoption of the global women and girls strategy, how is it being promoted and operationalised in Saudi Arabia, particular in terms of advocating for women's and girls' rights and amplifying the work of local women's organisations in the region?

Mr Mitchell: Progress is being made on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, with 37% of all those employed now women, which is a higher level than in Morocco, which was the outlier in all this. I can tell her that our excellent embassy team in Riyadh is running leadership and skills development programmes to help women, particularly those in the cyber sector and those who engage in sport.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): This summer's Vilnius summit will be an important test of NATO's willingness to fulfil its long-standing promises

to Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now ludicrous to say that Ukraine's NATO membership might be in some way provocative to Russia, since Putin has shown what he is willing to do when Ukraine is not a member of NATO and because Ukraine is not a member of NATO? Does he agree that it should therefore be the policy of the Government that Ukraine should be invited to make the necessary preparations to join as soon as possible under the rules, for the sake of clarity, stability and peace in Europe?

James Cleverly: Before I answer fully, I place on record the gratitude that I and others have for the leadership that my right hon. Friend showed at a vital point in time, ahead of the explicit, most recent escalation of aggression from Russia towards Ukraine. I know that Ukrainians hold him, as I do, in very high regard because of the decisions that were made.

NATO's position on Ukraine is unambiguous—that the invitation has been put out for Ukraine to join NATO. I think it is incredibly important that that is not taken off the table. Of course, Russia's aggression into Ukraine was the provocative action. Ukraine's desire to join NATO was an entirely understandable defensive posture, because of that threat from the east.

T3. [904739] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Foreign Secretary explain exactly how on earth he thinks the diplomatic staff now to be overseeing meetings between Scottish Ministers and Ministers from other countries and Governments will prevent discussion of whatever topics his Government decide are forbidden? Given that foreign direct investment growth was so much higher in Scotland than the rest of the UK last year—14% against the rest of the UK's 1.8%—why does he think that such draconian interference is useful or necessary?

James Cleverly: I would have thought that Scottish Ministers were better served ensuring that the people of Scotland are supported, rather than seeing health outcomes head in the wrong direction and seeing tax rates head in the wrong direction. I can assure the hon. Member that every one of the diplomatic staff in the FCDO promotes Scottish interests overseas. I am very proud of the work that our officials do from Abercrombie House, which is part of our UK headquarters in Scotland. I can assure her that, when it comes to promoting Scotland's interests overseas, we continue to do so at all times.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Please could my right hon. Friend comment on how the Windsor framework will improve trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of mainland Britain, particularly Wales, and say whether the framework will also facilitate UK trade with Ireland and the rest of the EU?

James Cleverly: The Windsor framework makes sure that trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, these constituent parts of the United Kingdom, is improved, increased and unhindered. That will be massively to the benefit of people in Northern Ireland, and of course to those businesses and traders in Wales producing such fantastic products that the people of Northern Ireland will want, as indeed will people across the whole world.

T4. [904740] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): On 15 May, it will be 75 years since the Nakba—the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and the destruction of 500 Palestinian villages. Given Britain's historical role in Palestine, what message does the Foreign Secretary have on this anniversary for the millions of displaced Palestinians in the occupied territories, refugee camps and the wider diaspora?

James Cleverly: The UK's position on this is of long standing, and I have discussed it at the Dispatch Box today. We strive to create or to support the creation of a sustainable two-state solution so that the Palestinian people and the Israeli people have safe homes in which they can live, and that will remain the cornerstone of UK foreign policy in the region.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Can the Minister outline to what extent he thinks that Finland's recent accession to NATO further unites Europe in the face of Russian aggression, and what lessons can be drawn from the process to facilitate the quick accession of other nations?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): Of course, our Finnish friends have a heroic legacy and heritage of military courage, and all our diplomatic efforts are now focused on the accession of our friends in Sweden.

T6. [904743] **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): It is almost a year since the killing of the Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in the Jenin refugee camp. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in supporting her brother Anton's call for a thorough independent investigation into her death, and agree with me that that is now long overdue?

James Cleverly: It is tragic when we see the loss of life in the region. We always call for the swift and transparent investigation of any fatalities, and that is very much at the heart of our policy. I will ensure that I get more details on the case the hon. Member has raised. I was familiar with it at the time, but I will make sure I am back up to speed with that.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): May I thank the UK Government and the Royal Air Force for evacuating so many people from Sudan, and ask the Foreign Secretary to continue to work with our allies to help evacuate civilians and, more importantly, to push for a long-term ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our top priority is to secure a permanent ceasefire. In respect of looking after British citizens who may still be there, we keep every option open and are 100% on that case.

T8. [904745] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many of my constituents from the Armenian diaspora remain deeply concerned about the ongoing blockade of the Lachin corridor and its humanitarian impact. Could the Minister let me know what the Government have done and will be doing to raise that issue with the Azerbaijan Government?

Leo Docherty: I raised this issue with the Azerbaijanis themselves in Baku in February. It is a very important subject and we continue to advocate for all sides to come back to the negotiating table. I will be looking at circumstances first hand in Armenia very soon.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the excellent question from my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), Vahid Beheshti has now been on hunger strike for 69 days. He has had a meeting with the Foreign Office Minister for the area responsible, but he has not had a meeting with the Foreign Secretary, so may I urge my right hon. Friend—Vahid Beheshti is just across the road from the Foreign Office—to have a meeting with him on his route back to the Foreign Office? He will tell my right hon. Friend about the malign activities carried out by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in this country and about the threat to UK citizens.

James Cleverly: As I say, my heart goes out to Mr Beheshti. I urge him to bring his hunger strike to an end. We know very well the threats the IRGC poses to the people in Iran and the region and here in the UK. We work very closely with the Home Office on how best to protect ourselves and our friends in the region against that activity. I assure my hon. Friend that remains a top priority for us. I am glad my ministerial colleagues have had meetings with Mr Beheshti on this issue. As I say, any decisions about designation will be taken conscious of our absolute commitment to protect British people and British interests both overseas and in the UK.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The conflict in Sudan is a humanitarian disaster not only for the 46 million Sudanese but for the east African region and the continent, with the expectation of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of refugees. What discussions has the Minister had with the African Union to promote African leadership, involvement and mediation and a successful resolution?

Mr Mitchell: I had a meeting with chairperson Mr Moussa Faki on Saturday morning and I can assure the hon. Member that everyone is focused on precisely the problem she has set out.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Good progress has been made on the Truro review, which this Government have given a commitment to implement. Of the remaining work, crucial is recommendation 6 to ensure the freedom of religion or belief special envoy role is permanently constituted—and, Mr Speaker, if I should declare an interest at this moment, I do, although I am speaking of course of the role itself. A short Bill would effect this. Time is now of the essence. Would the Foreign Secretary kindly meet me quickly to progress that?

Mr Mitchell: The whole Government are deeply conscious of the brilliant work my hon. Friend does as an envoy; indeed, she occupies the office next door to mine inside the Foreign Office. We will answer her question as speedily as possible—I hope later today.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I think the Foreign Secretary will agree that the voices of young people should be heard loudly in climate negotiations, so will he speak with Cabinet colleagues and set out a plan for how youth negotiators can form an integral part of this country's delegation to COP28 later this year?

James Cleverly: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his action in this area, particularly in his new role, which I had the opportunity to congratulate him on at the time. He is right: the future of this planet is very much in the forefront of the minds of young people particularly. They seek to inherit it and their voices are incredibly important. I took the opportunity at COP26 and COP27 to meet young climate activists, and it is incredibly important that we find some way of both formally and informally having—

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Graham.

James Cleverly: Having their voices injected into the agenda.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently say to the Foreign Secretary that this is topical questions and we are meant to get through them. Colleagues really want to get a question in and I want to hear them. I call Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Mr Speaker, thank you. The Philippines is the third largest English-speaking country in the world and a growing trade partner, and we will welcome President Marcos to the coronation later this week. However, the Philippines continues to suffer from maritime incursions by the People's Republic of China and the arbitration award under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, or UNCLOS, in 2016 has never been implemented because China, like the United States, does not recognise its arbitration awards.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Richard Graham: What can we do to help avoid unnecessary—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Graham, I just said to the Foreign Secretary that these are topical questions and we need short answers and short questions. I need speed. If you do not want a colleague to get in, please pick which one.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was in the Philippines just a few weeks ago discussing with the Philippines coastguard the realities of the coercive behaviour that Chinese militia ships are demonstrating in the western Philippine seas. We continue to work closely with them through our maritime security work to support their efforts.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My constituent Dr Alaa Elmutaz Mohamed Mahmoud and her young son became trapped in Sudan during a holiday to visit family. Her colleagues at Nottingham University Hospital's emergency department are desperately worried about her safety. She was advised to go to Khartoum to get a flight, but then fierce fighting closed the airport. She was then advised to travel 20 hours to Port Sudan. Now I understand that she is being told that any flights are for British passport holders only. What is the Minister doing to ensure that Alaa and her young son can be evacuated to safety and she can get back to work in Nottingham?

Mr Mitchell: I do not know her constituent's current position and whether she is in Port Sudan, but this is probably an issue that is better dealt with outside the Chamber and I would be happy to see the hon. Member immediately.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): The World Bank has suggested that the minimum amount of money needed for post-war reconstruction of Ukraine is £411 billion. While it is for the Ukrainian Government and people to decide whose money will be used and on what terms, what is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that the United Kingdom is on the front foot in planning how to fund the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine?

James Cleverly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that point. I am proud that the UK will be hosting the Ukraine reconstruction conference in June. We are doing what the UK perhaps does best: bringing together influential voices and, more importantly, finance, and ensuring that they meet and talk. Underpinning all of that has got to be the belief that any investment in Ukraine will be protected. That is why it is very important that we make it clear that we will put that arm of protection around the Ukrainians for the foreseeable future.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Ahead of the Joint Ministerial Council next week, could the Foreign Secretary please outline what he is doing to support the overseas territories? Will he be rolling out the red carpet?

James Cleverly: Metaphorically speaking, yes. The overseas territories are part of the immediate family. All relevant Departments will have a nominated Minister with responsibility for the relationship of their Departments with the OTs. We are launching a new OTs strategy and of course I will make myself available for the forthcoming JMC.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Hazaras. Hazaras are one of the most persecuted groups in Afghanistan and, since the return of the Taliban, they have been regularly subjected to targeted violence, killings and discrimination, all based on their ethnic and religious identity. Does my right hon. Friend accept that that targeting is happening? If he does, will he please do something about it?

James Cleverly: I commend my hon. Friend's work on this community. He is absolutely right that the Hazara community are being specifically targeted by the Taliban. Obviously, our ability to support people in Afghanistan at the moment is limited, but we keep them absolutely at the heart of our thinking with regard to preventing human rights abuses in Afghanistan.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): With reference to Nagorno-Karabakh, what steps has the Department taken to support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognised borders?

Leo Docherty: We continue to urge both sides to return to the negotiating table, and we recognise—I have told them this directly—how important both countries are as geostrategic allies.

UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport

3.39 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on UK concussion guidelines for grassroots sport.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): The UK concussion guidelines for grassroots sport mark an important step in making sport safer for millions of people. Taking part in sport has many benefits. It is great for people's physical and mental health, and it brings friends and communities together. We want to protect that and encourage more people to enjoy being active and play a sport.

As I set out in my written ministerial statement published today, the vast majority of people participate in sport safely, but head injuries do occur. We want to reduce the risks associated with concussion and make sport even safer for everyone. Research has shown the importance of fast, effective, tailored treatment, and we are issuing this expert guidance to help people spot and treat head injuries. Our guidance is a tool for the thousands of people who enjoy sport at the grassroots level. Whether it is used in a local leisure centre during a swimming lesson or in the second innings of a village cricket match, this landmark guidance has the chance to make a real difference to people across the UK.

The guidance was developed by a world-leading panel of medical experts, and I am grateful to the whole expert group for giving so freely of their time while drafting the guidance. I pay tribute to the efforts of the group and to the valuable input of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, which has worked tirelessly to produce this excellent guidance. All that builds on the world-leading work conducted in Scotland by raising UK-wide awareness of the issue of concussion and making sport safer for all who take part. Fundamental to the guidance is an overriding simple message:

"If in doubt, sit them out."

Finally, this guidance is an essential but first step. The Government remain committed to working with the industry to help to make sport safe and enjoyable for everybody, including on technological solutions and the prevention of concussion.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Chris Bryant.

Sir Chris Bryant: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for granting this urgent question.

Sport is indeed good for us, but as we have seen from countless footballing legends and rugby league and union players, repeated sporting concussions and sub-concussive events can lead to depression, anxiety, suicide and early-onset dementia. I have seen tough men weep and heard from sporting stars with no memory of their victories and triumphs. I am therefore delighted that the Government have worked hard to produce these guidelines. I pay tribute to Professor James Calder and the team, to the Minister and to Dawn Astle, Alix Popham, Steve Thompson and Peter Robinson, who have campaigned for all this to happen.

However, I do have some concerns. These guidelines rightly say:

"If in doubt, sit them out."

That is what to do after a brain injury on the pitch, but what are we going to do about preventing brain injuries in the first place? Should we not look at further limiting youngsters heading the ball in football and curtailing rugby training sessions that include tackling? Why is there no reference to multiple concussions? Surely a young person who suffers two or more concussions in a 12-month period must be referred to a specialist. Why is there no recommendation that medical approval be sought before a return to play? That is weaker than the Scottish guidance. How do the guidelines align with existing ones, such as in boxing and equestrianism?

What about elite sport? The sporting bodies have shown a shocking disregard for the health of their own professional players for far too many years. If they do not act, should we not legislate for a duty of brain injury care? How can we ensure we get reliable statistics on brain injury in sport when nearly one in five rugby league players say that they deliberately did not report a concussion last year lest they be not allowed to play?

How do we get schools to understand concussion and brain injury better? Would it not be better to say "brain injury" rather than "concussion" because that is what it actually is? How can we ensure far greater co-ordination of research into concussion in sport, for instance through saliva tests and new generations of mouthguards, and especially into concussion in women's sport? Are we sure that we have enough rehabilitation services for those with more serious injuries?

Brain injury is a hidden epidemic. We cannot normally see it. Let us do everything we can to prevent brain injuries, spot them, understand them, treat them and give people back the best possible quality of life.

Stuart Andrew: First of all, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on all his work in this area. He has been a passionate advocate and campaigner, and I welcome all the further work that he is doing with those across Government. He is right to mention many campaigners who have been working hard in this area.

Prevention is important, which is why the guidelines will go out through all sports' national governing bodies. We want them to go out to schools, so that teachers and medical professionals all have them. The advice in the guidance has been led by senior medical experts—I am not a medical expert so I am relying on their advice. I note the hon. Gentleman's point that it perhaps looks weaker than Scotland's guidance, but the professor involved with the Scottish guidelines has been instrumental in these, and has learned a lot of lessons from their publication.

The hon. Gentleman has raised with me the terminology of "brain injury" or "concussion". The reason "concussion" has been used is that it is more broadly understood among the grassroots organisations. We are trying to reach millions of people through the guidelines. I assure him that they are just the first step, as I said in my opening comments. I will continue to raise this issue with all the national governing bodies—I had a summit with them just last week to talk about it. We will ensure that sport is held to account to look after all players who take part.

Mr Speaker: I call the acting Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I welcome the introduction of the guidelines, and I would add the Love of the Game campaign to the list of institutions that the Minister paid tribute to. It has done a lot of work to raise the profile of this important issue.

I urge the Minister to combine the guidelines and raising awareness of the dangers of concussion with a continuous education campaign from the Government and others to say that sport is good for people, particularly young people. There is a dangerous tendency among some parents to stop their children taking up sport because they are worried about concussion. Of course, we should be careful and do our best to prevent concussion, but will the Minister assure me and the House that the Government will do all they can to continue to encourage as many boys and girls as possible to take up sport?

Stuart Andrew: I thank the acting Chair and the whole of the Select Committee for their input into this important area of work that we have announced today. I add my thanks to Love of the Game. He is right to raise continuous education. Sport and physical activity are incredibly important. We will release our sports strategy very soon, in which we will talk about how we want to raise activity levels among all age groups, particularly the young.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), who raised many important issues. We want everyone to safely enjoy the benefits of participating in grassroots sport. We agree on the pressing need to address concussion and brain injuries, so we welcome the guidance and the implementation of the action plan on concussion. However, we want to ensure that it is as robust as possible, so I have further questions for the Minister. Is he confident that the guidance makes the risks of sustaining a concussion clear enough? As my hon. Friend asked, why is the guidance limited to what happens once someone is concussed, rather than giving better advice on how to prevent concussions in the first place?

How does the Minister plan to monitor the adoption of the new guidelines and their impact? In the light of the possible gaps and points of contention in the guidance, and with new research and evidence emerging, what is the capacity to amend the guidance on an ongoing basis? Is the Minister aware of the ongoing inquiry into concussion by the Parliament of Australia—a nation that knows a thing or two about sport? Will he look at the outcomes of that inquiry?

Finally, guidance on dealing with a concussion can be effective only if the services that it signposts to can be accessed. Given the crisis in the NHS overseen by this Government, is the Minister confident that the current care and rehabilitation provision for people with a concussion is adequate? I do not think that he quite answered my hon. Friend's question. Let us get this right and keep grassroots sport safe.

Stuart Andrew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the guidance. Prevention is important. It is up to each of the national governing bodies to draw up plans, and in every meeting I have with those bodies I will keep asking what they are doing in that area. We will ensure that we monitor the success of the guidance. Just last week, we were talking about how we will measure success and ensure the messaging is delivered effectively.

If research suggests that we need to amend the guidance, then we will amend it. We will keep up with the latest available medical research and take evidence from all over the world. Indeed, medical experts from around the world helped us to develop the guidance.

On the provision of health services, I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of Health and Social Care are taking the issue seriously, as part of a wider brain injury strategy, and I am sure they will make announcements in due course.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Brain injury blights thousands of lives each year. The Minister is to be congratulated, as are his immediate predecessors, for taking the issue more seriously than it has been taken by Government for decades. Nevertheless, more needs to be done both on preventative measures of the kind that have been raised already and on aftercare. When concussion occurs, what happens 24 or 48 hours later, or later still, matters too. In developing the next stage of the strategy, will the Minister recognise that this is a matter of what happens before, during and after such an event?

Stuart Andrew: I know that my right hon. Friend is vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury and takes a keen interest in this area. I hope that the publication of the guidelines shows how seriously we are taking the issue. We want to ensure that the best possible information is available, and we will liaise constantly with the research groups that have been established, so that the guidelines will be updated if needs be.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I pay tribute to all those who have campaigned tirelessly on this issue, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). In order for the guidelines to be embedded in grassroots sport, the issue needs to be taken seriously at elite level, as that has an enormous influence on what happens in grassroots sport. Will the Minister say whether he is satisfied with how the governing bodies of elite sports, such as rugby union, rugby league and football, are treating the issue? What are the Government doing to ensure that they take the guidelines on board?

Stuart Andrew: Obviously, the guidelines are a baseline that we would expect all the national governing bodies to use, but then to go even further. Many of them have professional medical support, but they should still take the issue very seriously because, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, they are role models for many organisations. In my meetings with each of them, I will ensure that I keep raising that point.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Nothing will instil confidence in the important message of “If in doubt, sit them out” more than for grassroots players,

[Stephen Crabb]

particularly youngsters, to see elite-level players adhering to the strictest head injury protocols. Sadly, we have seen too many coaches, referees, on-pitch medics and game administrators turning a blind eye, cutting corners and ignoring the protocols. Will the Minister say a bit more about what he is going to do with the governing bodies at professional level to ensure that there is consistency throughout sports, from amateur and grassroots levels right to the very top?

Stuart Andrew: The very publication of the guidelines shows how seriously we are taking the issue. We felt that it was really important to get guidelines out to grassroots sports, given how many millions of people are taking part in them. My right hon. Friend is right that the elite levels of sports also need to lead the way. Good work is going on, but I accept that more needs to be done. I can assure him that I will take the messages from the House today to the governing bodies in my further meetings with them.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome these changes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) on the urgent question, but these changes relate to the grassroots. We know that elite rugby union players such as my constituent Ryan Jones, a former Lion, have early-onset dementia as a result of numerous subconcussions. Can the Minister update us on the work to develop technology that can help to mitigate concussions in sport—such as the player brain scan trials in rugby union clubs last summer—as promised in the concussion action plan?

Stuart Andrew: We have established a research group that is looking into the technology that is available, and any information that we receive from its members will help us to develop this important work further. The safety of everyone taking part in sport is a priority for the Government. National governing bodies are independent bodies, but, as I said a moment ago, I will certainly continue to put the pressure on.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In the year that marks the 200th anniversary of a game that started in my constituency and is now played around the world, will the Minister welcome the input of the English rugby union authorities in setting the guidelines, and also their commitment to ensuring that improvements in the game's protocols are implemented in time for the start of next season in September?

Stuart Andrew: It was a pleasure to join my hon. Friend in his constituency to celebrate this important year for rugby, and yes, I do welcome the work that has been done. I shall be interested to hear how it is developing when I have my next meeting with the Rugby Football Union.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am a gymnastics coach at a local club in Glasgow in whatever spare time I can manage. The message “If in doubt, sit them out” is very welcome—it is a good, strong message—but unfortunately there is still a lack of understanding among the public, parents, participants and coaches of the damage that concussion can cause. The Minister does not want to talk about brain injury, but may

I gently suggest to him that there has to be a better link between the words “concussion” and “brain injury” if we are to take this issue more seriously?

Stuart Andrew: Let me first thank the hon. Lady for all the work that she does with the gymnastics club. As she says, it is important for the guidelines to be available to grassroots sport throughout the country, and it has been good to work with the devolved Administrations in producing them. Of course, further work is being done across Government to examine brain injuries, which will be linked to much of the work that we have already done on the guidelines. We wanted the guidelines to be as effective as possible, given that there is so much grassroots sport, and ensuring that the information gets out there and is widely understood will be a priority for the Department.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the guidelines, which are an important step forward. I also pay tribute to those at the Headway charity in my constituency, who do fantastic work in supporting people with acquired brain injuries. They are always at pains to explain to me how the impacts of concussion can vary because everyone is different, and the way in which the side effects can fluctuate: they can come and go. What more can be done, moving forward from the guidelines, to ensure that the right training is in place for coaches and match officials so that the identification of concussion, and action on it, always take place very swiftly?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is right, and that is the exact purpose of the guidelines: they are for coaches, referees and teachers. Our key priority will be ensuring that everyone has this information, so that everyone knows how to recognise the symptoms of concussion and how to deal with it. As my hon. Friend says, each person is different, so understanding how concussion should be treated to ensure a safe return to work and further sport is a priority.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I recently visited the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability, which is in my constituency, with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). We heard about the shortage of beds for the rehabilitation of people who have had a brain injury, and about what is often too long a wait for the important early treatment, which is then a false economy. What assessment has the Minister made, along with Health Ministers, of the availability of rehabilitation beds and the need for more funding to meet the current requirement?

Stuart Andrew: The Department and I work closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care. I understand the point that the hon. Lady is making. We are making this a priority in terms of safety in sport, and I will certainly raise the issue in my next meeting with that Department.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I welcome the work that is being done in Scotland and across the UK. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a football referee with the Scottish FA. On that subject, how does the Minister envisage this guidance and any updates being disseminated to the match officials, referees and umpires who officiate at all age groups and all levels, and who are often the closest to incidents that happen on the field of play or the pitch?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. We are working incredibly hard on this. As I have said, we held a summit just last week with national governing bodies and all interested parties to ensure that this information gets out there. It is not just for one section of society; it is for everybody. We want everybody to understand and raise awareness of the issues that concussion can bring and, importantly, of how to treat it when it has been identified. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the distribution of that information, and if we need to look at another way of doing it, we will of course do so.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This new guidance is a welcome step in helping to make sport safer, but grassroots sports often do not have doctors or medics on hand to help players who have suffered concussion, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the correct level of training is there for coaches and others to identify and advise on concussion?

Stuart Andrew: That is precisely why we have published these guidelines. Professor Chris Whitty has said:

“These guidelines help players, referees, schools, parents and others balance the substantial health and social benefits and enjoyment from taking part in sport with minimising the rare but serious and potentially lifelong effects of concussion.”

We are providing easy-to-read guidance for all those people who are doing great work out there, so that they know exactly how to deal with the issue, should it occur.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I watch a lot of grassroots sport, particularly football and rugby, so I welcome the guidelines today. Does the Minister agree that, as risks vary between the sports, the sporting governing bodies are the best placed to regulate this, and also that as part of the review we need to look at the medical cover that is routinely available at these events?

Stuart Andrew: As I say, this is a baseline of guidance and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that each sport will have its own individual needs. That is why it is right that the independent national governing bodies should take this guidance and build on it for the safety of all those involved.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I welcome the guidelines and compliment the Government on their thoughtful approach, including talking to the devolved Administrations, which is most welcome. There is, however, a bit of a problem. If there is a suspected case of concussion and some right-minded person calls NHS 111, there could be a very long delay before that call is answered. I understand that within the last 12 months, 3.6 million calls were abandoned. We have an issue here, so can the Minister assure me that there will be discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care about this particular aspect?

Stuart Andrew: Yes, absolutely. This is obviously an important area of work. The running of NHS 111 is not within my remit, but that close working relationship with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care will be key to ensuring that the guidelines work effectively, so I will happily raise those issues.

Sudan

4.3 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to update the House on the ongoing situation in Sudan.

The situation on the ground remains extremely dangerous. The Sudanese armed forces and the Rapid Support Forces announced a further extension of the ceasefire on 30 April for an additional 72 hours until midnight local time tomorrow, 3 May. I pay tribute to the significant international efforts that brought that about. However, reports of fighting persist, with a large number of people continuing to flee Khartoum, and movement around the capital remains highly dangerous.

Since 24 April the UK has enabled the supported departure of over 2,300 people, including British nationals, dependants, Sudanese NHS medical staff and other eligible nationals. I pay tribute to our brave and remarkable military and civilian personnel who have delivered that effort.

UK operations at the Wadi Saeedna airbase ended on 30 April. Our efforts are now focused on Port Sudan and helping British nationals there who are seeking to leave Sudan. On 1 May the UK evacuated 144 people on flights from Port Sudan. In addition, we helped British nationals to leave on the US navy ship *Brunswick* on 30 April. I thank our American friends and countries across the region—in particular Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Cyprus—for their assistance.

HMS *Lancaster* is supporting evacuation efforts from Port Sudan, and Foreign Office staff who remain are helping British nationals to leave the country, signposting options for departure. British nationals in Port Sudan who require support should visit our team without delay.

However, ending the violence remains essential. The Prime Minister, ministerial colleagues and I continue to co-ordinate urgently with our international partners to support those efforts. I have just returned from Nairobi, where I had productive conversations with the President of Kenya; the chairperson of the African Union, Moussa Faki; and former Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, among others.

We must not allow ourselves to forget that the appalling violence in Sudan, wrought by two generals and their forces, is having a devastating impact on civilians across the country, with an increasing impact for Sudan's neighbours. The most vulnerable people in Sudan are bearing the brunt of the conflict. Aid operations are now at a standstill, humanitarian supplies have been looted, and hospitals and relief workers have been targeted in attacks—at least five aid workers have been killed, including other health staff. The warring factions must desist from violence so that aid can reach those who desperately need it.

The UK will continue to stand with the United Nations, which is leading the international humanitarian response. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.7 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

It is welcome that so many Brits have been successfully evacuated. Let me put on the record Labour's thanks to our dedicated armed services and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office personnel, who have worked around the clock to make that happen. However, we remain concerned for British residents who remain in the country. What assessment has the Minister made of the numbers of nationals and residents still in Sudan, and what steps is he taking to ensure that they can be evacuated safely and quickly?

It is right that, in the coming days and weeks, we look at how decisions have been made during the crisis and ensure that the right lessons are learned. We know that communications with British nationals have been patchy, that our evacuation started later than those of many of our allies, and that the Government were slow to support British residents. My constituent Dr Lina Badr and her children had to make their own way to the border. Can the Minister explain why the beginning of our evacuation was so much slower than those of our allies? Does he feel that it was wise to evacuate our officials before our nationals and residents? I note that the international development head was left behind, not the ambassador. Does the Minister feel that each of the lessons of Afghanistan has been learned?

So far, Ministers have spoken about this crisis largely with regard to Brits stuck in the country, and rightly so. However, we have heard little about UK support for the Sudanese people, whose dreams of a peaceful and democratic future are being shattered by the fighting. Will the Minister please say more about his commitment to support the people of Sudan should the fighting continue? How will the UK retain a meaningful presence in the country? What assessment has been made of aid programmes that have been affected by the security situation and subsequent evacuations of diplomatic personnel? Does the Minister acknowledge the impact of cuts made by his Government to the bilateral support that Sudan receives?

Even before the current crisis began, 15 million in Sudan were reliant on humanitarian assistance. Sadly, that figure will only increase. What conversations is the Minister having with partners to secure the safety of humanitarian workers and their premises and assets so that life-saving aid can continue?

António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, has warned that the power struggle is not only putting Sudan's future at risk, but

"lighting a fuse that could detonate across borders, causing immense suffering for years".

Yet official development assistance to the region is set to face further cuts this year, even as Sudanese nationals are fleeing across borders in their tens of thousands. Will the Minister please set out whether the Government plan to allocate additional humanitarian support to address the crisis this year? What assessment have the Government made of risk to the security of Port Sudan, given its crucial role in Sudan's economy, in the humanitarian response and in providing an evacuation route?

Finally, as the Minister will know, the RSF's military power is partly sustained through illicit cross-border trade, which has taken hundreds of millions out of Sudan's

formal economy and will continue to bankroll the violence. How will the Government seek to crack down on illicit trade? Does the Minister share my concern that the turn away from Africa in British foreign and development policy has vacated space that malign actors have sought to exploit?

It is right that the British Government's first priority has been to secure the safety of as many UK nationals as possible, but we must not allow the world's gaze to turn from Sudan once the airlifts have ended.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Development Minister very much for her comments at the beginning and recognise that she is asking questions that require an answer. I noted eight of them, but if I miss any I will certainly write to her.

The hon. Lady asked first about the efficacy of the evacuation. We were, along with the Americans, the first to pull our own diplomatic staff out of the country. We did so because the situation was extraordinarily dangerous. As I have mentioned before in the House, the embassy and the residences were caught between the two lines so it was an incredibly dangerous situation. The Prime Minister took the decision—at a Cobra meeting at 3.15 that Saturday morning, which I attended—that it was essential that we took our staff out, which is what we did. It was a difficult and complex operation, successfully conducted, but throughout all the planning we also planned to bring out our citizens, and that operation, I submit to the House, has been accomplished extremely successfully.

The hon. Lady asked me about communications with British citizens. She is right; it is extremely difficult. On one day when we were trying to communicate, there was only 2% internet availability. She asked about the speed of the evacuation. We had more citizens in the country to evacuate than the French and the Germans, who started evacuating their citizens before we did. A crisis centre was set up immediately in the Foreign Office, working across Government. I submit to the House that the evacuation has been extremely successful.

The hon. Lady asked whether lessons had been learned from Afghanistan. They most certainly have, but of course this situation was very different from Afghanistan. We did not control the ground. There was not a permissive environment—we did not have permission, as we had the permission of the Taliban in Afghanistan, to take people out. So the positions are not analogous.

The hon. Lady asked whether we would learn lessons from the evacuation. Of course we will look carefully at every decision that was made and make sure that everything possible is learned from it. She asked about the diplomatic presence. There is a diplomatic presence at the border with Egypt and at the border with Ethiopia. She will know that the excellent British ambassador to Khartoum is now in Addis Ababa.

The hon. Lady asked about the humanitarian spend. I should make it clear that we are able to exercise a bit of flexibility on humanitarian spend, as we always must. For example, I announced last Thursday that next year we will allocate £1,000 million to meet humanitarian difficulties and disasters. She quoted the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres. He is right in what he has said, and one of the encouraging things that we are seeing is that the African Union and the United Nations

are working in perfect harmony, delivering precisely the same message that there has to be a ceasefire; that these generals have to lay down their arms and return their troops to barracks.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the incredible evacuation effort to get so many out and also the effort from so many of our allied countries. I thank the Sudanese Government, who will have played a large role in helping us get people out. I thank ambassador Giles Lever, who has been the subject of a great deal of media attention and attacks in the past few days, but who over the weekend worked tirelessly to help with cases that I raised, particularly of British nationals who had been taken hostage.

I am concerned that the RSF's actions are a categorical rejection of the peaceful transition towards democratic rule and away from military rule. What can we meaningfully use to get them back within the process, because I am struggling to see why, having taken this action and decided that they do not support peaceful transition, they would now come back into the fold and be interested in any sort of transition to democracy.

I am also concerned that, this morning, MPs across the House will have received into their inboxes a briefing from the RSF press office. This is not some shoddily pulled together briefing, but a highly professional and clearly well-financed operation. Will the Minister kindly advise us who he believes is funding this RSF press office, and can we please make representations to it to make sure that no British firms are involved? If our allies are involved, they must step back and not fund the RSF in this way.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her comments. I thank her particularly for the point that she made about our ambassador, who has worked ceaselessly throughout the crisis and with very great effect. In respect of her final point, I will look into the issue of malign public relations and report back to the House.

On the process for ceasefire and peace, I draw the hon. Lady's attention to the statement made this morning by former Prime Minister Hamdok, which we strongly welcome. He made it clear that there will be a global emergency unless this situation is halted immediately. He demanded an immediate, monitorable and permanent ceasefire and said that we needed permanent, reliable and secure humanitarian corridors. He mentioned in particular the requirement for a recommencement of a political process, the transition to democracy and the inclusion of the voice of Sudanese civilians in all forums that aim at securing peace. The international community, the African Union, and the United Nations—everyone—should support the call by former Prime Minister Hamdok of Sudan on all four of those points, because they are essential if we are to stop this growing and dreadful crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I echo the thanks to the men and women of the armed forces and other staff involved in the evacuations of UK nationals, as well as to those of other countries who immediately stepped up to the plate to evacuate UK citizens along with their own nationals at the start of this escalation of the conflict.

This is developing into a full-blown humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people being displaced. There are acute food, water and medicinal shortages and they are likely to get worse. Agencies on the ground that have humanitarian, peacebuilding and development programmes will need to pivot quickly, so what assistance are the UK Government giving to those individual agencies? Can the Minister give us some details? I did not hear a response to the shadow Minister about how many UK nationals are estimated to be still in Sudan. Can he give us that estimate, because I would imagine that the Government have one?

The Minister said that there were more UK citizens in Sudan than citizens from other nations. Does that not mean that the emphasis should have been on our being better prepared and better resourced to move more quickly than those other nations? As violence erupts in Darfur, what actions has he agreed with international partners to protect international civilians?

Finally, the Minister for Africa said on TV last night that there were no safe and legal routes for refugees from Sudan. The Foreign Secretary promised last week that detail would be coming forward shortly. Can the Minister give us that detail now and tell us when those safe and legal routes will be in place?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, particularly his comments about the work of the armed forces, which, as he said, was absolutely outstanding. He asked about how we elevate our humanitarian response to this crisis. I have to tell him that more than 10 humanitarian workers have been murdered during the course of this conflict. I said in my statement that it was five humanitarian workers, but if we include the wider definition of humanitarian workers, the number is more than 10. For the humanitarian work to take place and for the corridors that Prime Minister Hamdok has called for to operate, there must be a ceasefire and therefore all our efforts are addressed to that. We are working closely with all the humanitarian agencies, through the United Nations, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union, to secure that.

The hon. Gentleman asked me for an estimate of those who are left, but it is not possible to be precise about that. He will have seen the figures of those who have been evacuated by the Royal Air Force and those who have gone from Port Sudan by sea. However, there is no question that those in Khartoum, which is where the predominant number of people were, will have known about the evacuation and will have been able to go to the airport. We believe that it is inconceivable that people did not know about it, and we think most of them are out.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me about safe and legal routes. When the Prime Minister made his comprehensive statement to the House about how we would stop the boats and the poor people coming

[Mr Mitchell]

across the busiest sea lane in the world, putting themselves into the hands of the modern-day equivalent of the slave trader, he set out a whole range of measures, including that in due course he would introduce safe and legal routes. That is the answer to that question.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is there any evidence that the Wagner Group's links with the Rapid Support Forces had anything to do with the uprising, bearing in mind that the attention of our Government and no doubt others has been taken away from Ukraine by this crisis? Does the Minister agree that, if we do not wish to see a flood of refugees coming into western Europe, such humanitarian aid as we give must be focused on the surrounding countries, nearer to where this crisis is playing out?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is entirely right on his final point. I have nothing that I can say about the work of Russia and Wagner in Sudan, but I can assure him that our attention has not been taken off the Wagner Group at any point.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituent's father is stuck in Sudan. He was refused at the airport after spending three days trying to get there, despite his wife and daughter, who have UK passports, getting on the flight. Another constituent's wife is also trapped there—alone, scared and six months pregnant. Both were in the process of getting their UK citizenship sorted out before the conflict happened. Now they are running out of food and water and they are desperate, as fighting is beginning again. How can that heavily pregnant woman and elderly man make it out safely? Will the Minister commit to doing all that he can to help my constituents' family members get to a place of safety and reunite their families?

Mr Mitchell: I think I am right in saying that the hon. Lady has raised that specific case with the Foreign Office. I will undertake to ensure that efforts are renewed. The answer to her underlying question is that an international ceasefire is essential.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What actions are the UN and neighbouring states taking to make provision for the refugees? Is there an up-to-date statement on how big a problem we think that is, given the current state?

Mr Mitchell: If there is no ceasefire, the problem will be enormous. I can tell my right hon. Friend that the head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths, is in the region and is looking at precisely those issues. I will keep my right hon. Friend and the House informed of the answer to that question as it develops.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Earlier today, the shadow Foreign Secretary received a fairly unsatisfactory answer to his question about getting Sudanese doctors back to the UK. The Minister has just said that this situation is not like Afghanistan. However, in 2020 during the covid pandemic, there was great difficulty in getting pensioners back from the Punjab, many of whom had worked for decades in the UK, had family here and had indefinite

leave to remain. Is not the crux of the problem the stubborn refusal of his Department to do anything for British residents with fully legal leave to remain? Is it not time to review that policy, to change it and to get people home?

Mr Mitchell: These questions rest predominantly with the Home Office rather than the Foreign Office. I think that the shadow Foreign Secretary got an outstanding answer from the Foreign Secretary earlier. I should make it clear that the Prime Minister took the decision that the NHS doctors would indeed be brought to Britain. Five eligible Sudanese NHS personnel were evacuated from Port Sudan to Larnaca, and 14 came out with the Royal Air Force from Wadi Saeedna and one by United States vessel from Port Sudan—that is 20. The other two left under their own steam. On the specific issue that was raised with the Foreign Secretary, I think I am able to satisfy the right hon. Gentleman that he has had a very good answer.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that getting a ceasefire is vital. On behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan, I thank him for coming to the meeting last week—if any colleagues want to join the APPG, we would be grateful for their support. Thousands of people are already heading for the border. I met Save the Children, South Sudan last week. It is expecting hundreds of thousands of people to come into camps in eastern Chad and on the South Sudan-Sudan border. Can the UK work with the UN to encourage more humanitarian aid for those areas, which desperately need extra support?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is entirely correct and highly informed in what she says. In the last few moments, the meeting of the African Union has finished in Addis Ababa. The meeting called for a comprehensive ceasefire, underlined the extraordinary humanitarian jeopardy that Sudan is now in, called for a properly co-ordinated political process to be immediately resumed, and underlined the profound humanitarian consequences that exist in Sudan today.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing our thanks to the British forces, civil servants and others who worked so hard to get British nationals out. He is absolutely right that a ceasefire is the single most important step that we need to see happen. It has been reported in the last hour or two that the South Sudan Foreign Ministry says that the two sides have agreed in principle to a seven-day ceasefire starting on Thursday, and to sending people to talks. I do not know whether he can shed any light on that. Clearly, the repeated breaking of existing ceasefires does not give us huge confidence, but this might be a significant step. Does he know why the Government of South Sudan appear to be the body reporting it?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, who knows a great deal about Sudan and these matters from his time in office, may be even more up to date than I am. I thought that I was pretty up to date in reporting the African Union meeting, which finished in the last few minutes. South Sudan is involved as one of the three parts of IGAD. It is heavily engaged. The President of South Sudan has been working hard to try to effect a

ceasefire. That is what South Sudan is doing, and we very much welcome it. I hope that, in due course, the right hon. Gentleman will be proven correct on the additional seven days of ceasefire that he mentions, and that we can build on it to achieve what the African Union has called for in the last few minutes.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I endorse what my right hon. Friend the Minister has said. I supervised ceasefires and organised safe corridors, and there cannot be one without the other. Does he agree that we are incredibly lucky to have such a jewel in our crown as the sovereign base areas in Cyprus, which are strategically and tactically important for operating in the eastern Mediterranean and areas around there?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right about the strategic importance of RAF Akrotiri and the sovereign base areas in Cyprus, which I know all too well from my brief and long ago military service with the United Nations forces in Cyprus.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Last week, there were people desperate to return from Sudan who are working here for our NHS. They look after us in our hour of need, and yet in their hour of need, they were initially told that our Foreign Office would not evacuate them, thus losing precious hours in the race to escape. That is shameful and embarrassing. How could that have been allowed to happen? Will the Minister undertake to review the decision-making processes in the Foreign Office and, if necessary, in the Home Office, to ensure that in future such cases are flagged up promptly and offered full support?

Mr Mitchell: I am sure the whole House will welcome the decision the Prime Minister made that those people should be evacuated to the United Kingdom and that they are now safely here.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am aware of a number of Westminster residents who are still stuck in Sudan, scattered across the country, having not been able to get to Khartoum to secure passage on one of the flights out. Can my right hon. Friend advise on what further steps the Foreign Office can take to evacuate British nationals and UK work permit holders who are still stuck in Sudan and want to leave?

Mr Mitchell: As we speak, British officials are still operating in Port Sudan, helping British citizens to leave. It is very important that the full details of any citizens in Westminster whom my hon. Friend knows about are given to the Foreign Office, and we will give them all the advice we can.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Of course, the Minister is right: focus must remain on ending the horrific violence that continues to see the death of innocent men, women and children, and we must continue to play a leading role in securing international humanitarian aid in one of the poorest countries in the world. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), many of the cases that I am dealing with involve the immediate family of constituents who hold a valid visa for entry to and residence in the UK and who normally reside in the UK but have not been allocated space on a

UK evacuation flight. I have a great deal of respect for the Minister, but he has remained largely silent on that point. What arrangements are in place to allow the safe passage of those residents from Sudan back to the UK, including any agreements with surrounding countries for safe routes of travel back to the UK?

Mr Mitchell: We continue to support people at the border of Sudan with Egypt and also at the border of Sudan with Ethiopia. I have outlined to the House the steps we are taking through Port Sudan. I am not aware of any reason why people would not have been taken if, as the hon. Gentleman says, they were able to get an evacuation point and all their documents were in order, but if he would like to bring any such case to my attention, I will of course look into it straightaway.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank and pay tribute to the FCDO and the Ministry of Defence for their successful and expeditious non-combatant evacuation operation from Sudan. As any student of military history will know, no responsible Government can write a blank cheque for the evacuation of civilians from a high-threat environment, particularly somewhere as dangerous as Khartoum, sadly. Will the Minister confirm that a full threat assessment will be conducted before the decision is taken to put British forces back into Khartoum?

Mr Mitchell: There are no such plans, but I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that we are still alert to any help that may be required by British citizens in Sudan, and we will provide all possible support that we are physically able to provide.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): May I beg the Minister for help with two constituency cases? One is an 11-month-old boy whose father is a constituent of mine and whose mother is Sudanese. Understandably, they do not want to travel without being guaranteed that they will all get on that flight together, so they have not. Another is a two-year-old child whose mother is British and whose father is Sudanese. They all want to get visas so that they can travel together. Does he understand that separation is not an option for them and that, without the Home Office in particular applying some cool-headed common sense, which we have shown we can do with Ukraine, we risk failing these very small children who should be and are citizens of this country?

Mr Mitchell: I understand the hon. Lady's eloquent plea. I have to say to her that we are restricted by the art of the possible. If those cases have not been brought to the attention of the Foreign Office, I hope that she will do that immediately, and we will do everything we can.

I want to re-emphasise to the House that what is required is a permanent ceasefire, going back to 11 April, and engagement with the political talks that were going on leading to a civilian transformation. I was struck in Nairobi at the weekend by the unanimity of purpose among former Prime Minister Hamdok; Amina Mohammed, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations; Moussa Faki, the chairperson of the African Union Commission; and President Ruto. All of them are doing everything they can to address this humanitarian situation through a ceasefire. I also pay a big tribute to the Archbishop of Canterbury in the week of the coronation,

[Mr Mitchell]

who was in east Africa over the weekend playing his part in urging people to agree a ceasefire, give up their guns, go back to barracks and embrace the political process.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the statement. As he says, though, the situation on the ground remains extremely dangerous. I have been contacted by my constituent Dr Hanaa Yahya, who is understandably extremely concerned that her brother—a UK passport holder—and her elderly mother are still stuck in Sudan, her mother having been denied evacuation.

The British embassy's advice has apparently been that my constituent's mother, who has a Sudanese passport with a UK visa valid for 10 years, could leave with her brother as a dependant. However, despite that, she was refused evacuation, and as a care-giver, her brother has remained with their mother. My constituent is very worried, particularly as her mother has significant health problems, and she fears for the safety of both family members. Could my right hon. Friend the Minister look into this case urgently and advise on what can be done to support both my constituent in Cheadle and her family stranded in Sudan?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I know that she has passed details about these cases to my officials in the past hour, and we will of course look into them.

In terms of support, it may be helpful if I give the House some further details. As I said, the Foreign Office and Home Office officials are resident—there are five of them in Port Sudan. HMS Lancaster is alongside and supporting. There are 23 people helping those who get off the plane in Larnaca; we have three people assisting those who have come out through Port Sudan in Jeddah; and on the Sudanese-Egyptian border, where I said there was a presence, we have 10 officials, in addition to those we have on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. As my hon. Friend will know, the British ambassador to Khartoum has relocated to Addis Ababa.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Afrah Adam Ahimir Essa, the wife of my constituent Abdeen Mohammed, was issued with her family reunion visa by the Home Office on 2 March, but she has not been able to leave Sudan. I fully understand the importance of a ceasefire, but what advice and assistance can the Minister offer my constituent and his wife at what must be an incredibly frightening time?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady, I think, raised this case during oral questions earlier.

Lilian Greenwood *indicated dissent.*

Mr Mitchell: It was a different case. Well, for the case the hon. Lady raised in oral questions, we met between oral questions and this statement to try to make sure that officials can take up the issues. If she sees me after this statement, I will make sure that this other case is taken up as well.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I put on record my thanks to all those who helped so much with the humanitarian evacuation from Sudan, because they

have obviously performed the best they could, although there are still issues to be resolved. I hear what the Minister says about a ceasefire, and obviously a ceasefire would be very welcome—the longer the ceasefire, the better—but a ceasefire is not peace, and it is not a permanent situation. Is the Minister confident that the intervention of the African Union and the UN will actually address all the underlying issues in Sudan that have brought about this polarised military conflict that has been so devastating for so many desperately poor people, and that we will hopefully see a long-term peace and a completely democratic and civilian Government?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, the former Leader of the Opposition, for what he has said. He is right that there has been a formidable operation: at 5 o'clock this morning, 2,187 people had been evacuated by the RAF from Wadi Saeedna and 154 from Port Sudan. That total of 2,341 people arrived in Larnaca, and 1,858 are confirmed as back in the UK.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in his comments about the importance of the permanence of a ceasefire to allow both humanitarian efforts and civilian politicians to operate, and I assure him that there is extraordinary unanimity of belief in this across IGAD, the Troika, the Quad, the African Union and the United Nations. I hope that that unanimity of purpose across the international system will prevail.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): There have been many reports of rape and sexual violence during the conflict in Sudan. Can the Minister advise the House on what steps the Government are taking to enable proper support for survivors and evidence-gathering by specialists to make accountability possible?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to raise these appalling offences that are committed against women. Obviously we have only limited ability to move the dial at this particular point in Khartoum and Sudan, but I assure her that this Government will never accept a culture of impunity in offences perpetrated against women.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The Rapid Support Forces in Sudan were formed out of the Janjaweed, the militia responsible for many of the atrocities in the 2003 Darfur genocide. As the RSF has many of the same leaders as the Janjaweed, there is a real risk of atrocity crimes, including sexual violence. Does the FCDO have an atrocity and genocide prevention strategy for Sudan, and what steps are being taken to monitor and prevent potential atrocity crimes?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to chart the nature of the RSF, which grew from the Janjaweed, which was active in Darfur. I first visited Darfur in 2006 and again in 2007. As she rightly said, that was a genocide, in the words of President Bush, perpetrated by the Janjaweed and other militias. All I can say is to reiterate the point that I made earlier: we will do everything we can to ensure that there is no impunity for these dreadful crimes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement today and for responding to questions for almost 40 minutes.

Point of Order

4.41 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, given the concerning incident reported over the weekend of the abuse and harassment directed at my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), can I ask whether Mr Speaker has received an update on this specific case from Leicestershire police or any other police force? I am sure that the whole House will be concerned by the impact such incidents can have on people standing for office, especially women. Is there any updated guidance from the parliamentary security department for MPs and our staff who receive abuse? Does Mr Speaker have any suggestions for how we can pursue this further? MPs and, crucially, future MPs need to know that neither they nor their families need put up with serious harassment. They should be allowed to serve their constituents without being targeted in this way simply because somebody disagrees with them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and forward notice of it. She raises a very important issue indeed. As she knows, we do not normally speak about security matters on the Floor of the House, so please forgive me if I do not inform the House as to what activity Mr Speaker has been involved in with regard to this particular matter. I agree with her totally about the impact that this sort of activity—abuse and harassment—has on MPs, their staff, their families and those thinking of entering politics.

I encourage any Member who has been subject to the sort of appalling abuse and harassment to which the hon. Lady refers to report it to the Metropolitan police's parliamentary liaison and investigation team, PLaIT. It will co-ordinate a police investigation in response. Members will also wish to be aware that the parliamentary security department provides general and bespoke security advice to MPs, liaising with PLaIT and local police forces. I advise any hon. or right hon. Members with concerns to contact PLaIT or the parliamentary security department in the first instance.

Finally, I know that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the exchange, and I am sure that Ministers will now want to consider carefully whether there is any action they could appropriately take, such as the issuing of guidance to public services dealing with these issues. I thank the hon. Member again for raising this important issue, and I am sure that she and others will wish to pursue this particular matter, and that Mr Speaker will continue to keep this issue under his review.

National Minimum Wage

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

4.44 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the national minimum wage; and for connected purposes.

Before I begin, I want to place on record that for several years before entering Parliament I served as regional convenor for Unison North West. I also worked in local government for over three decades, and I remain a member of Unison, my trade union, to this day. I want to pay tribute to the fantastic work of my own Unison region in the north-west for organising frontline care workers as part of the Care Workers for Change campaign. Under the stewardship of Kevin Lucas, it has delivered pay rises for thousands of care workers, particularly across Greater Manchester and now the Liverpool city region, winning for working people in an unforgiving sector with often poor employment practices.

After being elected in December 2019, I put my name into the private Members' Bills ballot for the first time, and I was really surprised to be drawn very near the top, especially given that it was the first time of entering. Little did I realise that the pandemic had other ideas, and after failed attempts and cancelled Friday sittings, my private Member's Bill was timed out. Nevertheless, here we are today, such is my belief in the significance of the low-paid, their contribution to our economy and wider society, and in their skill and dedication to their professions. No examples of this shine any brighter than in the adult care sector.

This year has been the most difficult for our people, especially those who face the uncertainty and insecurity that low pay can bring. The economic crisis and the pandemic before it have brought front and centre the workers who keep our economy going. They are our shop assistants in supermarkets, our care workers, those working in transport and logistics, and all manner of people operating across different sectors of the labour market. This Bill would ensure that they have confidence, because that is so often what precarious workers lack—in this case, confidence that they are properly remunerated for their labour under the law.

My Bill does not seek to overhaul the law as it stands, but rather to place a greater emphasis on enforcement, which would be to the benefit of all workers. The national minimum wage stands as one of my party's and the trade union movement's finest achievements. It was pioneered by one of my heroes, Rodney Bickerstaffe, whom I was lucky enough to call a friend. Long before it was popular to do so, Rodney pioneered this incredible national minimum wage.

Before entering this place, I had acquired years of experience working in close contact with the care sector. I refer to social care as a Cinderella service—the forgotten service. Indeed, it will be four years in July since the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), boldly promised to fix the long-standing crisis in social care in his first 100 days in office, yet here we are two Prime Ministers later, and we are still waiting.

[Paula Barker]

Among this fantastically underpaid, undervalued workforce exist home care and domiciliary care workers—unsung heroes every single one of them. In every hon. and right hon. Member's constituency, in every region and nation of these islands, this very second, home care workers are tending to the needs of our people, providing elderly residents with the independence and dignity they deserve. They are the very people who during their shift, starting early and finishing late, help an elderly resident get out of their bed in the morning, bathe and dress them, provide breakfast and administer medication, as well as tidying the person's home, before returning to their vehicle or public transport and travelling to their next appointment. Just as importantly, they are a point of contact for those who often face social isolation and loneliness. A brief chat or a catch-up can provide much-needed companionship.

In England alone, there are over 715,000 workers working in the home care sector. The vast majority of them are women, and a huge number are on zero-hours contracts. My Bill will ensure accountability for those workers, and provide a framework of safeguards and minimum standards to be overseen by our local councils as the commissioners of services. The scale of the issue cannot be downplayed. A pre-pandemic article published in January 2019 on homecare.co.uk found that over half of home care workers are paid less than the national minimum wage because employers are not properly paying for travel time between visits. That time spent travelling between visits is the crux of the issue here.

Over 50% of England's local authorities do not state in their contracts that firms must pay employees for time travelling between visits according to a freedom of information request. Furthermore, a survey of home care workers revealed that 63% are only paid for the time spent in people's homes. Ultimately, this means that for too many care workers hourly pay rates fall well short of the Government's national living wage and take many under the threshold of the national minimum wage. The UK Homecare Association, which represents providers, estimates that staff spend a huge 19% of their working day travelling between homes; that is almost a fifth of their working day. And no mileage expenses come anywhere near covering the cost of any shortfall.

In a sector that is deeply troubled with issues around recruitment and retention, my Bill would represent a genuine opportunity for the Government to clamp down on malpractice. It is a profession with a calling, and while no disrespect is intended to workers in other sectors, the home care market should not be losing workers to Tesco, Amazon, Nando's and the like—but it is doing so, as we speak. For 2021-22, the vacancy rate

across the entire sector stood at 165,000, with a slightly higher vacancy rate in domiciliary over residential care. It was only last month that the Government announced a new fund over the next 12 months to aid international recruitment in the adult social care sector.

Things must change as part of a longer-term strategy and investment in adult social care. Those on the Government Benches will undoubtedly say that provisions for enforcement under His Majesty's Revenue and Customs guidance already exist. In fact, if I remember rightly, they were broadly supportive of my original private Member's Bill and assured me that the issues I raised would be addressed in their forthcoming employment Bill. I am unsure if *Hansard* can feasibly be expected to pick up on the use of light sarcasm in this place, but I for one am still very much looking forward to the Government bringing forward such an important Bill.

In all seriousness, the figures mentioned earlier demonstrate that the existing system is not adequate for our army of home care workers across this country. For commissioned domiciliary services, local councils can, if given the powers, be the body that delivers pay transparency and minimum and effective pay assurances with real enforcement in defence of workers. Some councils are already doing this to some degree, but others are not. The Government are very well versed in defining and redefining the roles and responsibilities of local government so why not provide a statutory footing for home care workers that avoids a patchy postcode lottery? My Bill will work for employee and employer.

In the spirit of co-operation, I commend this Bill to all Members no matter their party allegiance. Let us make a real, tangible difference here today to all workers, not least those on the frontline caring for those who need it most. It is after all, a small but significant change.

Rodney Bickerstaffe said of our roles in the labour movement:

“We do our bit and pass it on”.

The same goes, I am sure, for Members across this Chamber. In the same vein as Bick, I hope that I too can play my small part in speaking up on behalf of our low paid while I have a voice in this place.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paula Barker, Kim Johnson, Rachel Hopkins, Navendu Mishra, Mike Amesbury, Samantha Dixon, Mr William Wragg, Bob Blackman, Wendy Chamberlain, Munira Wilson, Chris Stephens and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Paula Barker accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 267).

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Financial privilege is not engaged by any of the items in the Lords message relating to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Clause 4

CIVIL CLAIMS

4.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I beg to move,

That this House agrees with the Lords in their Amendments 10B, 10C and 10D; disagrees to their Amendment 10E, and do propose in lieu of their Amendment 10E Amendment (a) to the words restored to the Bill by Commons disagreement to Lords Amendment 10.

It is almost two years since the Bill was introduced to the House in defence of the fundamental principle that students and academics should be able to express their beliefs and debate controversial ideas without fear of repercussion. We return to the House to resolve the final element on which we seek agreement: the form that the statutory tort takes in the Bill. The tort is the measure that will allow people to bring civil proceedings where they believe that certain duties in the Bill have been breached to their detriment. Since I last brought the Bill before the House, the other place has accepted the inclusion of the tort in principle. That is a huge step forward and a significant victory for freedom of speech on campus.

In February, this House voted to reinstate the tort in full following its removal in the other place. In March, the other place accepted the need for the tort but sought compromise in the form of amendments identical to those tabled by the Government on Report. That is the wording of the clause that we are now considering.

I want to emphasise that this is a significant shift in the terms of the debate. We are considering no longer whether the right to go to court should be included but what form it takes. However, I recognise that colleagues still have some concerns, and I want to reassure them that the two Government amendments will mean that the tort retains its teeth and offers a concrete means of redress for those whose right to free speech has been unlawfully infringed.

Proposed new subsection (2) will make it clear in the Bill that “loss” is not limited to pecuniary loss. That means that academics will be able to go to court if they have suffered, for example, reputational damage or adverse consequences to the progression of their career. Subsections (3) and (4) mirror amendment 10E from the other place. New subsection (5) will ensure that, in circumstances where speed is essential, a complainant can apply for an injunction where there has been an alleged breach of the free speech duties.

I turn to proposed new subsection (2), which builds on amendments 10B, 10C and 10D as voted for by the other place. On 7 December in the other place, my counterpart Earl Howe stated on Report that loss is “not limited to pecuniary loss and could include damage to reputation, for example.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 December 2022; Vol. 826, c. 195.]

Subsection (2) simply makes that clear in the Bill. The amendment therefore reflects the original policy intent. I hope that offers reassurance to the House and that hon. Members will support its inclusion in the Bill.

I turn to proposed new subsection (5), which builds on amendment 10E as voted for by the other place as now included in new subsections (3) and (4). Amendment 10E would require claimants to have exhausted the complaints schemes of the Office for Students or the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education before they can bring legal proceedings. Some hon. Members have expressed concern that that would prevent individuals from seeking an injunction where a breach of specified freedom of speech duties has already taken place and swift redress is sought. I share the view of many colleagues that access to the courts in those circumstances is crucial.

Subsection (5) will mean that a claimant who is applying only for an injunction will no longer have to exhaust the complaints schemes first. Those claimants will therefore have direct access to the courts. It is important to allow for that to avoid delays that may cause further harm to the claimant. If, for example, a student is expelled from their course because of a free-speech issue, it may take a long time to resolve their complaint, and damages would not be sufficient. The student would be seeking re-entry on to that course to continue their studies. In that scenario, subsection (5) will allow the student to seek an injunction from the courts as quickly as possible. I am sure the whole House agrees that that is sensible and justified.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Yes, it is an excellent change. The only question in my mind is why this rather obvious feature was not included at the beginning. Could the Minister look into that and—if not now, on another occasion—throw some light on it? It was an obvious flaw in the Bill.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend. I think the fact that we have now included that in the Bill shows that we have worked with both sides to ensure that the Bill is as strong as possible. We have always had the academics, visiting speakers and students that it seeks to protect at the forefront of our mind.

I should reiterate that the provision concerns injunctions where there has already been a breach of the relevant duties. Where there is an anticipated breach of the duties, a claimant can apply for an injunction to prevent that—that has always been the case, since the requirement to exhaust the complaints scheme only applies in the case of an actual breach. It is important to note that we believe that this exception will apply only in a minority of cases, as most claimants will not seek, or have their case result in, an injunction. Nevertheless, we are sympathetic to complainants who find themselves in the difficult circumstances in which an injunction may be required. Further to this, we expect the OfS will take into account the implications of the amendment when drafting the complaints scheme rules.

I hope that the House will therefore accept amendments 10B, 10C and 10D from the other place, and agree with the Government’s proposed new subsections (2) to (5), which are consequential upon the amendments.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): In recent weeks, we have seen a rather unedifying situation whereby Members from both sides of the House have been no-platformed by universities across the UK. In addition, Berkshire has several Facebook groups which purport to be in the public interest, but are actually used mainly

[James Sunderland]

by Labour activists to attack the Government. Comments made by Conservative councillors or those who disagree with the sites' administrators are deleted, with some users even banned from the sites.

Cancel culture is odious, and I believe it exists because the Opposition do not want to hear the truth—they cannot face the truth. Will this Bill go any way towards dealing with cancel culture?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend, who has had his own experience of that in recent weeks. This Bill will not only strengthen the duty of our universities to ensure that they are protecting freedom of speech on campus, but create a new director of free speech, who will champion the cause, and strengthen the powers of the OfS to deal with those who breach that duty. I believe it will speak to my hon. Friend's real concerns.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The last time I was here debating this Bill, I told the Minister that it had spent more time in Parliament than any other Bill sponsored by the Department for Education since 2010. Indeed, as defenders of free speech, Members would be forgiven for thinking the Government would be determined to see the Bill on the statute book. Yet 721 days—almost two years, as you, a maths connoisseur, will appreciate, Mr Deputy Speaker—have passed since the Bill had its First Reading, and it could have been further prolonged by the prospect of legislative ping-pong with the other place.

Here we are again. This time, we have the Minister, whose remit now includes university campus activity, rowing back on the compromise reached in the Lords. I am sure that this has been pushed by the Common Sense Group. I consider myself to be a member of whatever common-sense group this place may offer, but I am unsure whether we should be here again two years on. We need not be here, but heavy-handed legislative responses to largely exaggerated social problems—I am not saying there are no problems—appear to be this Government's general *modus operandi*.

Sir Julian Lewis: It is a very serious step for anyone, particularly a student with limited means, to go to court and seek an injunction. Surely the hon. Gentleman can see that no one will do this on a whim. They will do so only when their rights are being seriously infringed.

Matt Western: I have a huge amount of respect for the right hon. Gentleman, as he knows. Of course I would be concerned about the case of an individual student, but I fear more generally about the tort being a channel for more vexatious claims by well-funded individuals or organisations, and where that may take us. I will expand on that point.

Where issues arise, Ministers have shown no interest in dealing with the underlying causes. I fear that this is yet another example of Ministers leaning in and exploiting cultural divides, opting for punitive, confrontational tools such as the tort before us. I have repeatedly stated the plethora of options open to the Government: the Chicago principles, the Robert French report, Universities UK's guidance, internal processes and the Manchester and King's guidelines—all of which would do a better job at resolving issues whenever they arise.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions the cost of going to court and that that will be prohibitive for students and academics, but surely the opposite is true. At the moment, the only provision that students and academics have in the case of their free speech being cancelled is judicial review, which costs tens of thousands of pounds. The whole point of introducing a tort in a county court, for example, is that it is relatively cheap and relatively affordable for anyone.

Matt Western: As the hon. Member will know, the tort has been left in the legislation. A compromise was reached in the other place, so that is in the Bill, as far as we know. Our point is that we do not believe that an injunction is at all necessary. Indeed, it will complicate the process for all involved. The Minister will know that I was trying to reach her last week. I was keen to discuss this issue, because I wanted to seek some sort of understanding about what was going on, but for some reason we were not able to speak. I hope that we can do that in future, because I think that will circumvent problems.

To be fair to the Minister, she is clearly aware that colleagues have strong views on the issues linked to the tort—she said as much in her “Dear colleague” letter last week. Perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves of some of those views. Lord Grabiner, an eminent jurist, said that the tort could be used by

“well-heeled trouble-makers for whom the costs issue would be of no concern at all.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 825, c. 709.]

That is the point I was making to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). Lord Molyan, a Conservative peer, stated:

“the Government do not know what they want to do about this”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 March 2023; Vol. 828, c. 1692.]

Universities UK, which represents 142 universities, stated: “our position remains that the tort should not stand as part of the Bill.”

It feels that the original amendments amount to “sensible and acceptable compromise”. It was understood across the sector and in the other place that we had reached a point where the system was workable—they had reservations, but said they would accept the compromise. Given the Minister is clearly aware of those strong views, why has she not paid heed? In her letter, she encouraged us all to support the Government's motion today, owing to “limited legislative time to progress with further changes”.

It is pretty ironic for her to invoke the tight parliamentary timetable to push through her regressive motion, given the Bill has benefited from two parliamentary Sessions. We are here today, two years on, only because the Minister has reneged on the position accepted by Government Ministers in the Lords.

In her “Dear colleague” letter, the Minister claims that her motion provides the necessary reassurances on the issue, but she fails to mention that reassurances were already provided by Earl Howe. A satisfactory compromise—supported by Labour—was reached. Indeed, it might be deemed a model case in how to resolve competing interests, reminding us of the shared values we have in common:

“a commitment to freedom of speech and diversity of opinion.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 March 2023; Vol. 828, c. 1685.]

Those are the wise words of Lord Willetts. Yet with this motion, the Minister seems to be reopening Pandora's box, prioritising tabloid headlines about a permanent crisis in freedom of speech on campus, over and above cross-party consensus and good legislation.

On the two planks of the Government amendment, the first specifies sustained loss as including non-pecuniary loss. The first concession the Minister has made to her Back-Bench rebels is to put in the Bill that "loss" extends to non-pecuniary loss, such as injury to feelings and reputational damage. I understand that was always assumed to be the case by the Government, but the Minister felt compelled to assuage the concerns of Back-Bench Members that such damage could be excluded by the courts.

If non-pecuniary damage is to be a loss recoverable under tort in freedom of speech claims, the question arises as to how the loss will be calculated. That has important consequences for the costs of litigation for universities and student unions. The Minister will no doubt say that that is a matter for the courts but, in the interest of clarity, I would welcome the Minister setting out her understanding of how damages might be awarded for non-pecuniary claims in freedom of speech cases.

For example, will the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom or the Government be setting cost guidelines for the courts to follow; or is it the Minister's expectation that the courts will follow pre-existing costs guidelines, such as those used in discrimination cases? It is worth flagging that, if the courts were to follow such guidelines, the most egregious cases of non-pecuniary loss arising from a breach of a freedom of speech duty could cost a student union or university up to £56,200 per individual claim, in addition to any further litigation costs, which I am reliably informed range from £75,000 to £125,000.

Members of the House may want to consider, in the context of their local higher education providers, how such costs may detract from the student experience, given the financial pressures across the entire sector. Such monies would be better used to support hardship funding and welfare support, given the rocketing number of mental health cases they are seeing.

The second plank relates to the opt-out of the last resort mechanism for injunction-only claims. The amendment creates an exemption from the last resort mechanism put in place by the Lords for claims exclusively seeking an injunction. It is worth noting that the underlying purpose of the last resort mechanism was to prioritise university internal processes, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, the Office for Students Free Speech Complaints Scheme and the director for freedom of speech and academic freedom. The Government amendment potentially paves the way for that purpose to be inverted.

In effect, the amendment creates a perverse incentive for claimants to bypass the schemes created in the Bill in search of an injunction, including in anticipation of a breach. Was that unintended or intended? Regulatory investigations and internal processes rightly and understandably take time. When competing freedoms are at play, such care is to be expected. While the circumstances in which a court may grant an injunction could be narrow, for vexatious claimants with deep pockets, the amendment invites them to try their luck.

I note Lord Willetts sought to ensure the tort was "sensibly targeted" through his amendment, presumably to limit such vexatious claimants. Does the Minister believe her amendment opens the scope of the tort back up again? What justification does she have for doing that? Has the Minister met Lord Willetts, a Conservative peer, to discuss this? I am sure he would welcome such a discussion. As for process, the Minister claims she is "confident that this will not create a further burden on the courts".

She plainly omits reference to the burden on institutions and student unions.

We all know that litigation is generally expensive and time consuming. It can soak up management bandwidth, detracting from the ability to focus on more important issues, most obviously the staff and student experience. Anything that risks an increase in the use of litigation in this context is therefore to be greatly cautioned against. In that vein, I urge the Minister to provide greater clarity on how her amendment will keep vexatious claimants at bay, will ensure the protection of institutional autonomy and regulatory processes, and will not expand the scope of the tort to the detriment of the student experience.

5.15 pm

No doubt the Lords will be able to scrutinise this with more vigour than one hour's protected time allows us to scrutinise it today, and they should do so with good reason, for there are many outstanding questions. What expectation do the Government have regarding the scope for damages available for claims for non-pecuniary loss resulting from a breach of the freedom of speech duty? What circumstances does the Minister envisage that would warrant the use of an injunction, and how would those circumstances justify tampering with the orderly progression of a complaint through established complaints mechanisms? What assessment have the Government made of the effect of their amendment on the ability of higher education providers and the Office for Students to deal with complaints before they escalate into litigation? We should remind ourselves that we have a very expensive director of freedom of speech who is about to join the Office for Students; one wonders whether this person will become unnecessary.

It has taken two years for us to get to this point, but the Government seem determined to divide Parliament after consensus—an agreement between Ministers and the Opposition—has been reached in the other place. It says much that this issue, and specifically the matter of the tort, is being reopened once again.

Miriam Cates: I admit to having a sense of déjà vu, because I think this is the third time I have made a speech defending the sharp end of the Bill—which is, of course, the provision allowing students, academics and visiting speakers who have had, or are about to have, their freedom of speech curtailed to bring a claim against a university in court. Most cases can, will and should be settled through the Office for Students' complaints process, but that could take months. There will be circumstances in which quick recourse is needed, for example when a speaker's event the next day is due to be cancelled.

The Lords have tried to remove the tort. They have tried to water it down with the requirement to exhaust the complaints procedure first. That is why I initially tabled an amendment for consideration today to ensure that students and academics could still apply to a court

[*Miriam Cates*]

for injunctive relief if necessary. However, I am very glad that the Government have tabled their own similar amendment; I have withdrawn mine, and will of course be supporting the Government. I thank the Minister for her commitment to the Bill and its original policy aim, and to freedom of speech. It would have been easy for her to capitulate to their lordships on this matter, and it is to her credit that she has not only identified the damage that the Lords amendments would have done to the success of the legislation, but has actively engaged with academics, Back Benchers and ministerial colleagues to ensure that the Government defend their legislation.

Retaining the full use of the tort is vital to the success of the Bill. After all, the Bill's aim is not to enable people to sue universities—no one wants that to be the mainstream course of action—but to deter universities from reneging on their free speech duties in the first place. Essentially, we want the Bill to have a deterrent effect to help universities to stand up to those who wish to cancel certain viewpoints by providing for clear boundaries and swift consequences if they fail in their duty to free speech. Facing a long Office for Students complaints process is no deterrent against cancelling an event due to take place tomorrow, but the potential for court action is. Creating a liability risk for universities that neglect their free speech duties is the most effective way to ensure that free speech is always factored, substantively, into decision making.

I am not a free speech absolutist, and of course there should be speech that is illegal, such as racist speech and speech inciting violence. Everyone should take responsibility for what they say, and I believe that anonymous speech is a largely detrimental development in today's culture. However, the freedom to voice opinions and present evidence, however controversial those opinions and that evidence may be, is a foundation of democracy. Authoritarian regimes, not democracies, censor speech, and when mainstream, evidence-based views, such as the belief in the importance of biological sex or the belief that immigration should be limited—for which my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) was cancelled last week—are being shut down in our universities, we have a problem that needs to be addressed. Our brightest future minds, the young people in our universities, deserve to have an education that helps them to become robust, inquisitive, and appropriately sceptical of new ideas. They will become robust only if they have the opportunity to hear a whole spectrum of opinions and ideas and to learn that being offended is not an injury but an opportunity to learn and mature. We do our young people no favours by pretending that they need protecting from ideas and facts.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), spoke about the mental health crisis that some of our students face. I agree that there is a crisis in mental health among our young people, but the American psychologist Jonathan Haidt links that crisis in mental health with cancel culture and the over-protection of children in schools and universities from viewpoints and ideas that might hurt their feelings. His book confirms my belief that being exposed early on to viewpoints that we might disagree with and want to argue against helps us to become robust and makes us less likely to be injured and have hurt feelings when we come across views that are different from our own.

Those are the kinds of people that we want to be the future leaders of society, and the culture that starts in the universities always makes its way into mainstream culture. That is the point of our higher education institutions, so the Government are absolutely right to protect their policy aim of ensuring free speech in universities. That will be to the benefit of everybody in this House across the political divide and of future generations. It does not just protect one particular viewpoint; it protect everybody's viewpoint.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the House for today's debate, which demonstrates the full benefit of open discussion and free speech. I will touch briefly on some of the points raised. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said that he thought this was driven by the Common Sense Group's views, but in fact it has been driven by the conversations we have had with academics who have been targeted for sharing their views on campus. They are the people at the forefront of our mind. In our last debate, I suggested that the hon. Gentleman might like to speak to some of them. I would be delighted to relate my conversations with them, but I think he should speak to them as well.

The hon. Gentleman talked about how we would assess costs, and he is right to say that that is a matter for the courts. That is well established. He also spoke about the cost to universities, but it is very simple: if universities would like not to have to spend money on redress, they should simply uphold freedom of speech. He mentioned Lord Willetts, and like everyone whom the Bill concerns, we have been talking to people right across the spectrum as we have moved through this process, and I am confident that people will see that we have come to a good place in our amendments. He also asked whether the money would be better spent on the staff and student experience, but I ask again: should not the staff and student experience of university be one in which they are exposed to different views and can speak freely and debate controversial ideas? Is that not fundamental? That is exactly what the Bill is trying to uphold.

The hon. Gentleman asked about examples of where we might want to use an injunction. An example of where we might want to see swift redress is if a student has been kicked off their course and they feel that their freedom of speech rights have been impinged on. We would want to deal with that quickly so that they can get back on their course and resume their learning swiftly. That been widely agreed on in our conversations as a reasonable example.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates). She is absolutely right about building young people's resilience. Exposing them to different views is a key part of growing up, and it is something that we all use as we go into adult life.

We remain convinced that the right to go to court is crucial as a way of enforcing the new duties in the Bill and providing redress for those who have had their rights unlawfully restricted. I am thrilled that both Houses now accept that the tort should be part of the Bill. I believe that in accepting amendments 10B to 10D as agreed by the other place, together with the inclusion of the Government amendment we have discussed today, we will have reached the right position to ensure that freedom of speech and open debate remain central to university experience.

Question put and agreed to.

Backbench Business

Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

5.24 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House—especially those on the all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh—who supported the application for the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

In January, along with a number of MPs on the APPG, I visited Cox's Bazar and witnessed the desperate plight of Rohingya refugees, particularly women and children. The visit convinced me of the need to keep this humanitarian disaster at the forefront of our hearts and minds, and to urge the UK Government to lead the international community in doing all we can to help. I thank all the non-governmental organisations, charities, human rights organisations and volunteers who work tirelessly on the ground to provide aid and assistance to some of the most desperate people on earth.

It is almost six years since hundreds of thousands fled Myanmar in 2017, when the Myanmar military, supported by militias, launched a brutal genocidal campaign that took thousands of lives. At least 700,000 escaped Rakhine state for Bangladesh. Now, 961,000 Rohingya refugees live in refugee camps—the largest in the world—in the Cox's Bazar area. The vast majority are women and children.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officially recognises that a state of emergency remains in place across Myanmar. There is conflict and significant violence across much of the country, involving airstrikes, artillery bombardments, landmines and armed clashes. It is not yet safe for Rohingya people to return.

The generosity of Bangladesh in taking in more than 1.5 million refugees cannot be overstated. The pressure of responding to a humanitarian crisis on such a scale in the way that Bangladesh has would be difficult even for the wealthiest countries in the world. Although its economy is growing fast, Bangladesh remains one of the poorest countries in the world and needs our continued support to share responsibility for such a large and rapidly created diaspora.

Conditions in the camps are not good. Some of the MPs who are here to support the debate today have visited them. The plight of the people there is devastating. I have lived and seen real poverty, and I have seen the impact of conflict—the many displaced people, the people with nothing—but I have never seen anything like the suffering of the women and children in the camps we visited. The trauma etched on some of their faces still haunts me.

Vulnerable people and children have spent years living in squalid conditions. There are severe restrictions on the kind of temporary shelters Rohingya refugees can live in. Refugees' homes are not permitted sanitation, water or electricity, and there is little access to education and healthcare. They are surrounded by barbed wire fences and have no freedom of movement. Children born in the camps have never seen an existence beyond their makeshift tents.

We must use all our political clout to assist these destitute people with no means or obvious hope of building a new life or returning to their old ones. Bangladesh wants and needs to work with international donors and Rohingya people to develop long-term plans for hosting refugees in decent housing, with access to proper education and health services. Bangladesh cannot be expected to shoulder the bulk of the responsibility. Although I think that was understood by the UK Government and many others in the beginning, support is fading fast.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing such an important debate to the House. He is making an excellent speech, in particular about the plight of the Rohingya in the Cox's Bazar camps. Does he agree that it is beyond disappointing that less than 50% of the aid promised by the international community has yet to be received?

Mohammad Yasin: I thank my hon. Friend for making such an important point. That is what I am saying: aid from the international community has been cut by more than 50%. Aid from the UK has reduced by more than 82%. That is really affecting the people who are living in such difficult conditions. We must improve our aid and lead a campaign around the world to ensure more help for the people we have seen living in such poor conditions.

Sadly, the plight of the Rohingya and those living in the camps no longer gets the news coverage or the national or international attention that it deserves. As pressure grows, without an end in sight, there are signs of increasing discontent in the Bangladeshi host community over insecurity, economic costs and other negative effects of the refugee camps. In December, the UK led efforts to secure the first ever UN Security Council resolutions on the situation in Myanmar. UN Security Council resolution 2669 stresses the need to address the root causes of the crisis in Rakhine state and create the conditions necessary for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees.

But the situation in Myanmar has deteriorated since then and Amnesty International has documented widespread human rights violations, including war crimes and possible crimes against humanity as part of the military crackdown on the opposition across the country. The Myanmar military continues to arbitrarily arrest, torture and murder people with impunity two years after the coup. Since then, nearly 3,000 people have been killed and 1.5 million have been internally displaced. As hope of repatriation fades, so conditions in the refugee camps become more hopeless. A range of conflict mitigation approaches that involve citizens, the Bangladeshi state and the international community is urgently needed to alleviate inter-community tension and prevent further conflict.

On 5 March a huge fire tore through Cox's Bazar, destroying around 2,000 shelters and leaving around 12,000 Rohingya refugees homeless. Rations have been cut and criminal gangs operate freely in the camps, particularly preying on women. Poor security measures allow the Rohingya insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, and other criminal gangs to terrorise, extort and exploit refugees, leaving them vulnerable to sex and drug trafficking and radicalisation.

It has been reported by Human Rights Watch that safety has also deteriorated under the armed police battalion that took over security in the Rohingya camps

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

in July 2020 due to increased police abuses and corruption. UK aid must be met with more efforts from Bangladeshi authorities to investigate these alleged abuses of power to ensure that refugees are protected.

The UK Government have done a great deal to support the Rohingya, providing £350 million in aid to Bangladesh since 2017. Understandably, the world has turned its eyes and efforts to do all it can to support Ukraine, but the scale of the humanitarian crisis for the Rohingya must not be overlooked. It cannot be either/or.

To 6 March 2023, the UK had provided £15 million to the Rohingya response during 2022-23, and a further £5.26 million to be distributed through the World Food Programme. However, I am sorry to say that, despite the need being even greater than before, it is estimated that the British Government have cut aid for 2022-23 to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh by a staggering 82% since 2020. The majority of these refugees are children. We cannot give up on them. According to the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, 40% of children are suffering from stunted growth because of lack of nutrition. What is more, the World Food Programme announced that it was cutting the food provisions to all refugees in the camps by 17%. More cuts to basic human needs are expected if cuts in aid are not reversed.

The new UN appeal for funding for the current year—the 2023 Rohingya joint response plan—requires \$876 million. Only 15% of that fund has been met. So far, the British Government have contributed \$6.4 million to the plan. I urge the Government to review this when the spending plans for 2023-24 are confirmed.

Cutting the aid budget is short-sighted. The only way to prevent the diaspora and refugees seeking a place of sanctuary on our shores is to do all we can to stabilise their lives in their homes in host countries. Dire conditions are forcing refugees to risk dangerous boat journeys to escape. When host nations do not feel supported, hostility grows. A recent survey by the US Institute of Peace shows that 68% of Bangladeshi people think that the Rohingya should be sent back to Myanmar immediately.

The Government of Bangladesh will find it increasingly difficult to do the right thing politically without sustainable support from the international community. UK aid cuts are not only a humanitarian tragedy; they are undermining our ability to negotiate with Bangladesh to improve conditions for the Rohingya people in the camps.

Bangladeshi officials and Ministers say that theirs is a poor country. They are having to host a million refugees while richer countries do not pull their weight. Although Bangladesh can do more to improve conditions and security, there is the fundamental truth that the UK and the international community must step up their support.

Ultimately, the solution must be to create the conditions for the Rohingya to return home safely and securely, and with dignity. China, as one of the few countries with influence on the Myanmar junta, has been seeking to broker a repatriation process. This is important, but we should be cautious about both China and Myanmar's motivations.

The British Government have taken the lead in the international response to the attempted coup, rightly targeting sanctions on sources of revenue, arms and

equipment, but they are doing so too slowly. The British Government can and must do more to limit the ability of the military to commit human rights violations. It is good that the UK has agreed to join the Rohingya genocide determination case at the International Court of Justice, but while this process takes its course, I urge the Government to respond to calls for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss how the Burmese military are ignoring provisional orders to prevent ongoing genocide.

I hope that today's debate shows how much support there is in the British Parliament for the Rohingya refugees and for Bangladesh. I hope that it injects a renewed energy to address the causes and possible solutions that will enable the Rohingya to return voluntarily and safely to Myanmar as soon as conditions allow. The only real hope of achieving that is for the British Government to work with their international partners and with the Government of Bangladesh to meet the scale of the humanitarian disaster by fully restoring UK aid to Rohingya refugees above previous peak levels.

5.36 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on leading this important debate.

In March, I had the privilege of visiting Bangladesh. As well as meeting the honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and a number of businesses throughout the region, we visited the Rohingya refugee camp at Cox's Bazar. It was a very moving visit and brought home the harsh realities of Myanmar's relentless oppression, discrimination and victimisation of the Rohingya people, which has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

At the same time, it was encouraging to see the level of support being provided to the Rohingya by the Bangladeshi Government, who have assigned a substantial amount of money and land to provide a safe, temporary home to those who have been made involuntarily stateless. It was also good to meet those involved in running the camp and providing the vital services on which the residents rely. This includes those working at a women's health clinic who were offering ante-natal classes to pregnant women, as well as the people who were responsible for delivering water and energy and those providing education to resident children. These are tough jobs, but they are being done incredibly well in difficult circumstances. I was proud to see the "UK Aid" sign over the medical centre.

It is also important to mention that much of this work could not have been carried out without the significant contribution of the UK Government, having provided more than £340 million to the crisis since 2017. However, as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs put it:

"Despite progress, the Rohingya remain in an extremely precarious situation. The root causes of their plight in Myanmar have not been addressed and their future is yet uncertain. Refugees have access to the basics, such as food and healthcare, but they are still extremely vulnerable, living in highly challenging circumstances, exposed to the monsoon elements and dependent on aid."

This was clearly visible in the camp that we visited, where there was a deep fear of the incidents that had been occurring at night, as well as of the fires, mentioned

earlier, that have ripped through the camp on a number of occasions. Shortly before we visited, one fire engulfed an estimated 2,000 wooden shelters—making around 12,000 refugees homeless—and at least 35 mosques and 21 learning centres. From January 2021 to December 2022, there have been 222 fire incidents in the Rohingya camps, including 60 cases of arson. It is clear that the camps, while crucial to providing emergency shelter to refugees, are not a permanent solution.

Alongside providing funding to Bangladesh to support those in camps such as the one at Cox's Bazar, the UK Government must continue to utilise all their diplomatic firepower to bring an end to Myanmar's horrific treatment of the Rohingya people and ease the burden on countries such as Bangladesh that are having to deal with the humanitarian fallout. I would welcome an update from the Minister on recent actions the Government have taken to achieve that.

Many of the children I met at Cox's Bazar were young and small; they had clearly been born there and lived there their whole lives. That is no life. Those are innocent people who deserve to have a proper future. Please, let us do everything we can to give them one.

Finally, I take this opportunity, in the mother of all Parliaments, to thank the Government of Bangladesh—a country of only 52 years so far—for all that they have done to support the Rohingya, all the aid charities who work on site daily to help the residents, and the UK Government and other Governments for their aid. I also take the opportunity to impress upon those in charge in Myanmar that the world is watching. We ask them to stop the oppression of the Rohingya people and allow them to go home.

5.41 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this important debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for us to debate this issue. As he mentioned in his opening speech, in January this year we visited Cox's Bazar and south-eastern parts of Bangladesh with the all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh. I declare an interest, because the visit was funded by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the parliamentary group is one that I chair, along with the APPGs on Burma and on the rights of the Rohingya.

The Cox's Bazar area is a beautiful part of the world, with miles of sandy beaches, and has a reputation internally as a tourist destination, but now it is synonymous with the vast refugee camps that are home to 1 million Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya people are the most persecuted in the world, having had their citizenship rights stripped from them in the early 1980s by the Burmese military.

Before the January visit with colleagues, I had visited the camps a number of times, meeting with refugees and speaking to local and international agencies. I can tell the House that this is and remains an urgent and pressing humanitarian crisis. I also had the opportunity to visit Rakhine State on two occasions: once with Refugees International a few years after I was first elected, and then in 2017, before the attacks on the Rohingya population led to the forcing out of 750,000 people, who had to flee to Bangladesh.

Five years on, the situation has got worse, not better. The Burmese military, having perpetrated genocide and attacks on the Rohingya population and forced them out of Bangladesh, went on to carry out a military coup and oust the democratically elected Government two years ago. The impunity granted to the Burmese military over the genocide is a clear reason why it calculated that it could get away with a military coup in Myanmar.

Imran Hussain: I thank my hon. Friend for all her continued efforts for the Rohingyas and for that region, and I think Members across the House will agree. Does she agree that in autumn 2017, many of us stood in this Chamber and pleaded with the Government to take action when we saw the beginning of the ethnic cleansing and genocide, only to be told by Ministers that they would not interfere because of the fragile democracy in that region? As she says, what have we achieved by doing that? The Government's inaction has emboldened the military there.

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that, in the hope of securing a transition to democracy, the international community failed to see the dangers for minority groups in Burma. I think we can all recognise that that was a massive oversight, despite warnings from some of us in this House—not just in my party but in others—about the need to ease sanctions gradually rather than letting the Burmese military do as it pleased without any levers left for us to influence and curtail its behaviour. The reality is that it was not a full democracy: the Burmese military continued to control the police and the major security operations, and it used Aung San Suu Kyi as a human shield to defend its actions and the bloodshed and genocide that it committed. It is a great source of regret and disappointment that she then defended the military in the International Court of Justice case. That was completely unacceptable.

These are lessons that we all need to learn from rather than continuing in the same vein and allowing genocide to be perpetrated in other countries. In a number of countries—China in relation to the Uyghur Muslim population, for example—ethnic cleansing and human rights violations are increasingly being used by leaders as an acceptable policy tool. We have to do more to prevent ethnic cleansing and the persecution of minorities in a number of countries, and lessons need to be learned.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I celebrate my hon. Friend, who has campaigned and challenged on the Rohingya since the inception of this awful situation. Does she share my frustration that the Minister sat back when it came to declaring genocide and just waited for the international courts to do it? People are dying as a consequence of this situation.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful for the support that I have had from colleagues across the board, particularly on the Labour side, on this important issue and on ensuring that our Government take action to support the cause for justice in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. My hon. Friend is right that the UK, as the penholder in the UN Security Council in relation to Myanmar/Burma, has a unique and special responsibility.

[*Rushanara Ali*]

We have had a failure of leadership by our Government. That is not a criticism of the relatively new Minister of State with responsibility for the Indo-Pacific, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (*Anne-Marie Trevelyan*), who recently visited the camps in Cox's Bazar. I know that she is conscious of the need to seek justice. One of the ways in which we can protect the Rohingya people who remain in Burma is to ensure that the International Court of Justice case led by Gambia is properly supported. That case against the Burmese military is protecting people in Burma from being persecuted. I hope that the Minister will be able to address the point about the need for proper support. The UK Government announced last year that they would support that case, but we need to see that in concrete terms, with the UK joining the Netherlands, Canada and the other countries that were first out to support it. We should be leading the charge.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Member is making an informative and powerful speech. Does she agree that a number of major countries with huge clout should know better and should have done more and been stronger in their condemnation of the behaviour of the Myanmar regime? That has been disappointing.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who serves as a vice chair of the all-party group on Bangladesh and who is a powerful advocate for the Rohingya people, for working cross-party on this important issue. He is right that we could have done more and should do more, but we can rectify some of those mistakes by ensuring that we support the International Court of Justice case. I welcome the fact that the UK Government have agreed to support a referral to the International Criminal Court, but we need further clarity on what action will be taken to enable that to happen. I recognise the point made by the then Minister about the risk of the Chinese blocking a referral to the International Criminal Court, but we cannot use that as a justification for no action.

Despite the attacks on the Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Burma, the Rohingya are forgotten and face constant threats from the Burmese military in that country, along with other groups. We had a debate in Westminster Hall recently about the situation in Myanmar and the attacks and airstrikes by the Burmese military on their own people, which is causing the displacement of millions within the country and putting at risk their ability to survive because of the way in which the country has been devastated by the military coup and the actions of the Government there. Before, they were persecuting certain groups, in particular Rohingya refugees and other minorities. Now, the whole country is being persecuted by the Burmese military once again. They have seized control, and there seems to be no end in sight to their repression of the people of that country.

More than half the refugees in the camps in Cox's Bazar are children. A generation of children growing up in refugee camps are being denied a decent education, denied opportunities to grow and develop their talents and abilities, and denied a future. That is not to say that the Bangladeshi authorities and Bangladeshi NGOs, working with international NGOs, have not made an enormous effort. In a context where many countries,

including our own and other western countries, struggle to accommodate even a few thousand refugees, Bangladesh has accommodated 1 million refugees, and we commend it for that, but these areas need improvement with our support.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (*Mohammad Yasin*) on securing this important debate. The International Development Committee has long been concerned about the situation for Rohingya refugees, in particular those in Cox's Bazar refugee camp, which we visited some time ago. We saw how important UK aid funding was in supporting refugees there, in terms of both preventing extreme hunger and protecting women and girls from violence. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is crucial for the Government to rethink their 80% cut to aid funding for Rohingya refugees since 2019-20?

Rushanara Ali: I am really grateful to the hon. Lady, and I commend her for the work she does on the Committee and her commitment to this agenda, including her work on UN Women. Given that she is in the ruling party, I hope that even if Ministers do not pay attention to what we say, they might pay attention to her and her colleagues, who are making very important points with us. There is cross-party agreement on the need to support those who are struggling, not least because half of them are children and the majority are women.

This is a broader point, but if we are serious about addressing these issues and making sure that refugee crises around the world do not put people in a position where they have to risk their lives and find clandestine mechanisms to get to our shores at the hands of criminals and gangs who try to exploit them, we need to ensure that there is proper support in countries that are hosting the largest number of refugees. That is ultimately the only way in which we are going to be able to address these issues.

Therefore, it is in our self-interest to ensure that those who are in refugee camps in these countries get the appropriate support and protection that they need, so that they are not exploited, and also so that we do not need to use those resources in this country—resources that could go a long way. At the moment, the UK Government are spending £6 million of the overseas development aid budget per day on housing those who have got here, in order to keep them in shelter. If that continues because not enough action is being taken to address the source of the issues, the aid budget will diminish further, which cannot be right. We will have even less scope to help millions of people in other countries and get more value for our money in our aid efforts. These are interconnected issues, and I really hope that they are taken seriously, rather than politicised—which, sadly, has happened on the domestic front while people continue to suffer.

Returning to the way in which the Burmese military have acted, as I mentioned, we are seeing them continuing to act with impunity. That is why, in past debates, we have spoken out about the need for the UK Government to ensure that sanctions are placed on the Burmese military. I welcome some of those that have been introduced, but there is a lot more we can do to make sure the Burmese military do not continue to carry out airstrikes against their own people, because that is forcing more of their citizens to seek refuge elsewhere in other countries.

I pay tribute to our Government and aid agencies, as well as to the Government of Bangladesh and other authorities, for doing incredible work over the past five years to support those who need help—people who face a desperate situation, who have been traumatised and have lost family members. On top of all of that—on top of seeing members of their families brutally killed, women being raped and sons being killed in front of their fathers, which is what I was told on previous visits by men in the camps—they have since faced a global pandemic. They are in a country that is climate-vulnerable and susceptible to floods, and which has its own challenges with high levels of deprivation. For years and years we have seen people with no hope—no hope of being able to return to their homes and build a life with some sense of hope for the future.

That is why it is so disheartening that our Government have responded, not by ensuring that there is appropriate support on an ongoing basis, but by cutting the Rohingya refugee budget by more than 80%. I hope that the messages that have already been provided by colleagues across the House will be heeded, and that the Minister will do all she can to persuade her colleagues not to maintain that cut. According to Burma Campaign UK, what was £112 million in 2019-20 will be £20.26 million in the 2022-23 Budget. The interventions in the early years of the crisis were very welcome: they were significant interventions that saved lives, and of course, I commend the Government for what they did in those early years. All I ask is that Ministers do not continue with the cuts and that they look at restoring the support, for the reasons that have been made clear in the interventions and in the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford.

The need for aid and compassion is greater, not less. This is not about altruism; it is absolutely in our self-interest to act and make sure that we deal with the issues at source. The United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Burma, Tom Andrews, reported that 45% of Rohingya families are living on insufficient diets; half of the children are anaemic; four in 10 pregnant and breastfeeding women are anaemic; and four in 10 children have their growth stunted because of poor diets. Imagine what will happen when the budgets go down further. In a letter to United Nations member states in response to what could be a series of further cuts to World Food Programme food rations for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, he said:

“These cuts will be devastating for a traumatised population that is already suffering from widespread malnutrition”.

As has already been said, when the cross-party delegation that I was a part of visited the camps in Cox’s Bazar in January 2023, people highlighted just how challenging the circumstances were. When I first visited the camps in 2018, a year after the exodus when all those 750,000 people fled to Cox’s Bazar, the men and women, but particularly the women were relieved, although the camps’ conditions were not good, to be in a place where they were not going to be killed. That is how they saw it. They were just relieved that they could sleep without being taken away and raped. They felt that they had found refuge, and they were incredibly grateful to have that. The problem is that years and years on, they cannot see any signs of hope, and it is a true sign of desperation when some of those people say that they would consider going back, even though going back is not an option and the dangers are even greater.

Given how the Rohingya are feeling and where they are in terms of a lack of hope—for reasons that we can understand—we cannot have a situation where we make matters worse by reducing food rations and putting them in a position where there is no hope, and where their survival is in danger. We heard from refugees about that despair and hopelessness, while the people responsible for genocide are still in power with no justice for the Rohingyas. They told us that they had no conception that five years on, they would still be living in refugee camps with little chance of safe return home.

Our lasting impression is that the plight of the Rohingya remains a stain on the conscience of the world. Every humanitarian, diplomatic and Government effort needs to be focused on securing justice for the Rohingya people. That must include safe return to their homes and the legal prosecution of those responsible for the genocide. Women in Cox’s Bazar told us that they wanted more autonomy within the camps. They raised concerns about their safety and that of girls, especially after dark, when the aid workers are absent and there is a lack of security and little light. Notwithstanding the heroic efforts of the aid agencies within Bangladesh, as well as the international agencies and the major NGOs, the Rohingya are living on the brink of what feels like a constant state of humanitarian crisis that will only get worse, not better, if we do not play our part. There is a massive and vital role for international aid, and budgets should be increased as soon as possible to avert disaster.

The situation is worsening, with around 350 people having died at sea trying to escape. That highlights the desperation of the situation. Hostility towards the Rohingya population is increasing in Bangladesh. There was a huge welcome in the beginning and people were helping all over the country, but years have gone by and they have their own pressures, and some of the hostilities are growing. The US Institute of Peace suggests that nearly 70% of Bangladeshi people say that the Rohingya should be sent back to Myanmar immediately, despite the obvious and apparent dangers. Even within the camps, children are denied access to education, and no permanent homes are to be constructed. Refugees are being denied proper sanitation, water and electricity.

There is also the ever-present danger of epidemics. The World Health Organisation reported in March 2023:

“Beyond COVID-19, persistent threats in Cox’s Bazar include diseases such as dengue, diphtheria, and cholera, as well as environmental health challenges like cyclones, floods, and landslides.”

There is evidence of criminal gangs preying on vulnerable people. A report published by the London School of Economics in February stated:

“All the 34 extremely congested camps in...Cox’s Bazaar...have become hubs of organised crime of Rohingya militant groups like the ARSA”—

the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army—

“and other criminal gangs. These groups control everything from drug trafficking to extortion”.

There is also an increased danger of fires. In March this year, a terrible fire ripped through camp 11 in Cox’s Bazar, leaving 12,000 people homeless for a second time. So we need to recognise that the situation is not sustainable, and we have to be active partners and provide the resources needed to make sure the situation does not get worse.

[Rushanara Ali]

There is much that still needs to be done. Repatriation of Rohingya people is currently impossible, as has been stated. The British Government should make it clear to international partners that there can be no forced repatriation of Rohingya people back to Myanmar. The Rohingya can only return when their citizenship rights are reinstated, and when their full human rights are respected and protected. The UK Government, who have of course slashed these budgets, need to make sure that that support is reinstated. Aid cuts to the Rohingya refugees need to be reversed. The cut in humanitarian aid is now working as a push factor, forcing more people to risk their lives to find a better life, and dying, as I have pointed out. The 50% cut in the UK aid budget to Burma since the coup needs to be reversed if we are not to see a further deterioration in people's conditions within that country.

As I have said, we welcome the British Government support in principle for a referral to the International Criminal Court and their support for the International Court of Justice referral, and I hope we will get more information from the Minister on what that will mean. It is clear from the continuous reporting that these measures are not being implemented and the Burmese military is still getting away with genocide. So we urge the British Government to support any other justice initiatives taking place, including universal jurisdiction cases, and to reconsider British laws in relation to making universal jurisdiction cases possible in this country.

We must increase the aviation fuel sanctions on Burma, because the military is increasingly using its air power to target civilians across the country. The British Government should speed up sanctioning, and cut off all sources of revenue and arms to the military. This includes sanctioning Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise and the natural gas industry. The British Government should also increase pressure on India and Pakistan to stop supplying arms and equipment to the Burmese military.

We need to improve in practical ways the support we provide so that conditions are not deteriorating further for the people in Cox's Bazar. We need to make sure that the Bangladesh Government have the support and encouragement so desperately needed to ensure that education and training are provided to half a million children in that country. We need to allow for proper utilities to be provided, including clean water, electricity, lighting, and drains and sewage, or the situation will just continue to get worse. Action and support are required to make sure that criminal gangs do not prey on the most vulnerable people in the world, which is what is happening at the moment.

I am grateful to the Minister for the visit she made recently, and I hope she will recognise the strength of feeling in this House. Over 100 MPs and peers have supported the campaigns we have run over the years for support in the camps for the most persecuted refugee population in the world. It is not a competition, and we need to support refugees wherever they are—notably, of course, with what is happening in Sudan and Ukraine—but we need to make sure that support is not diverted away from one group to another, because that is not right and it is not going to serve our national interests either.

My plea to the Minister is that I hope she will find the resources needed urgently to stabilise the situation in the camps. I am grateful to colleagues across the House for their support for our campaigns. Ministers have changed regularly, but I believe that it is because of the campaigns from colleagues across the House and in both houses that we have managed to get the referrals and the support for the referrals on the international justice side. I hope the Minister will recognise the strength of feeling about the need to restore the aid budget for those who need it in the camps.

6.10 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), a key voice on all Bangladesh issues, particularly this one.

Since being elected to this place I have had the opportunity to visit Bangladesh three times, which is quite a lot really. I initially went to Bangladesh because I have quite a large number of British Bengali constituents; I met a few people then and made a few connections and ended up going twice more—the only times I have been to Asia are when I have been to Bangladesh.

I have been to the Rohingya refugee camp three times as well. When going somewhere a number of times there is a danger that the power of the experience might diminish, but it has not. Every time I visit the Rohingya refugee camp I leave with the same feeling and sensation, and I believe that that will continue to be the case if I visit again.

I have been to lots of different parts of the camp, including Bhasan Char, the island, where I took part in a quick game of football. There are some ways in which the accommodation there is better than that of the main camp; I understand others have concerns about it, but there are some opportunities for livelihoods there, which is not the case in the main part of the camp.

I remember a lot of the conversations I had at the Rohingya refugee camp, and I remember the look in the eyes of a couple of the refugees I met and the slight terror in their eyes when I spoke to them about their experiences. That will probably be what sticks with me the most, particularly from the visit I made to the camp in January when I went with the all-party group on Bangladesh. I will never forget some of those conversations. They really are the most genuine refugees it is possible to meet: the experiences they have gone through; the horror they have experienced; a lot of the women there have been repeatedly raped, and have lost fathers, sons or husbands in the most brutal of ways; chased, driven from their homes purely for their ethnicity, their religion, for who they are—hated for what they are; driven from their homes for what they are.

Sadly, it continues to be the case that huge numbers of people of Muslim faith across the world continue to experience this persecution, and that should never be forgotten. No one religion is immune from dipping its toes in evil; we have seen that in Myanmar, and we must never forget that.

I went to the camp in January with colleagues including the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). I forgot to thank him at the start of the debate for his successful application, which I was happy to support behind the scenes—I am a Parliamentary Private Secretary so I could not officially do so, but I like to think that

I was a steady force of support behind the scenes. Four of us went on the trip in January and I was the only Conservative Member of Parliament, but the politics have been stripped out of this issue: it is about our humanity, and I feel very passionate about working closely together. Actually, it is good that, on a Tuesday when a lot of people have other things on their mind, there is a decent turnout and it is a cross-party turnout for the debate. That should be taken into account. I am really pleased how many people have turned up for the debate and how many speakers we will have and interventions will be made.

From what we could see, a lot of good things were happening at the schools that we went to. Burmese was being taught to the children there. The children seemed happy. But my concern is about when they get a bit older because of the inability to have a livelihood, or to have any future at all. That is when a lot of the problems start. Many teenagers and people in their 20s and 30s are completely directionless with nothing to do and can be victim to gangs: that is a significant concern we had when we left the camp. The situation they face is unique because they have effectively become stateless. That puts them in a more vulnerable position than almost any other group of refugees in the world. I do not want to start comparing different types—a refugee is a refugee—but they are particularly vulnerable; they are stateless. It is true that, when they first found safety in Bangladesh, a lot of them were just thankful to be free from persecution. However, one year became two years, three years, four years and five years, and they look to the future and see no hope.

When it comes to aid, the UK has made a generous contribution. The Government have to make really difficult decisions in the wake of the pandemic, where hundreds of billions of pounds were spent, so I am not just going to say that it was a mistake to cut the international aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5%—I was one of the people who completely understood why the Government did that—but there is a question: within the 0.5% we are spending on international aid, could we channel more to the Rohingya camp to support them because the demands have only gone up? The population of the camp has increased, so, if anything, the amount of money that we should be providing should be going up, not down.

We have played a leading role through the UN and the UN resolutions. It has been disappointing that many other countries have not played a bigger role in condemning the Myanmar regime. There is a question about what role India and Pakistan are playing in condemning the Myanmar regime. Are they comfortable with the role that they have played? Do they think that they have done enough? I think it needs to be an international response.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I apologise for intervening. My hon. Friend is talking about countries that could do more. Is not the reality that a big, important country is deliberately undermining any efforts made on the Rohingya, and that is China? It is about its relationship with Burma, its support for Burma, weapons and everything else. It is doing this all over the world. Surely when the Government think about our relationship with China, they need to consider what China is doing in other countries and not just among the Uyghur Muslims.

Tom Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his intervention. He never has to apologise for intervening on me; it is always a great privilege to be intervened on by such a distinguished colleague. On this, he is completely right, as he is on many other issues. China is playing a sinister role in the Rohingya crisis, and it is concerning to think that economic ties with China may be getting in the way of some countries seeing the issue for what it is: a moral crisis where a clear rogue state is inflicting misery now on upwards of 1 million people. That is an important point to make.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Further to what my very good friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), said on China, may I remind the House that once you define a crisis as genocide, articles 1 and 2 of the genocide convention say that every signatory should take action to sort it out and that includes military force? We are signatory to that convention. This is a clear case of genocide, so we have to do all that we can to sort it out.

Tom Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for intervening. I have sympathy with what he said. When the crisis began, it grabbed the attention of our country and our media, but I have to say I am surprised how little about the Rohingya crisis has been written about in our national media over the past year or so and how little coverage there has been. Of course, our hearts go out to Ukrainian refugees, and we have to do what we can to support them and any other country, but the situation of the Rohingya is without precedent in many senses. They are so vulnerable—the majority are young people and women—and we have to get attention back on what is happening there because there appears to be no end to the misery. I can see no pathway in the medium term for the situation realistically to get any better—it is probably going to get worse.

I will talk briefly about the Bangladesh Government. As I said, I have been to Bangladesh three times since I was elected. It is important that we recognise the situation that Bangladesh is in. It is one of the fastest growing economies and has, I believe, a very bright future, but it is still a developing country and—I have seen it in Bangladesh—certain areas still have significant levels of deprivation. The Government there have a huge challenge when it comes to tackling inequality in their own country; I have seen some of that poverty across Bangladesh through visits with colleagues. So it is unfair to ask them to shoulder this burden alone. They have given a huge amount of financial support.

I would echo the comments of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. I am concerned about the sentiment among the Bangladeshi population and how it may subtly change over time. To be honest, I noticed that a little in my visit in February 2022 and in my most recent visit; I have noticed a subtle change. That is my concern because they cannot shoulder the burden alone. As just one example, in the area to which the Rohingya refugees initially fled, a couple of people were killed by elephants and a huge amount of work was done to divert the elephants. A huge amount of work has been going on. Returning to the point about international aid, I have occasionally been sceptical about international aid. Whether it is 0.7% or 0.5%, I believe there is scope for us to recognise the uniqueness of the Rohingya situation and the pressures and to make a further contribution. That is very important.

[Tom Hunt]

I make a point now about the short to medium term: when does this end? What is the pathway to it ending? At what point do we say, “Enough is enough. Something has to be done”? When I asked some refugees at the camp what they wanted, they just said that they wanted to go home. That is all they want. They want to go home safely. But is that a realistic prospect in the next year, two years or three years? At what point do we say, “Enough is enough. The wait has gone on too long. There is no realistic prospect of things getting any better”? They cannot safely go back to their homes, so at that point we will begin to have to start thinking about the possibility of resettlement.

I understand why Bangladesh is wary of any conversation about the majority of those at the camp staying. I have touched on the reasons why it would be unfair for Bangladesh to shoulder the burden alone. We might have to enter the conversation about a resettlement programme, but the question is: at what point are we going to do that? In many respects, that would be a great shame because one of the places I went when I visited the Rohingya camp in January was the Rohingya cultural centre, where we learnt about Rohingya culture. If it were the case that they could not return home, the concern would be that that culture would be destroyed and lost and we would be giving in to this barbaric regime. The end goal we want is for the Rohingya to go home and for that culture to be preserved and enriched. That is what we need to strive for, but if we cannot deliver that, at what point do we say, “Enough is enough”?

The camp is growing in size each year, the suffering continues and people are looking to the future with no hope. There is no way for them to have a livelihood or build a future. There needs to be some kind of conversation about when we should start turning to different options if we cannot get what we all want, which is for them to safely return home.

This debate has been necessary because many Members across the House have been to the camp and have been moved and forever changed by our experience. We want this debate to help raise the profile of the issue and to put it further up the Government’s agenda, so we can do more to support some of the most desperate people in the world, and be part of an international effort to ensure that those behind it pay for the misery that they have inflicted on almost 1 million people, who have been persecuted because of who they are. So we need to do more. We need to support the Bangladeshi Government in every way we can to end this.

6.25 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a huge honour to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), whose passion and knowledge of this topic came out well. I am hugely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this timely debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it, because it gives us the opportunity to speak today and draw attention to this sadly forgotten crisis.

It has been nearly six years since the Rohingya people fled violence and persecution in Myanmar to seek sanctuary in Bangladesh. We must be clear that the root cause of

the crisis rests squarely with the Myanmar military, which has never recognised the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar and has fought a brutal campaign against them. We commend the Bangladeshi Government and their people for opening their borders and allowing the Rohingya into the country. However, the past six years have not been easy for around 1 million Rohingya refugees who live in camps in Cox’s Bazar.

The situation only seems to get worse. The Rohingya refugees are still living precarious lives in flimsy, overcrowded shelters, because they are banned from using permanent construction materials and from installing water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure. Children do not have access to full formal education, and most Rohingya are prevented from earning a living. The dire situation has been compounded by devastating floods and fires in the camp, which have destroyed thousands of shelters and brought additional trauma to already vulnerable inhabitants.

As the crisis has become protracted, the camps have not provided safe havens. Instead, the Rohingya face violence and intimidation from neighbouring communities and increasing militant activity, as armed groups seek to dominate the camps. That is no way for anyone to live.

Since 2017, the international community has stepped in to support the Government of Bangladesh to host the refugees and to provide basic services. I am grateful that the UK has provided more than £350 million in funding since the start of the crisis. But, as happens all too often, the plight of the Rohingya fell out of the news bulletins and off our TV screens, and so did our support. Russia’s war in Ukraine has both diverted our attention and driven up food and fuel prices around the world, causing needs to rise just when budgets are being spread ever more thinly. In March, the World Food Programme announced, unbelievably, its first ration cuts for Rohingya refugees, going from \$12 to \$10 dollars per person per month. That was a crushing blow to the nearly 1 million people who rely on that vital lifeline.

Those cuts might not be the end of the misery. The World Food Programme has warned that, if sufficient funds cannot be found, it will have to make further cuts. The consequences of such cuts could be felt for many years to come. Malnutrition in the Rohingya communities in the camps is already causing grave concern. Increases in malnutrition today will inevitably drive up the need for assistance tomorrow. Children under five, adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women are most at risk. Complications from malnutrition and stunting in children will cause developmental delay, jeopardising those children’s life chances.

The additional £5.26 million in funding for the Rohingya response, announced by the Minister in March, is welcome, but it is not enough. Reducing our support also reduces our diplomatic influence with the Government of Bangladesh, and therefore our ability to call for the human rights of the Rohingya to be respected and upheld. To support intercommunal relations, the UK must work with its partners to ensure that the humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar addresses the needs of both Rohingya refugees and host communities living in the vicinity.

As we move towards the general election in Bangladesh in January 2024, it is crucial that the Rohingya crisis does not become a political football in the campaign. In our report, “Humanitarian crises monitoring: the Rohingya”, the International Development Committee raised fears that the Government of Bangladesh would

relocate Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, a silt island in the bay of Bengal. Unfortunately, those fears have been realised, and around 28,000 refugees are now living on that island. How can those refugees exercise their right to freedom of movement when they are located on a remote island?

Increasing numbers of Rohingya are setting out on perilous journeys in small boats to countries in the region, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, and we can imagine the consequences of some of those missions. The Committee raised concerns about that development in 2021, but the situation continues to deteriorate. More Rohingya died at sea in 2022 than in any other year since the crisis began in 2017. We all know how important it is to stop those perilous journeys, and the solutions lie at the source.

The hostile security situation in Myanmar means that a safe and dignified return for the Rohingya is currently unthinkable. Since the military took over in a coup in February 2021, the situation has only deteriorated. The Myanmar military and security forces have arrested thousands of activists and carried out attacks on ethnic groups across the country. We must shine a spotlight on those atrocities and ensure that the perpetrators are held to account for them. I welcome the UK's announcement that it will join the Rohingya genocide case at the International Court of Justice. That is the right thing to do and an important step in securing justice for the Rohingya. The UK is the penholder on Myanmar at the UN Security Council.

Today, I am not asking for more funding, although I will take it, even though I am not asking for it. I am asking for political leadership. I welcome the resolution that the UK brought forward to stress the need to address the root causes of the crisis in Rakhine state and to create the conditions necessary for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees. However, building on the point so eloquently made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the UK must do more to bring together key actors to work towards de-escalation. Also, it cannot be so nervous about China and Russia vetoing any action as to be rendered useless.

The International Development Committee's report on preventing future mass atrocities around the world called on the UK Government to

"introduce a cross-departmental strategy for preventing and responding to mass atrocities globally, both within and outside of conflicts."

I urge the Government to reconsider their negative response to that key recommendation. They need a clear strategy to respond to the heinous violence taking place in Myanmar to ensure that refugee populations can safely return home. To be honest, nothing else will work.

6.33 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this incredibly important debate, and thank everybody who worked hard to support his application.

At the outset, I declare an interest: I have been to Bangladesh twice, supported by the Zi Foundation, a charity set up by my constituent, Zillur Hussain. The Zi Foundation supports charitable endeavours here in the UK and back in Bangladesh, where Mr Hussain is from. When I was in Bangladesh, I saw some of the

relief efforts the foundation has set up in Sylhet province. We met business leaders and Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and we visited Cox's Bazar refugee camp on two separate occasions. Last time I went to Cox's Bazar, aid agency workers showed us the sanitation and healthcare facilities and some of the new accommodation that has been set up since the recent fires. All that had been provided through aid, much of it from the UK.

Of course, I was very pleased to see this money being spent in such an incredibly useful way, but one experience stayed with me. A gentleman showed me and the other parliamentarians with whom I had gone there—many of them are in the Chamber—around his modest shelter. He showed us the place that he called home, which he shared with his family. He was proud of what he had. However, we also saw children running around. As the father of a three-year-old and an eight-year-old, I can tell the House that seeing children living in that camp, and the awareness that that is all they have ever known, changes you: it has a lasting impact.

That man who showed me around his home was very proud, but the difference between him and me was that I got to go home; I got to leave. He could not go home, because he was no longer welcome there. He had been forcibly expelled from the place that he called home, and was now living in a refugee camp.

I met people who had seen their daughters, their mothers, their sisters raped; people who had seen their brothers, their fathers, their sons murdered. It changes a person to hear that directly. I am not the sort of person who is usually shocked by anything, but I know that when I describe hearing those stories, I also speak on behalf of many of the Members, across parties, who were with me. One of them was my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt). The first time we visited the camp, we had a longer meeting with a group of refugee and camp leaders. As we sat with them, they told us stories that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I now want to make three points. The first is that this is not a new issue, the second is about aid, and the third is about Bangladesh.

Sadly, what is happening is not new. It has been going on since the second world war, and I think that the British Government have a unique role in trying to resolve this crisis. In fact, I think we have a moral duty to do what we can to support the Rohingya. During world war two, the Rohingya Muslim population of Rakhine province supported the British, whereas some of the other populations there supported the Japanese. The Rohingya fought bravely, with the British, through the jungles of Burma. I think they had the understanding that they would have a Muslim state of their own, but in the end that did not happen; Burma gained independence.

This has been going on since 1947. We are a power in the world, and we have a moral duty to support these people who once supported us on the battlefield. As I have said, this is not new: there has been significant violence, and there have been flare-ups and persecutions of the Rohingya population in 1978, 1991, 2015, 2016 and 2017. Operation Dragon King, instigated by the Myanmar—then Burmese—Government, was a mission to expel those whom they called foreigners, namely the Rohingya. This has been going on for all that time. It was estimated in a 2017 report produced by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that 43,000 people had

[Paul Bristow]

been murdered, and a 2018 report from Harvard University said that 24,000 had been murdered and 18,000 women and girls had been raped. It has been going on for decades; it is not a new issue.

Of course, the UK Government have been very generous with aid. Ours is one of the leading countries in supporting the Rohingya with aid, and that has to be recognised. On an international basis, however, I hope the Minister recognises that, as a country that has a unique and leading role to play as a member of the Security Council and a country that owes so much to the Rohingya people themselves, we should step up and secure citizen rights for the Rohingya and then a safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation to their home. I want to see a situation in which the man I met is able, like me, to go home, with his family, and I urge the Government to use all their diplomatic power to that end.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Member is making an excellent, passionate speech. I do not often say that about him in this Chamber, but I will on this occasion. The spirit today is very clear: we are taking a cross-party approach, as is right and proper, and that is when this House is at its best.

Talking about safe routes, I have one of the largest Rohingya populations in my constituency, and many of them have family who are eligible to come to this country through legal routes. I have been pressing the Government on this for three years now, but tragically, due to the red tape requirements such as TB tests, those Rohingya communities cannot come out of the Cox's Bazar camps and join their families here. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the very least we can do is to allow those who are legally eligible to come to this country to be reunited with their families?

Paul Bristow: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, and the Minister will have heard exactly what he has said. There is an all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh, led by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) with my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich as a vice-chair, and I would urge him and others to come together with me to talk about this and see what pressure we can bring to bear to resolve some of these issues.

What I am keen to stress is that this cannot be left on the “too difficult to do” pile. This cannot be a situation that goes on and on and on. If any country is going to lead the international effort to resolve this problem and to allow that dignified safe and voluntary return, it is the UK, and I would hope that that message has been heard loud and clear. There are challenges. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) made an incredibly powerful point about China, and we should not be afraid to call such things out.

The second point I want to talk about is aid. The UK Government have provided about £350 million to support 449,000 people through the World Food Programme, and when we were in that refugee camp, we saw where that money was going. It was going on food, shelter, healthcare, water and sanitation. This aid is changing lives. It is providing the basics—actually, to be fair, more than the basics. I saw some of the voluntary aid workers there, and what they were providing was very

impressive. The way they were managing to supply that vulnerable population was very impressive, and I left with a sense of admiration for the volunteers and the professionals who are dedicating their lives to saving lives among some of the world's most vulnerable populations. I give my admiration and my thanks to them.

I support the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow in saying that our international development budget should be spent on what it is supposed to be spent on, which is international development. It needs to be targeted at places such as those we all saw when we went to Cox's Bazar, because if we do not tackle these problems at source, they will come back and hit us later on. I think there is a firm recognition of that, and I hope we will see that made incredibly clear in the Minister's remarks today. We have done a lot, but there is certainly a lot more to do.

Finally, I want to talk a little bit about the response from the Government of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is not a rich country, but it is a country with a big heart and enormous potential. Its economy is growing incredibly quickly, but it is absolutely clear that it does not have the resources to support a refugee population such as this for any considerable period of time. The willingness of Bangladesh to work with the international community, and with the UK, should be commended. What it has done is incredibly impressive and perhaps not recognised enough by the international community.

I am going to see the honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, when she comes to Cambridgeshire, my county, in a few days' time on bank holiday Monday. She is coming to the Cambridge central mosque and then to a children's hospital that I think one of her relatives has something to do with. I am looking forward to seeing her, and I will make the point again that I made to her when I was in Bangladesh, which will be to say a big thank you on behalf of the UK Government. That is the first thing we should say when we talk about this issue: a big thank you for what Bangladesh has done. I am not blind to the challenges that Bangladesh faces, including—perhaps—the beginning of some resentment from the local population about the support for the Rohingya population, but we should all remember the fact that it has provided so much when it is not a rich country.

I looked out of the window when we were on the plane travelling to Cox's Bazar and I was struck by the beauty of the area, with its rolling beaches. The area is prime for development, and there is a growing tourism industry in that part of Bangladesh. The most important thing is for Bangladesh to have a big heart and to support its neighbour and the fellow Muslims on its border, and of course that is what the Bangladesh Government have done, but that area could enrich Bangladesh and make it a much more successful country. Having welcomed these very vulnerable people in, Bangladesh cannot use its tourism industry right now—we sometimes forget that impact on the country. Again, we have to start from the premise that what Bangladesh has done is incredibly impressive and we in the international community should all be grateful for it.

Let me end my remarks by reiterating that Britain has a unique role and a unique duty when it comes to the Rohingya. This cannot be left on the “too difficult to deal with” pile. The UK has been leading international aid efforts, and we should all be very proud of that. A lot has been done, but there is a lot more to do.

6.46 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this important debate. I refer the House to my declaration of interests. In March, I had the pleasure of visiting Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. I was blown away by the unbelievable resilience of the Rohingya people living there. Over 1 million refugees live in Cox's Bazar, with more than 900,000 of those having fled persecution in Myanmar.

I was a nurse for 25 years, and I worked in public health all my working life before being elected to Parliament. The conditions that vulnerable refugees in Bangladesh face are some of the worst I have witnessed. Living conditions in Cox's Bazar are extremely poor, with overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and limited access to clean water meaning that infectious disease spreads very easily. Chronic malnutrition is also a major concern: 40% of children suffer from stunted growth, 45% of Rohingya families have insufficient diets, and 41% of pregnant and breastfeeding women are anaemic and just do not have access to the health services they need.

Many refugees have experienced trauma, including violence, displacement, grief and loss, all of which can lead to significant mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I am a lay manager at my local NHS trust in Birmingham and I know the difficulties that many people face with their mental health here in the UK. We can only imagine how difficult it must be for people who have been forced away from their homes and families and seen indescribable violence along the way.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): What my hon. Friend is saying about what she saw at Cox's Bazar is heartrending. As the hon. Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) said, this has been going on for six years. We cannot allow it to continue for another six years. The international community must bring an end to it, with Great Britain playing a leading role.

Mrs Hamilton: I absolutely support what my hon. Friend says. This has to come to an end.

When I went to Bangladesh, it was an absolute honour to go to those camps. Sometimes, it does not matter what you read; you have to see it and experience it. When I went there I saw the conditions that people were living in. The hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) talked about the small house that a number of us went into. The gentleman was quite proud, because that was all he had to call his home. But then you think about what they do not have and the fact that they were worried about it becoming dark because it then becomes lawless. It was uplifting to see that he was proud, but it was really sad to see what they have gone through, what they are experiencing and what was about to happen, even on the night we left the camp. It really opened my eyes.

Governments have to get together and support the Bangladeshi Government to get this travesty ended. As with any conflict, the impact has hit women and girls disproportionately hard. UN Women has said that most women and girls in the camps in Cox's Bazar are either survivors of, or witnesses to, gender-based violence.

Fires in the camps, which were highlighted earlier, are a significant problem, with the most recent, in March this year, destroying health facilities, waterworks, women's centres, learning centres and mosques. Those things are important to these people.

It is now over five years since the Rohingya crisis began. While I am glad to see the Government's recent announcement of a funding package to help over 400,000 people through the World Food Programme, it is still concerning that UK aid to this crisis has fallen by 82% since 2020. It is imperative that UK Government support continues and focuses on the serious public health issues and chronic malnutrition in the camps. In the midst of the Government's rhetoric and unworkable gimmicks on migration, it is also important that we remember how much value refugees bring to the UK. I was overwhelmed by the willingness of the Government of Bangladesh to support the refugees and not to give up on the Rohingya, but they cannot do it alone. I hope both sides of this House can work together to improve the safety, security and health of all the Rohingya people living in the largest refugee settlement in the world.

6.53 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank every Member, without exception, across the House who has spoken during the debate, for their authoritative, impassioned and moving speeches, many if not most of which were well informed by personal visits. Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for calling me, but in the light of such a high-quality debate, I feel that all I can do is echo the profound concerns that have been expressed for the Rohingya, but I do want to do so because I want to put it on record that I share them.

Few, if any, communities around the world have suffered such severe, grave, continuous and prolonged persecution as the Rohingya. They have been targeted both by the Myanmar military and by extremists from the Rakhine ethnic group and by other proponents of religious intolerance and extremist Buddhist nationalism within Myanmar.

The Rohingya people have been the victims of a sustained and appalling campaign of hate speech, discrimination, violence and, since 2016-17, a campaign that resulted in atrocity crimes, which the US Administration and other international experts have recognised as genocide. The Rohingya are targeted because of their ethnicity and their predominantly Muslim faith.

Since August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have fled Myanmar into neighbouring Bangladesh. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, at the end of March this year there were nearly 961,000 refugees in Bangladesh, almost all of whom are settled in refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh, forming the world's largest refugee settlement. More than a million Rohingya people have fled Myanmar in successive waves of displacement since the 1990s. The UNHCR said in an emergency appeal that

"most walked for days through jungles or mountains, or braved dangerous sea voyages across the Bay of Bengal. They arrived exhausted, hungry and sick—in need of international protection and humanitarian assistance."

Since the coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, the human rights and humanitarian crisis inside the country has only worsened. The very military that perpetrated

[Fiona Bruce]

the atrocities against the Rohingya are now inflicting similar atrocities against other ethnic groups, particularly the predominantly Christian Chin, Kachin and Karenni, as well as the Karen population, which has a significant Christian population. Indeed, I recently met a teacher from the Karen population who told me how, in order to give the children any education at all, they could not use any of the schools; they had to teach them in the forests and in the trenches to avoid the airstrikes.

This military regime are brutally suppressing civil society, independent media and pro-democracy activists. It is such a sad change from the country of Myanmar that I travelled across just a few years ago, where I met young people who were so hopeful about the future of their country. The conditions for the safe and voluntary return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, therefore, are almost certainly not there at present. Indeed, as the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said as recently as March this year, the small Rohingya community that remains in Myanmar

“continues to face widespread and systematic discrimination in every area of life”—

and that—

“the necessary conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified returns of refugees to Rakhine State simply do not exist.”

Yet Bangladesh, which has provided sanctuary for the Rohingya for many years, cannot be expected to shoulder this responsibility alone, as indeed we have heard tonight. Bangladesh is preparing a pilot scheme for repatriation, which Human Rights Watch has called for a halt to because

“lives and liberty may be at grave risk.”

Conditions in the camps in Bangladesh are dire, leading to thousands of Rohingya refugees risking their lives in precarious boat journeys across the sea to south-east Asia, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, in search of a better life. Traffickers who facilitate these dangerous sea crossings are giving Rohingya refugees false promises and false hope and placing them in grave danger yet again.

The Rohingya people are trapped. They are stateless, unable to return home to Myanmar, unwelcome in other countries in the region, and in a desperate situation in Bangladesh. The solutions to this appalling humanitarian crisis are twofold: in the immediate term, increased aid to the refugees in Bangladesh to improve their conditions and security, and to assist the Bangladeshi authorities in supporting the refugees; and in the long-term, pressure on the military regime to stop their campaign of crimes against humanity and war crimes, action to hold the military accountable for their crimes, and pressure on the democracy movement to ensure that, in any future democratic transition in Myanmar—when it happens—the Rohingya people’s right to citizenship and basic human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, are respected, protected and upheld.

In closing, I welcome the Government’s provision of £350 million in aid to Rohingya refugees since 2017 and of £15 million in 2022-23 alone, but there is a need to do more. Will Ministers commit to reviewing the needs of the Rohingya refugees and ensuring an increase in aid this year and in the years ahead? Will they commit to working with like-minded countries to ensure that no

Rohingyas are repatriated to Myanmar against their will? Will it be a priority for this Government to do everything possible to protect the Rohingyas’ dignity, their rights and the better future that they deserve and that they have, for far too long, been so tragically denied?

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

7 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called in this hugely important debate on support for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. I thank the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this debate and the hon. Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions to it.

In particular, I single out the contribution by the hon. Member for Rotherham, the Chair of the International Development Committee, highlighting the stark reality of what is happening to a group of people who are widely recognised as being the most persecuted minority in the world. When the United Kingdom Government slash their foreign aid budget overnight, she also highlighted just what happens when people are left without hope.

As we have heard many times in this debate, the Rohingya people are not in Bangladesh because they want to be. They are there, suffering some of the worst living conditions on the planet, because they are fleeing what the United Nations has described as an “ongoing genocide” at the hands of the Myanmar military. They are there because the dire humanitarian conditions, the squalor, the constant risk of fire and the incredible overcrowding of those camps are still better than that from which they are fleeing.

Right now, those refugee camps are also safer than what the Rohingya would face had they to return. The threat of displacement, gender-based sexual violence and murder is every bit as real now as it was in 2017, when up to 1 million fled to the relative safety of Bangladesh. I remember five years ago that the journalist and documentary filmmaker Simon Reeve, who visited one of the camps, said it was,

“like nothing I have seen anywhere on Planet Earth. This speaks of a Biblical exodus of an entire people terrorised into fleeing.”

As colleagues from both sides of the House have testified all too often this evening, he was sadly correct.

What we witnessed in 2017 was the deliberate attempt at religious and ethnic cleansing on behalf of the Myanmar military. It had been building for 60-odd years, as the Bamar-dominated military launched successive efforts to Burmanise the country. They began with excluding ethnic minorities from the political process, limiting social and economic development among ethnic minority groups and curtailing their cultural and religious freedoms. Burmanisation says that the only true Myanmar citizen is someone who is both Burman and Buddhist.

That is what is behind the build-up over the decades and the appalling treatment we have seen, because the Rohingya people are non-Bamar and, of course, they are Muslim. Sadly, that mindset has not changed one iota, as we can see by the continued persecution of the

Rohingya by the Burmese military. In 2019, the United Nations described sexual-based gender violence as “a hallmark” of the Burmese military’s operations in the country.

That is why, no matter how much they may want to escape the hell of the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, any Rohingya daring to return to Myanmar right now would be in the gravest danger. Anyone remotely suggesting a forced return over the border is advocating for sending refugees back to Myanmar at a time of increased military activity, authoritarianism, violence and ethnic persecution. That would be an act devoid of any humanity and indeed of any common sense. I agree wholeheartedly with colleagues, and indeed those at Human Rights Watch, who have said that voluntary safe and dignified return is not possible while the military is carrying out massacres around the country. The Rohingya will be able to return only when rights-respecting rule is re-established. Unfortunately, that seems a long way off.

I join colleagues in paying tribute to what the Bangladeshis have done since 2017 in opening their doors and borders to the Rohingya people fleeing that genocide. They have provided an invaluable and crucial lifeline, and I shudder to think what would have happened had they not done so. Of course, we also recognise the pressure that the Bangladeshi Government are under. Theirs is one of the poorest nations in the world, facing its own serious economic problems, widespread poverty and, as we have heard, the climate crisis. Having to deal with a mass influx of 1 million impoverished refugees fleeing genocide adds to that crisis. As the hon. Member for Bedford said, it is little wonder that there is an increasing host fatigue when there appears to be no end in sight as the world turns its attention elsewhere.

That said, we are extremely concerned about the Bangladeshi Government’s joint response plan for this humanitarian crisis. It hints strongly at repatriation efforts, which, at the moment, are voluntary. How long that continues to be a voluntary arrangement remains to be seen. Let us be clear and unequivocal: no one can return to Myanmar until all ethnic minorities are safe from the threat of persecution. Right now, that is a long way off. As the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow and for Congleton said, Bangladesh needs to be supported in what it is doing for its own people and for the Rohingya. That is why it beggars belief that with all the economic challenges currently facing Bangladesh, the UK Government decided to slash overseas aid to that country by 62%.

Just how could the Government think it appropriate, justified or humane to pull two thirds of that funding from a poor nation that is caught up in alleviating a humanitarian disaster on its doorstep by providing shelter to 1 million people fleeing genocide? Did no one around the Cabinet table suggest that cutting foreign aid to Bangladesh—one of the poorest countries in the world, as we have heard—was, in these circumstances, a terrible idea that would only hasten further humanitarian crisis? Was no impact assessment done on what would happen to Bangladesh, and on the knock-on effect for the Rohingya refugees, if that money was taken out? Did no one ask what would happen to that strategic partnership, and what it would mean for the 360,000 girls who relied on it for education or the 12 million infants who benefited from nutritional support? Did no

one ever stop to ask about the knock-on effect that taking away that amount of money would have on the 1 million impoverished refugees?

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington was right to say that the UK and the wider international community cannot allow the Rohingya refugees to be forced back into the hands of an oppressive state military whose hallmark is human rights abuses, sexual violence, torture and killings. We cannot allow that to happen because we simply did not support the host nation and allowed it to do all the heavy lifting and pick up the cost. That is why the UK must, at the very least, restore the original ODA funding to Bangladesh. As the hon. Member for Bedford said, not to do so would be short-sighted at best. We and the international community have to deliver, because this is not a Rohingya problem or a Bangladeshi problem but a global problem. We all have a responsibility for putting it right.

7.8 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important debate and for his excellent contribution. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) in the shadow FCDO team for her work on Myanmar and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for her tireless work to keep the plight of the Rohingya on the agenda through her work on the all-party parliamentary groups on Bangladesh and the rights of the Rohingya.

It is nearly six years since that fateful morning in the early hours of 25 August 2017 when violence broke out in Rakhine state, Myanmar. The military, supported by militias, launched a murderous campaign that took thousands of lives. Villages were set ablaze, entire families were killed, and women and girls suffered atrocities, including rape. According to eyewitnesses, from August to September, the Naf river, which empties into the bay of Bengal, literally ran red with blood. Roughly 24,000 were killed in that period—an unimaginable number. Some 700,000 fled Rakhine state for Bangladesh, the majority of whom travelled by foot, walking through jungle and rough terrain, or by boat, taking the perilous journey across the bay of Bengal. Today, 1 million refugees still reside in Bangladesh. It is a humbling reminder of the horror that leads someone to flee their home.

In the last two years, what little attention has been paid to Myanmar has focused on the military’s coup and attempts to crush civilian resistance. Military attacks on the civilian population are up nearly 400%. Over 600 villages have been torched by the junta’s troops. A staggering 17.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. However, the suffering of the Rohingya began decades ago, as we have heard from many Members, and continues to this day outside Rakhine state and in south-eastern Bangladesh. As António Guterres has said, the Rohingya are

“one of, if not the, most discriminated people in the world”.

Whether in Rakhine state or Cox’s Bazar, the Rohingya people are currently without a future. It is important that we confront that reality today.

I used the word “humbling” a little earlier in this speech, and I think it is appropriate, as, having spoken in several debates on this matter over recent years, I am saddened that we are still talking about it and that our

[Preet Kaur Gill]

hopes for the Rohingya people look, if anything, further away. In 2020, I spoke for the Opposition in a debate on this matter and said

“It is a tragedy that...the international community is still having to provide them”—

the Rohingya—

“with immediate life-saving humanitarian support. That is the situation that we need to take a long, hard look at, to learn from mistakes and rectify them so that we are not here next year and the year after having the same debate.”—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 55WH.]

And yet, following the coup in February 2021, the prospect of a durable political solution that allows Rohingya refugees and forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals to return safely and voluntarily to their homes looks more distant than ever.

I commend much of the work that the Government are doing to sanction the abhorrent military regime in Myanmar and support the ICJ case to bring the perpetrators of atrocities to justice, although there is certainly more that they can do, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green raised the other week—for example, on banning aviation fuel, and the role of maritime insurance companies based here in Britain in the shipping of aviation fuel to Myanmar’s military. However, in the meantime, some 1 million Rohingya refugees are languishing in south-eastern Bangladesh with no meaningful prospect of a future, and we cannot ignore that either.

The hon. Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friends the Members for Bethnal Green and Bow and for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), and the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), all made excellent contributions, and some spoke of the conditions in the camps at Cox’s Bazar, which we know are poor. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are living in settlements only a few kilometres wide, in tents and huts made of bamboo and thin plastic sheeting. We can only imagine what it is like living in those conditions during the monsoon and cyclone seasons, when hailstorms, wind, rain and lightning hammer down on these homes.

In March this year, we were served a powerful reminder of the conditions in these camps when we saw images of a towering fire tearing through these huts. That inferno impacted around 15,000 refugees, destroying something like 2,800 shelters and key infrastructure networks including schools, medical clinics and service points. It also displaced 50,000 people. That is only one of some estimated 222 fire incidents between January 2021 and December 2022. According to a Bangladesh Ministry of Defence report, those fires included 60 cases of arson. For the many families living in those camps, it must seem as if wherever they go, they are not safe.

I recognise that the Government responded to the March incident with £1 million pledged through the UNHCR for pressure cookers, to replace the use of liquefied petroleum gas, but does the Minister recognise that restrictions on the materials used to construct the huts and the fact that barbed fencing restricts movement increase the risk of tragedies as well? The camp’s residents are reportedly not allowed to build permanent structures.

Bricks are banned—only bamboo and tarpaulin may be used—leaving them at the mercy of the elements. Has the Minister raised this issue with her counterparts in Bangladesh?

Meanwhile, basic human needs in those camps are going unmet. Food assistance to the refugees, who have been left reliant on humanitarian aid, is dwindling: we have already heard that the World Food Programme says that it needs £103 million just to avoid further ration cuts in a community where malnutrition is already rife. In February, for the first time in five years, the World Food Programme had to cut food rations to refugees by 17% across the board due to a lack of funding. In response, the UK has offered £4 million for this year. According to the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights in Burma, Tom Andrews, 45% of all Rohingya families in the camps are living with insufficient diets; some 51% of Rohingya children and 41% of pregnant and breastfeeding women are anaemic; and 40% of children are suffering from stunted growth because of a lack of nutrition. As we have heard from Members across the House, half of the people living in those camps are children. This is a tragedy unfolding in real time, day by day for these people, yet we are cutting our support to the bone.

This year’s commitments represent an 82% decrease on 2020. Asked about this issue recently, the Minister said that

“we do not look at the issue of restoring the money, we look at the issue of need.”—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 134WH.]

So I ask whether she can publish what possible assessment could conclude that need has declined by 82%. I know she will say that fiscal constraints—the result of her party’s dire economic record—mean that we have to keep ODA at 0.5%, but what she does not acknowledge is that within those constraints there are clear political choices to be made, including the blank cheque that the Minister has signed off to the Home Secretary for asylum hotels and the half a billion pounds going to British International Investment over this year and last.

In his speech at Chatham House last week, aptly titled “Can rhetoric match reality?” the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), stated that food insecurity would be one of his priorities. Can the Minister explain how these cuts to food assistance to the Rohingya assist that? Likewise, can she explain how the Rohingya crisis remains one of the Government’s top priorities, as the Europe Minister claimed in October?

Of course, the Rohingya need not only food, but a future. As such, I welcome the focus on skills outlined in the 2023 joint response plan: education and development of livelihood skills are essential among the young and deprived populations that are living in these camps. It was therefore disappointing to see the UK permanent representative speak at the conference on the joint response plan in support of those provisions, yet announce not a single penny of support. This is becoming an increasing habit, so will the Minister revisit this issue and set out what support the United Kingdom is providing to the response plan this year?

The urgency of the crisis in Cox’s Bazar is starkly demonstrated by the number of Rohingya who are now attempting dangerous sea crossings. The numbers trying to get to Malaysia or Indonesia increased fivefold last

year to more than 3,500, at the cost of hundreds of lives. It is again a reminder of why our humanitarian and development work is essential to tackling the causes of displacement and irregular migration, and why it is essential that we do not leave Bangladesh to shoulder the burden alone. Most countries would struggle to manage an influx of 1 million refugees—it certainly puts our own country's struggle with just a fraction of those numbers into perspective. To do so in a country where GDP per capita is only \$2,500 is remarkable, so we have to pay thanks to the Government of Bangladesh for what they are doing—I note that the high commissioner is here, listening to this debate. They are stepping up and taking a share of responsibility that we would not expect of such a relatively poor country; it is doing so brilliantly in terms of development.

We remain hopeful that, one day, the Rohingya can return to Myanmar. We recognise that that is where the ultimate solution of this crisis lies, but we must also confront the reality that that prospect has gotten further away, not closer, in recent years. Fading international attention to the crisis in Bangladesh is making matters worse. As such, does the Minister agree that we must learn lessons about our assistance to refugees displaced for many years, including prioritising local engagement from the outset, shifting from emergency assistance over time, and tipping the scales from short-term humanitarian work to development for longer-term needs? Can she say whether assessments have been made as to where investment now can generate greater returns or reduce need in the long run?

Moreover, can the Minister speak to the need for conflict and atrocity prevention in the first place? Atrocities do not happen overnight, as we have heard from Members across the House—they are years in the making—yet it was notable that the Minister of State did not mention conflict and atrocity prevention in his speech at Chatham House last week. What lessons have the Government learned about atrocity prevention, and will they be looking to take up the International Development Committee's recommendations laid out in its important recent report on atrocity prevention?

Finally, can the Minister say something on how the Government will help to support the women and girls who continue to bear the brunt of this crisis, including the many bearing the physical and psychological scars of sexual violence? It is imperative that Britain plays its full part in the response to the Rohingya crisis to secure the decent future that they deserve. As international attention dwindles, the Government must reflect on their role and ask what will become of those million refugees—stateless, fenced in, increasingly hungry and at the mercy of people traffickers. That question is not just for Bangladesh, but for all of us who desire a humane solution to one of the world's most harrowing crises.

7.20 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to his work as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Bangladesh. I am also grateful for the passionate, informed contributions from so many hon. and right hon. Members today. I will do my best to respond to the points raised,

although some, particularly those from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), are ones that the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), will need to answer in more detail. I will make sure that his officials pick up the questions from *Hansard* as quickly as possible.

This subject absolutely needs to be spoken about, and doing so here today will have an important impact. We should never forget how much the voices of Parliament are heard, listened to and respected not only within our own borders, but across the world. I thank all colleagues for taking the time to spend this evening here sharing their expertise.

The Rohingya, one of the largest stateless populations in the world, have endured, as colleagues have said, decades of systematic marginalisation, discrimination and persecution. During my visit to Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh in March, I saw first-hand the difficulties the Rohingya face and the immense challenges confronting the humanitarian response. My visit afforded me the opportunity to meet NGOs delivering food aid, education and healthcare alongside a number of Government officials working to find solutions both short and longer term.

I had the opportunity to meet groups of Rohingya mothers who described fleeing the brutal violence of the Myanmar military. They told me about their fears for their children's future. I met them alongside new mums whose children will only know Cox's Bazar for now and teenage girls empowered to teach new skills throughout their generation of young women. They were an impressive group of young women who gave me hope that they are neither going to give up nor give way to the depression that could otherwise come. They are a really empowering group.

There are close to 1 million Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, the majority of whom, as we have heard from colleagues, fled Myanmar and the military-led ethnic cleansing of their people in 2017. I say this when I am talking to people in my constituency to help get our heads around the size of these camps, but Newcastle upon Tyne metro area, which is my nearest big city, is about 800,000 people over a very large area. The million people in those camps are in a very cramped area. That is an enormous number of people, and it is important to stop and think about what that looks like. Each of us, whether MPs in a city or who have a nearby city, should just contemplate for a moment what we are talking about when we try to understand the challenges that we face in trying to help tackle this situation.

As many colleagues have said—it is lovely to have the high commissioner here with us for the debate—we all genuinely want to thank and commend the Bangladeshi Government and all those who live in and around Cox's Bazar for their generosity in hosting the Rohingya for more than five years in these huge camps. We continue to be steadfast in our support to the Rohingya population and the Government of Bangladesh. It was an honour for me to spend an hour with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discussing not only the generosity, but the resilient and patient care that the Bangladeshi Government provide the Rohingya refugees. We will continue to support that response until conditions are right for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Rohingya to their homeland.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

The UK has provided £350 million to the response in Bangladesh since 2017. That funding has paid for life-saving food, water, sanitation, healthcare and shelter, and it also supports protection work for those vulnerable women and girls. We continue to be a major global donor to the UN's humanitarian agencies and the Central Emergency Response Fund, providing £160 million this year supporting it in responding to this crisis. The UK Government's portfolio of support makes us overall the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor to the Rohingya response since 2017. To maintain the much-needed delivery, we are ensuring our aid is used strategically and deploying our combined development, humanitarian and diplomatic expertise on the response. With humanitarian need across the world increasing all the time, global funding is under unprecedented strain and this, sadly, is unlikely to change in the short term.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful for the visit the Minister has done, because she has been able to see the need herself at first hand. The International Organisation for Migration provides Rohingya refugees with materials and services to build and repair their shelters. In the absence of this support, close to half a million refugees will be exposed to the adverse effects of flooding, monsoon and cyclone, as well as of landslides and fire; this country has these occurrences regularly. That will leave them without safe shelter, so the cuts will have a direct effect on the good work that has been done by the Government of Bangladesh and agencies. How can she possibly not address that issue? These agencies are telling us that there is a major issue with this funding cut.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady continues to raise—with deep eloquence, experience and expertise—some of the many challenges we face. That is why I will continue to work with donors, both traditional and other, to both raise more international funding and ensure that, as many colleagues have said, this is not a forgotten situation. We need to ensure that the NGOs delivering food, energy and multiple aid for healthcare, education and safety, day in and day out, for those living in these camps can be resourced for the medium term. So we are going to continue working very closely with other donors and partners to help move towards a response that is less reliant only on humanitarian aid and thinking about more resilience for the future. There is a number of areas there that I would be very happy to pick up with colleagues offline.

Sarah Champion: I really appreciate the Minister, because I know she genuinely understands this. This is a spoiler alert to the Chamber, but the International Development Committee will shortly be publishing a report on long-term refugees. When we think about the Palestinian refugees, we are talking about nearly 75 years. As the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) said, everybody wants to be at home and everybody wants to go home. So rather than dealing with the consequences of usually politically unstable and fragile states, what are the Government going to do to try to make sure that people can go home? That is the lasting solution that everybody wants, not keeping on paying taxpayers' money to deal with the problem. They want to go home.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I think we all look forward to reading the hon. Lady's report, which will, as ever, be insightful and full of opportunities for all of us to consider what some of those long-term solutions might be. As we work on responses that work towards future resilience, we will also be exploring alternative funding options and promoting the positive role that development finance can play in the wider context, because of course the self-sufficiency of the Rohingya is vital to create a sustainable response to this crisis. Access to substantial livelihood opportunities would contribute towards that and help enormously to mitigate the worsening security situation in the camps. This was an area of discussion I had with all those I met on my March visit, including the Prime Minister. We will continue to advocate for progress in those areas with the Government of Bangladesh, but these actions alone will not of course bring an end to the crisis. So we must continue to use all the levers we have to improve conditions in Myanmar, exactly as the hon. Lady says, because people want to go home.

The Myanmar military of course continues its brutal attack on its population, and many of the attacks bear the same hallmarks of atrocities committed against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. We now see 17 million people in need across the country, and more than five years on from the crisis, the regime is yet to be held fully accountable. Of course, accountability is crucial to ending that cycle of violence and the misery faced by the Rohingya people. That is why, last August, we announced our intention to intervene in the ICC case brought by the Gambia regarding Myanmar's obligations under the genocide convention. It is a case we have supported since its inception, and one that I know colleagues will be pleased to hear we are working closely on with other intervening states to ensure a co-ordinated approach.

We also support the securing of criminal accountability and attempts to bring these issues before the International Criminal Court. Within the international sphere, the UK uses our penholder role in the UN Security Council to keep the spotlight on the crisis. Between 2017 and 2021 we have convened the Security Council 19 times to discuss the situation in Myanmar. Last year we passed resolution 2669 on Myanmar, holding the regime to account for its atrocities and urging an end to all violence. This resolution was the first of its kind in over 74 years. We will continue to use our role at the UNSC and in other international spaces to press for justice and accountability and to ensure the crisis is not forgotten. Domestically, we will continue to use our sanctions regime to maintain pressure on the Myanmar armed forces.

Tom Hunt: I really do see all that the Government have done and I really do think it is right to focus on the Rohingya going home safely; however, a colleague mentioned a child spending five years growing up there and knowing nothing else but that camp, but what happens when that becomes eight or nine years? Does my right hon. Friend agree that there may come a point where we have to think about something that ends this horror but that may not, sadly, involve them going home safely?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend raises an issue that we are cognisant of, but in the shorter term we are seeing whether the international community can work together to make going home a possibility, so we

are continuing to use our sanctions in co-ordination with the US, Canada, the EU and Australia, among some of our key international partners. We have so far sanctioned 20 individuals and 29 entities, and as sanctions Minister I will be continuing to work on further sanctions that we might be able to deliver to target the junta's access to revenue, arms and equipment. Just a few weeks ago we sanctioned four individuals and two entities selling arms and aviation fuel to the Myanmar military; we will continue to find ways to reduce its ability to deliver its appalling violence to its citizens.

Sarah Champion: I am grateful for those sanctions on the junta, but is the right hon. Lady also aware of the influence of both China and Russia in Myanmar, and is she doing more to get them around the table to try to come up with a solution?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady will be aware that we do not discuss future sanctions, but we raise these issues regularly in our role as the penholder and in international forums where we meet other countries—perhaps not Russia at the moment, as it is not participating in any international discussions, but more widely other countries including neighbours of Myanmar.

I shall conclude by saying that the Rohingya people have shown the most extraordinary courage and resilience in the face of incredible hardship that no one should have to suffer. I am genuinely in awe of the spirit they continue to display day by day as they struggle in the camps, with an unbroken spirit, hoping and believing that a better life lies ahead. The UK is committed to continued support for the Rohingya in Bangladesh alongside the 600,000 who remain in Myanmar.

Rushanara Ali: I have two points to make. First, the right hon. Lady mentioned that she is working with international partners: can she say a bit more about when her Government will convene a meeting of the UNSC to discuss how the Burmese military are ignoring the provisional measures ordered to prevent the ongoing genocide?

Closer to home, the right hon. Lady mentioned sanctions, and I welcome the sanctions already introduced. She could look at a step related to aviation fuel raised in a recent Westminster Hall debate. Some UK insurance companies are insuring vessels that provide aviation fuel, and the Burmese military are then using the aviation to attack their own people. Some of our companies are literally complicit in providing the fuel and fuelling the airstrikes; will the right hon. Lady look at that, to build on the sanctions introduced already?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the hon. Lady and others who work closely with us on this will know, we welcome all evidence, and the sanctions team will always be pleased to look at it and discuss these issues. We do not ever discuss in anticipation where we might impose sanctions, as that might reduce their effectiveness, but I would be pleased to sit down with the hon. Lady or her sources to continue working on where we can use our sanctions powers, with our international partners, to have an impactful effect on reducing the junta's ability to deliver violence against its own people.

Humanitarian aid will of course continue to play a large role in the short term. As colleagues highlighted, we can see no immediate solution to the crisis, but

ultimately the solution is a political one of refugees being able to have a safe return to Myanmar or to find resettlement in other countries. I note that a number of colleagues raised constituency family asks, and I will ensure that those are picked up in due course, with relevant parts of Government working together on them.

We will continue to advocate for better conditions for the Rohingyas in Bangladesh in the short term, and for them to have the important opportunity to work and develop skills and greater self-sufficiency. We will also continue to use all available tools across our international networks to help improve conditions in Rakhine state so that the Rohingya people have a chance to return home voluntarily, safely and with documented rights, which, as colleagues have expressed so eloquently, is the outcome that these refugees hope for.

I hope that colleagues know how important this part of my portfolio is to me. I often say jokingly that I have dozens of countries in my portfolio, and I obviously have no favourites, but, if I am allowed to have areas on which I intend to—and do—spend a lot of my time, I will continue to use all the tools in the FCDO armoury to make progress so that every young woman and child in Cox's Bazar knows that we are fighting alongside them. I promised the young women I met who called me mama that I would do all that I could, and I thank all colleagues for helping us to do that.

7.36 pm

Mohammad Yasin: I thank all 15 colleagues from both sides of the House for their contributions and interventions, which made this such an important debate. Once again, I thank the Bangladesh Government for their generosity and all the NGOs for their tireless work to help people living in such poor conditions.

It is clear that Members on both sides of the House are united on how we must continue to keep the plight of the Rohingya at the forefront of our minds. We all care deeply about the humanitarian crisis, and as parliamentarians we will work together to ensure that we do all we can to improve their lives and ensure that they are not forgotten.

We all agree that Bangladesh, as the host of the largest refugee camp in the world, must be supported. It is not easy, but we must follow our words with actions, and actions cost money. The needs of the Rohingya refugees are greater than ever before. Now is not the time to cut aid. I hope that the debate has made the case for increasing UK aid here and elsewhere to the most desperate people around the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Wythenshawe and Sale Town Centres: Regeneration

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

7.38 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate on Wythenshawe and Sale town centres. Town centres are the heart and soul of our communities. They are places where people come together to shop, to eat, to drink and to socialise. They are centres of trade and business. They provide jobs, skills and opportunities. They are the backbone of local economies. Over time, they have experienced periods of boom and bust. Each has its own unique history and identity, and I am sure that they are sources of local pride for every MP in the Chamber. But, sadly, over recent years they have faced many challenges including under-investment, changing retail and leisure demands, covid-19 and, now, the cost of living crisis.

I would like to use this Adjournment debate as an opportunity to pay tribute to the two town centres in my constituency—Wythenshawe and Sale—and highlight their important economic and social roles. I will also highlight the challenges and opportunities that they face and ask the Government what plans they have to support them. Too often, we hear this Government pay lip service to levelling up, the woes of left-behind people and places, and the importance of economic growth. Tonight, I want to talk about the reality of levelling up, and what levelling up actually means, or should mean, to places like Wythenshawe and Sale, and to people like me who grew up and live in a so-called left-behind town.

I am a lucky MP. I get to represent the constituency that includes not only the town where I grew up and still live, but two brilliant town centres: Wythenshawe and Sale. Both have the benefit of Greater Manchester's Metrolink, which connects them to the rest of the conurbation.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In Stockport, we have been campaigning for a long time for an extension of the Metrolink tram system into our town centre to increase footfall and trade in the town centre. I raised the matter with the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who assured me that he would study the plans with care, but I never heard back from him. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest issues facing northern towns is the lack of ambition and investment from this Conservative Government?

Mike Kane: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He should be proud of his work in Stockport to regenerate the town. There is nothing quite like “Foodie Friday”, which attracts independent retailers and thousands of people, but we know that the cream on the cake for Stockport would be extending the Metrolink to the town centre. I fully back his campaign, even if the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has not got back to him yet.

Wythenshawe, designed by the visionary architect Barry Parker, with the support of Ernest and Shena Simon, once led the way as a suburban utopia. In 1930,

their garden city vision saw tens of thousands of families from Manchester's inner-city slums moved to well-built, spacious neighbourhoods and green surroundings. That saw Wythenshawe transformed from a handful of small villages at the turn of the 20th century to a settlement of 100,000 people by the 1960s. In December last year, I hosted the “Who Built Wythenshawe?” exhibition with Professor Michael Wood, a famous former resident, and the Town and Country Planning Association here in Westminster, showcasing Wythenshawe's garden city heritage.

The current site of Wythenshawe town centre, or the Civic, as it is known locally, started life as a shopping centre in 1963, with Wythenshawe Forum—one of Manchester's largest buildings at the time—and a swimming pool, theatre and public hall added later. I would visit the Civic most weekends growing up, shopping at the market, visiting the Forum theatre and, yes, having many of my first dates there as well. Today, it still attracts over 5 million visitors a year and sits at the heart of a community of over 100,000 people. Like many towns, Wythenshawe faces some challenges, with increased costs for businesses and changing retail and leisure demands, but with the right investment it has so much potential.

Sale, a former market town that grew on the back of the Bridgewater canal, which brought coal to fire the industrial revolution, has also experienced challenging times, but it has an exciting future. It was recently voted the fourth best town in England to live in. It has strong transport links and housing stock and great schools, including the one at which I had the pleasure of teaching for the best part of a decade. Recent regeneration by Trafford Council is seeing independent businesses return to the town centre, but more investment could take the transformation to the next level, attracting more businesses and creating jobs.

In the Summer of 2022, recognising the need to rejuvenate these town centres, Manchester City Council and Trafford Council, under the leadership of my friend the former Member for Stretford and Urmston, submitted bids to the levelling-up fund. The plan to redevelop Wythenshawe town centre offered a once-in-a-generation chance to transform the Civic with a new public square, food hall, community cinema and 1,500 low-carbon homes.

Manchester City Council bought out the lease on the shopping centre to help control, steer and accelerate that investment. It put its money where its mouth is. The plans for Sale town centre included a wholesale transformation of the public realm and highways, to improve active travel for all and support the regeneration of Stanley Square. I pay tribute to Altered Space for the private sector investment that has so fundamentally altered the precinct in Sale and brought about so much regeneration.

To ensure that the plans were fit for purpose and had the support of the local community, Trafford Council funded the refresh of the Sale public realm strategy, which set out and delivered a costed plan to inform the bid. The transformational potential of the plans and the golden opportunity for regeneration that they provide must not be underestimated, especially in a constituency where 41.3% of neighbourhoods rank in the highest category of deprivation. The plans were serious about levelling up.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: not only was I the leader of Trafford Council when the bids were submitted, as my hon. Friend said, but I have the great honour—at least until Thursday—of representing Sale town centre on Trafford Council.

My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point about the diligence and care that were put into both levelling-up bids, which is replicated in bids up and down the country. Does he agree that that time, energy and endeavour did, in many cases, go to waste, as a result of a brutal bidding process that pitted town centres and local authorities against each other? Does he agree that such a system should not be used again, and should instead be replaced by a system in which funding allocations are made on the basis of need?

Mike Kane: I will miss my hon. Friend as one of my councillors after Thursday, but I welcome him to these Benches. Under his extraordinary leadership, Trafford went from strength to strength. He took control away from the Conservative party in Trafford and started to build a sense of place. The plans for Stretford in the civic quarter, what we have done in Altrincham and what we hope to bring to Sale were the direct result of his leadership. I am grateful.

Both bids underwent a rigorous drafting process and extensive consultation, with strong local support. Careful consideration of the plans, which strongly reflect local need, could deliver so much more than shiny new buildings and superficial facelifts. They would attract new business, creating new jobs. Disappointingly, despite two strong bids and high hopes from local leaders, the Government did not match our ambition for Wythenshawe and Sale town centres. Both bids were rejected.

Tonight, I would like to hear from the Minister directly why the bids were rejected. I am not going anywhere. I will raise this at every opportunity, from now until kingdom come, to make sure that we make progress in the town centres in my constituency, of which I am extraordinarily proud. Why were the bids left out of a fund to support economic recovery and growth in the poorest parts of Britain? Why did the same fund that rejected the bids award £19 million to the Prime Minister's own wealthy constituency? My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) is right; some sort of "Hunger Games" of bidding seems to have taken place.

The truth is that the fund, just like the Government, is not serious. Around 70% of levelling-up funding has been pledged to constituencies in England that have a Conservative MP. How does that happen? Analysis shows that Tory-held seats received around £19 more per head than those in similarly deprived non-Conservative constituencies. We already knew that the Government were not serious about it—they have a track record. The Government have been in power for 13 years, and the levelling-up agenda has not cut the mustard with the British public.

A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research says that the north is being held back by "vast inequalities" and "systematic underinvestment" in research and development, social infrastructure and transport. What have this Government done to correct that? What have

they done on R&D investment? Some 46% of R&D investment—vital for business innovation, jobs and skills—still goes to London, the east and south-east, despite those areas representing around only a fifth of the population.

What have this Government done to boost transport and connectivity in the north, in order to improve the vibrancy of our towns? HS2, which would have come to the borough of Trafford, has been put on ice. It would have reduced journey times from Manchester airport, in my constituency, to London Euston from two hours and 24 minutes, as they are currently, to 59 minutes. HS2 from Old Oak Common to Birmingham has now been shelved. The paucity of ambition to connect up this country is palpable. On Northern Powerhouse Rail, we cannot get TransPennine and other routes into Manchester airport. Some 20% to 30% of services to Manchester airport, one of the biggest economic drivers in the region, are regularly cut.

And it gets worse. What have this Government done to support local councils to deliver the frontline services that our communities rely on to function efficiently? Following the 2008 financial crash, rather than support the most vulnerable, there were politically motivated cuts. Manchester City Council, ranked the sixth most deprived local authority in England, has had to make £428 million of savings, while Trafford Council has had to take more than £260 million from its budget. We have seen the devastating reality of those cruel cuts.

As disappointed as I was by the Government's decision to reject the two perfectly solid bids for levelling-up funding, which denied Wythenshawe and Sale town centres £40 million of investment, sadly I was not surprised. While this Government may not be serious about levelling up, local leaders are. Despite the lack of funding from Government, I am pleased to say that plans for both town centres will go ahead.

Manchester's Labour council is delivering for Wythenshawe with new homes, cultural and leisure spaces, job opportunities, green infrastructure investment and better walking and cycling links. Likewise, Labour-run Trafford Council is pressing ahead with its transformation of Sale town centre, with solid backing from the private sector. The transformation around Stanley Square has been truly incredible, creating a modern and vibrant district that is home to new independent retailers, cafés, restaurants and bars. Both councils have my full support and I pledge to continue to do all I can, as the Member of Parliament for Wythenshawe and Sale East, to deliver investment and economic opportunities for our towns and our people.

Labour is serious about levelling up. We care about our town centres and we understand what communities need, because we are those communities. Despite all the funding cuts and lack of support from the Government, and the crushing blows that were delivered when we did not receive our levelling-up funds, we are already delivering. Will the Minister tell me what the Government will pledge to deliver for Wythenshawe, Sale and other towns like them across Britain? Are the Government finally ready to get serious about levelling up?

7.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East

[Dehenna Davison]

(Mike Kane) for securing this important debate and for speaking so powerfully on behalf of his constituents and his constituency. I know he has been, and remains, a tireless champion of the people and businesses of Greater Manchester more broadly, as has been exemplified by his service as a local councillor and portfolio holder, in a past life, and by his time as a Member of Parliament in this place.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the points he raised. One particular sentence stuck with me: he said that town centres are the heart and soul of our communities. On that point, I could not agree more. I saw that in my own constituency this weekend, at the Bishop Auckland street-food market. I definitely need to visit Stockport on Foodie Friday, as that sounds right up my street.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting some of the persistent economic and social challenges facing his Wythenshawe and Sale East constituency, and the deep-rooted disparities between communities, with parts of Wythenshawe that are highly disadvantaged starkly contrasting with areas in Sale that are much more prosperous. That is born out in the data in the indices of multiple deprivation, which ranks the constituency as the 53rd most deprived in England, with unemployment more than double the English average.

It is fair to say that communities in the hon. Member's constituency stand to benefit the most from the Government's levelling-up agenda and our ambition to close the regional disparities in health, education and attainment that are holding communities back. We have made some real strides in that endeavour in recent years.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned unsuccessful bids, and I will say something about that shortly, but I think it worth noting that Trafford Borough Council was successful in the most recent round of the levelling-up fund. It is set to receive more than £80 million for regeneration of the Partington sports village, with new changing rooms and a new BMX track at the park in Cross Lane. That will mean a big improvement in the health and leisure offer for local residents, encouraging more people to take part in sporting and leisure activities. It is complemented by the £85,000 grant from our levelling up parks fund for Southwick Road Park in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I know that several committed local residents have long been calling for that investment.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about his council's unsuccessful applications to the levelling-up fund, specifically the regeneration bids for Wythenshawe and Sale town centres. I fully appreciate that everyone involved in preparing and submitting those bids will have been deeply disappointed by the result. We certainly do not underestimate the time, care, attention and, indeed, heart that council officers and members put into the work. I shall say more about that shortly as well, but I know the hon. Gentleman was one of the strongest backers for those bids as well.

It must be said that the response to round 2 of the fund was overwhelming. More than 500 bids were received from all over the UK, totalling over £8 billion, but we had £3.1 billion to allocate, which meant that, unfortunately, some difficult decisions had to be made. It is also worth noting that although this is the—in capital letters—LUF, it is not the only—small “l”, small “u”—levelling-up

funding that the Government have provided. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific applications, but I know that officials in my Department have now given detailed feedback on unsuccessful bids, and I shall be happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further following the debate.

As for how the applications were judged, we have published an account of this and are entirely transparent about it, but I will run through it once more for the benefit of the House. As in the first round, our funding was targeted at the areas most in need according to the index of priority places. The index takes account of the need to address issues such as under-regeneration, low productivity and poor connectivity, and each bid was assessed by the officials from the Department against the published assessment criteria. Our officials then came up with a shortlist based on the highest scores. To ensure that we had a fair spread of bids across the UK, Ministers then made funding decisions based on the assessment score, but also taking into account factors such as geographic spread and past investments. However, an area's relative need is baked into the process as well. In this round, 66% of investments went to category 1 places.

The second round of funding is going predominantly to areas in Great Britain that have not received funding before, in order to ensure that investment reaches as many places as possible across rounds 1 and 2. However—I must highlight this point—there will be a third round, and we should not lose sight of that. We will give further details in due course, and I will of course make sure that the hon. Gentleman is informed. We want to support as many areas as possible with this truly transformative funding.

As I have said, however, the levelling-up fund is not the only means of levelling up investment in Greater Manchester by my Department. The hon. Gentleman will know that in his neighbouring constituency, Stretford town centre has benefited from £17.6 million from our future high streets fund—real investment to transform Stretford Mall and the surrounding town centre, with spaces for open-air markets and a host of new cultural events that will indeed be genuinely transformative. Local people will benefit from the new high-quality and affordable housing in the town centre, increasing pride in the place and fostering a sense of community.

Greater Manchester more broadly has benefited greatly from some game-changing pots of money from central Government in recent years, in support of our shared levelling-up ambitions. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the combined authority was awarded £54.2 million from our Getting Building fund to deliver seven major capital work projects across the city region, including 7 acres of landscaped public park near Piccadilly Station, the new Manchester innovation activities hub, and a vocational training centre dedicated to the rapid upskilling, reskilling and retraining of local residents. Moreover, £150,000 from the Department's community ownership fund has been awarded to Healthy Me Healthy Communities, a social enterprise group in Gorton. That will secure a community facility for the charity to tackle food poverty, helping those who are struggling to find jobs to gain new skills, as well as giving budget advice and support to those on low incomes.

Despite the investments that we have made, I agree with the hon. Gentleman's principal point that, more broadly, we need to reform the way that we support our

people and places by moving away from the model of councils bidding into loads of separate pots of money and all the form-filling and hoop-jumping that goes with that. That point was very well made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western).

Andrew Western: On that point, could the Minister tell us exactly how much money was spent by local authorities on pulling these bids together?

Dehenna Davison: That information is held by the authorities, but I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman with some further information following this debate.

We want to move away from those bidding pots to pursue a more sustainable, longer-term solution—in other words, one single settlement not a million miles away from the ones enjoyed by Scotland and Wales—to allow authorities such as Greater Manchester to really push the boundaries of levelling up in education, skills and innovation and to pursue on their own terms projects such as the regeneration of Wythenshawe and Sale, working hand in hand with local businesses and communities. Since first getting involved in politics, I have said that local people know best what is right for them, rather than us sitting here in Westminster and Whitehall, so we really are putting our money where our mouth is on this, through our radical devolution agenda.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East will know that we took a big step towards that goal earlier this year when we agreed a trailblazer devolution deal worth billions of pounds with Greater Manchester. It hands unprecedented powers, money and control to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority so that it can realise its ambition of creating a fully connected London-style transport system by the end of this decade as well as delivering the UK's first integrated technical education system. On the transport point, putting power into local hands means giving Andy Burnham more control over things such as the Metro, so it will definitely

be worth badgering Andy about the extension of the Metrolink. I am happy to sit down and discuss this with the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), and I can only apologise that the former Prime Minister did not get back to him. I will certainly meet him to discuss this a bit more formally.

On transport, I am also incredibly pleased about the £84 million package from central Government to Greater Manchester to increase the reliability of trains through Greater Manchester in the Manchester recovery taskforce. We still have a way to go to get those trains up to scratch but central Government working hand in hand with local government through the GMCA are absolutely doing the right things. For the Government's part, we have made no secret of our ambition to see more areas benefiting from these enhanced freedoms and flexibilities through devolution, and we hope to kick off talks on these D for Devolution arrangements with other Mayors very soon.

I have given a bit of a flavour of what the future holds for Greater Manchester and for the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East's constituency: more freedoms and more funding to pursue locally led regeneration. In the here and now, I hope that he can rest assured that my Department and I are committed to working with him and with Members all across the House, on both sides, to get more levelling up projects off the ground, whether through the third round of our levelling up fund, through working with the combined authority, as in this case, or through using any of the tools at our disposal to bring real economic benefits to the businesses and communities we represent. This really is our shared ambition and it is what we will deliver in the weeks and months ahead. I am looking forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on this.

Question put and agreed to.

8.3 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 2 May 2023

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

Marine Protected Areas

3.30 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Marine Protected Areas.

It is a pleasure to take part in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate this issue again, which is one that I feel passionately about and I intend to keep pushing on.

This is not the first time I have pursued this matter on the Floor of the House. Two years ago, I brought forward a private Member's Bill, the Marine Protected Areas (Bottom Trawling) Bill, with the objective of banning bottom trawling in marine protected areas. Since then, I have been pleased with what the Government have done. They have taken the first steps in the right direction by banning bottom trawling in areas that are particularly important. We were not able to do that when we were part of the common fisheries policy. That Government have made a good start, but while the intent is good, progress is not yet rapid enough and planned measures not extensive enough to provide adequate protection to key species around our shoreline.

I want to set out the measures that are essential if we are to protect and restore a thriving ecosystem around our shores. I do not believe that this needs to be done at the expense of the fishing industry—indeed, it must not be done at its expense. I see no reason why fishing boats from ports around the UK cannot continue to do the important job that they do today. What must stop is the situation where large, industrial-scale boats are able to scalp our seabeds, towing huge mechanisms behind them to Hoover up marine life, without regard to what gets trapped in their nets. That is what has got to stop.

Outside the EU, we have a chance to pursue a different course. As we approach the review of the post-Brexit arrangements—that is not too far away now—we need to make sure that we do not leave nature behind when planning the future of the industry. The starting point is our marine protected areas. I have said it before: most people would be astonished to discover that marine protected areas are not really properly protected at all.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Despite measures to protect marine protected areas from damaging fishing gear, ecosystems were subjected to more than 130,000 hours of industrial fishing in 2022; 7,000 of them involved the use of destructive bottom-towed fishing gear. Does the right hon. Member agree that current Government measures are not sufficient to protect MPAs from detrimental fishing practices?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Member makes an important point about the nature of the equipment and the damage it does to the seabed. I think the Government have made a good start in the process, but there is a way to go.

I want all our marine protected areas to have the same protections that have been introduced to the Dogger Bank. I hope that, after this debate, the Minister and officials will get a move on. The job is not nearly completed. We now have the first four or five areas protected. The Dogger Bank is particularly important, and that is a good start, but every day of needless destruction in other marine protected areas causes more damage to our ecosystems, which will take years and years to restore.

My message to the Minister today, first and foremost, is that we need to get on with stopping these destructive practices altogether. That is why I have particularly focused on bottom trawling. If we destroy the seabed and the habitat of the creatures that live on it, we also deeply damage the food chain for the fish who live there. In doing so, we compound the problem for our fish stocks. To my mind, there is a benefit to the fishing industry in sorting out adequate, proper and appropriate protections for marine life. I do not believe that there are any fishing communities around the UK that want to destroy our fish stocks and create a situation where fishing is unsustainable.

We must prevent the most damaging practices—big industrial trawlers, often coming from continental ports, towing vast mechanisms behind them—simply scalping the seabed and leaving a trail of destruction. We have to take a wholly new approach to managing fish stocks and supporting the industry. As stocks diminish, the industry has had to go further and further afield to stay in business. Our focus therefore must be on helping our fish stocks to recover. Proper protection in marine protected areas is an essential part of that.

If people do not engage in damaging fishing practices and there is only limited scale local fishing, marine protected areas become a breeding ground for new fish. Those fish will spread outside of the protected areas. Fish stocks have shown signs of really recovering in the small number of highly protected marine areas around our shores, and in the waters around them. That approach is beneficial to the fishing industry as well as being of absolute importance to our natural ecosystems. We must step up our approach to restoring the marine environment and managing it well so that both nature and fishing can flourish.

My first ask of the Minister—it is one of a number—is to drive forward with bans on damaging fishing practices in marine protected areas. There really is no reason why that cannot be done in the current Parliament. Let us take responsibility. We have done some great things in government, including taking the legislative framework for nature protection further than it has ever been before. Before we get to a general election, let us be able to say to the country that we have completed the job, that we have provided those protections in the MPAs and that we have done what we started out to do. My message to the Minister is: please, let us get on with it.

We must also take a further step forward and provide even greater protections for our most important waters. As recommended by the Benyon review, I want to see highly protected marine areas around our shores. In such areas, no extractive activity is permitted, and nature can be left to its own devices. In the few areas around the UK where really tough protections have been put in place already, there has been a resultant rapid increase in local marine populations. That has happened only on

[Chris Grayling]

a very small scale in the UK, but the results have been dramatic. It benefits the surrounding fisheries because if an area's nature, fish stocks and ecosystems are given a chance to recover, surrounding areas have better fish stocks and healthier marine life. If we look after nature, the benefits work for everyone.

My second request to the Minister is this: let us move to designate our most important ecological areas as highly protected marine areas. If we ban all extractive activity in those areas to help them to recover, we will provide a real boost to the surrounding seas too. I say that fully in the knowledge that we must find a balance for the fishing industry; we cannot just close the fishing industry off from large areas of the waters that it has fished for centuries. However, it is also in the interests of the industry that there are patches where we provide complete protection.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is being sufficiently general in his terms that I do not think that anyone, even from the fishing industry, would disagree with him. However, he may want to look northwards to the experience of the Scottish Government with their consultation on highly protected marine areas. There is a great deal of advantage in hastening slowly in this area. The right hon. Gentleman really must bring fishing, coastal and island communities with him. Otherwise, he will end up doing something that is ultimately counterproductive to fish conservation. If the right hon. Gentleman can demonstrate the benefits in a small number of areas first, there will be more support from coastal and island communities.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely take on board the right hon. Gentleman's point about the need to do this in stages. It is still more important to do this in partnership with the fishing industry and with fishing communities as well. Where there are highly protected marine areas, communities are seeing the benefits. I am not in favour of barging in and saying, "This area of sea that you currently use is closed from tomorrow." Let us talk to them and work with them to designate areas in a way that works for those communities and for marine life. Let us not approach this on the basis that there should be no more marine protected areas or highly protected marine areas. This can be made to work for both sides.

Mr Carmichael: The right hon. Gentleman has to bear this point in mind. He wants to exclude fishermen for rewilding purposes, but fishermen find themselves excluded from other fishing opportunities as well because of cables, pipelines, aquaculture and offshore renewables. It is a salami-slicing effect. Does he agree that if we are to be effective in creating marine protected areas, or highly protected marine areas, we have to look at it in the round, and not just the HPMAs in isolation?

Chris Grayling: I accept that we need to look strategically at all our waters to see what the right approach is, but I do not think this is something we can simply not do. The need to protect and restore the ecology around our shores is such that we must take bold steps, although we should take those steps fully aware of the potential impact on coastal communities, and work in full consultation with those communities to identify the best places on

which to focus. This is not something we can avoid doing, or even try to avoid doing. We need to step up the pace to provide protections where it is appropriate and most important to do so.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the right hon. Member for being generous and giving way again. The 2015 figures show that 341,000 people were employed full time in the marine economy, with sectors such as marine transport, defence and oil and gas among the largest employers. Does he agree that the Government must balance employment and environmental concerns to ensure that the UK marine economy moves forward in a sustainable manner?

Chris Grayling: I do not think that there is any contradiction between high-quality environmental protection and employment, and indeed the welfare of communities. It is paramount that we get the marine ecology piece right. We have done so much damage to nature in this country that, frankly, it is to our benefit and our children's benefit that we start to turn back the clock.

I will touch on another area where there has been a loss that needs to be restored.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Before he moves on to another point, I want to follow the previous interventions by accepting that the development of protected areas has to have the support of local fisherpeople. That was the experience of the sites off Lyme Regis and elsewhere in the country.

I am a member of the Science and Technology Committee. From time to time we and other Select Committees have called on the Government to be quicker in their implementation while consulting. Will the right hon. Gentleman, who is experienced in government, give us any insight as to why it has taken more than 10 years to develop the sites this far?

Chris Grayling: Most immediately, we are only recently free of the common fisheries policy, so it was never that straightforward. We now have the opportunity to get a move on, though. That is why I set a goal for Ministers for this Parliament. I see no reason why we cannot provide, in the course of this Parliament, a ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas. It does huge damage to the seabed and to ecosystems. Most members of the public in this country, and frankly most people in coastal communities, will be amazed to discover that a large continental fishing boat dragging huge amounts of equipment behind it can scour the seabed. To my mind, that is the first priority. The second is to start looking at additional areas, as the Benyon review recommended, where localised no-take areas can be put in place to help the ecology recover.

My next point is about the seabed itself, which is crucial. We hear a lot about the need to plant trees and reforest degraded areas. As hon. Members know, I am passionate about my view that deforestation is a blight internationally and needs to be reversed. However, the loss of seabed habitats—kelp and seagrass—also has a big ecological impact, and we must deal with that as well. We have seen huge loss of seagrass beds around the world and around this country. Restoring and expanding the seagrass and kelp beds on our shores and under our

waters is important because it helps local marine ecosystems and is a rather quicker way of absorbing carbon than planting a tree. The Government and all those who work in this field should be eagerly pursuing the opportunity for this country to contribute to our 2050 net zero goal by restoring the traditional kelp and seagrass beds around our shores.

My third request to the Minister is, therefore, for regulatory and financial support for those working to restore seagrass beds and kelp forests. We have lost 90% of our seagrass beds, with a corresponding loss of small marine creatures; many species are vulnerable to disappearing altogether. That would be a sensible, logical part of the good Government strategy over the coming decade of turning around the loss of nature in this country. Of course, there is a financial benefit too, and groups that work in this field have highlighted a number of areas where the UK can benefit financially from a smarter approach to marine protection, but it is not about money. It is just the right thing to do. It is also necessary to protect our future.

I very much hope that the Minister will follow up on all three of those requests, but I also want to touch on an area outside the United Kingdom: the future of the marine areas we do not control around the world. I pay tribute to the UK team that played an active part in the recent negotiations to secure the international agreement on the future of our oceans. As they did at the COP summit, the Government have continued to play a leading role internationally in seeking better protection for and the recovery of nature. That is clearly a very good thing, and Ministers and officials should take credit for it.

Margaret Ferrier: I commend the ethos behind the blue planet fund and the Government's commitment to aid developing countries in protecting marine environments, but it is vital that the many workers in the microplastic industry are given the opportunity to transition into alternative jobs. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the blue planet fund must be inclusive and sensitive to the economic realities of developing countries?

Chris Grayling: We clearly have to be sensitive to the issues in developing countries, but they do not benefit from a damaged environment. I see this proposal as beneficial to everyone on the planet. I do not see any downside to living on a cleaner, greener planet. It will bring different kinds of job opportunities. There are many opportunities across the developing world—renewable energy is an opportunity in parts of the world that are hotter and windier than the UK—so it is not an either/or. There are benefits to pursuing an environmental strategy and an economic strategy.

International agreements are all well and good, but to make those strategies work, it is action that matters. Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing around the world remains a huge problem, despite the international community's readiness to talk positively about growing the number of marine protected areas around the world. That is a good thing, but those areas have to be protected. Illegal activity is doing real damage around the world. It is making fish stocks much less sustainable, and is having a big negative impact on smaller coastal communities. One of the key steps to deal with that problem and to protect our marine protected areas is to require every fishing vessel around the world to have

satellite monitoring devices on board and to keep them switched on. Even in our own waters, boats occasionally go dark, but elsewhere it is a particular problem. I will be grateful if the Minister touches briefly on what the Government are and will be doing to address this issue.

There is also a job to be done onshore. I have long argued for a system of food labelling in this country that indicates clearly how sustainable the product and its supply chain are. A lot of the focus has been on products such as palm oil from south-east Asia and soy from Brazil, and we need to keep pushing on those issues. It is very much a current problem: recently, beef from deforested areas of Brazil ended up on Tesco shelves. We in this House should clearly keep the pressure up, to ensure that we bring about the right international pressure against deforestation, and that the Government do what they can to move us in the right direction.

We really have to step up progress on food labelling. When the Environment Act 2021 was before Parliament, I pushed the issue of moving towards a system of sustainable food labelling. Ministers made encouraging noises, and committed to doing work on that, which I know they are, although I want to see it happen straightaway, or pretty much straightaway. May I ask the Minister to give the Chamber an update on that work and on when we can expect a proper sustainable food labelling system to come to fruition? Unless and until we can demonstrate to consumers that the products they are buying are from sustainable sources, or that they are not, so consumers can take a decision not to buy them, we will not bring to bear the full weight of consumer power on this issue.

There are always limits to what Governments can do, but consumer power, harnessed in the right way, can probably make a bigger difference than any politician can. We need to bring the full strength of consumer power to bear on marine protection, environmental protection, combating deforestation, and creating a greener, more nature-friendly world. That is basically my message to the Minister. Let us get on with completing the work on banning bottom trawling from all marine protected areas. Let us start the process of going further in expanding highly protected areas, though not in a way that completely cripples the local fishing industry. Let us work with the industry to do that, but let us get a move on to make it happen. Let us do what we can around the world to turn the recent international agreements on illegal fishing into action.

Let us move to bring in sustainable food labelling in this country, and let us continue to focus, on both sides of the House, on the protection and restoration of nature, whether it is seagrass beds, kelp forests or the things that we need to do on land. This is an agenda that the nation increasingly feels passionate about. There is a real need for action before further damage is done, but the opportunity is enormous. We can make a real difference over the next decade, so my message to the Minister and the Government is please get on with it.

3.52 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) on securing the debate. I know that he is passionate about this issue. I agree with everything

[Kerry McCarthy]

that he said, except the little blip about the common fisheries policy being responsible for everything; he would not expect me to agree on that.

It has been a long time since the last Labour Government drew up plans for an ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas around our coast. Since then, I have served on the Environmental Audit Committee. We did really good reports into the fact that what we really had was a system of little more than paper parks, where protections were not properly enforced. It was far from coherent. Obviously, the Benyon review was important, but it seemed to me yet another way of kicking things into the long grass. We are still nowhere near the position in which we need to be.

I will focus on one specific point, and suggest one way of ensuring that marine protected areas are genuinely protected, not just now but in perpetuity, and not polluted or plundered for the sake of short-term gains. Rather than looking at what we should not do in those areas, I will look at positive interventions—what we can do to create more value in these areas and give more people a vested interest. I hope that people would be motivated by the need to protect the planet and a love of biodiversity and our marine environment, but we know that financial interests can be powerful, too. We heard in some of the interventions a worry about the economic impact of marine protected areas. I will talk about how they could attract financial investment. In doing so, I will talk specifically about seagrass, which the right hon. Member touched on.

At the moment, we do not really value seagrass. The UK has lost nearly half of our seagrass beds since the 1930s. Globally, they are declining by 7% a year. They are the fastest disappearing habitat on the planet. We hear a lot from climate campaigners about rainforests, because we can see them—they are not hidden under water—but seagrass is just as, if not more, important, and I will come on to say why. Boats anchoring, fishing activity and sewage are all damaging seagrass. One problem is that boat users do not actually know where the seagrass beds are, which is another point I will come on to.

We think that 98% of carbon stored in the UK's seafloor is in areas with no trawling restrictions, and the right hon. Member focused on bottom trawling. I come back to the value of protecting our marine environment, in terms of carbon sequestration and the importance of nature-based solutions to climate change, and creating nature markets.

Seagrass is 35 times more efficient at absorbing carbon than rainforest, alongside its biodiversity benefits. The Marine Conservation Society says that the UK's salt marshes, which are very much part of the mix, and seagrass beds have

“the carbon storage potential of between 1,000 and 2,000 km² of tropical forests.”

Damaging that habitat comes at a huge environmental cost. According to the Climate Change Committee, the organic carbon stored in the soils of marine ecosystems is equivalent to around 17% of the UK's total emissions. That was calculated in 2020. Damaging those ecosystems risks releasing all that carbon into the atmosphere. We need to protect our seagrass meadows and our seabeds, and we need to enhance them.

During the Easter recess, I went down to Plymouth and met the Ocean Conservation Trust at Plymouth's National Marine Aquarium. Two weeks before that, I went to an event hosted by the Crown Estate on the launch of the blue carbon accelerator programme, which is really interesting. I met the Ocean Conservation Trust to hear about its seagrass programme, and what is needed to scale it up. It nurtures the seagrass plants onshore and then plants them on the seabed. Investment of around £5 million is needed to scale that up, of which the trust has raised £1 million.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) told me that a self-planting, self-replicating seagrass meadow has been discovered near his constituency, but the general feeling is that there is a need for onshore growing, followed by mechanical planting on the seabed—when I say mechanical, I mean divers going down and planting by hand.

In the first instance, creating more seagrass meadows would be about nature, such as creating breeding grounds for fish, and creating more biodiversity. That ties in with the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). We will not have a fishing industry if we take all the fish out of the sea. That is common sense; the debate in the past has been quite frustrating. We have to fish sustainably. Seagrass meadows are a wonderful breeding ground for the fish stocks of the future.

In the short term, seagrass meadows are about nature and biodiversity. In the longer term, the carbon sequestration benefits could also be huge, but there is a difficulty in evaluation at the moment. The Climate Change Committee has said that there are currently no estimates of carbon accumulation rates in UK seagrass ecosystems, and that UK-specific data is urgently needed. We also need a seagrass code, so that it can be properly accounted for.

Last month, we heard about the discovery of one of the UK's largest seagrass beds off the coast of Cornwall, in St Austell bay. I was surprised—the seagrass bed is absolutely massive, it is not that far out from shore and it is not that deep; this is not like not knowing what is at the bottom of our very deepest oceans. The fact that it has remained undiscovered for so long shows how little we know about our marine environment, as opposed to what is on land.

Now that we have discovered that seagrass bed, we need to protect it. According to the joint report from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust and Natural England, St Austell bay currently benefits from only one formal marine protected area designation, a special protection area. The report notes that:

“Understanding the current legislative processes and that further formal designations are unlikely to be assigned to this site in the near future, Cornwall Wildlife Trust recommends that a whole site approach for the management of the SPA is considered thus protecting the associated habitats, in this case the seagrass and maerl, from damaging marine activity, such as bottom-towed fishing.”

The authors of the report said that a lack of funding limited their survey work, so what support can the Minister give people who are carrying out valuable work such as that and trying to discover exactly what we have around our shores? There is potentially a really big benefit from making the initial outlay, finding out what we have and then being able to place a proper value on it.

The Office for National Statistics conservatively valued the annual carbon sequestration of our marine and coastal ecosystems at £57.5 billion, which means that the UK seabed is more valuable as a carbon sink than as a source of fossil fuels and fishing.

A report by the Marine Conservation Society, Deloitte, and Whale and Dolphin Conservation—*[Interruption.]* I have a very on-brand cup here, from Surfers Against Sewage—contrasts the mechanisms and voluntary carbon markets that support investment in terrestrial nature solutions, not least the woodland code and the peatland code, with the

“significant lack of existing or scalable mechanisms...to incentivise or mandate private sector investment in ocean restoration.”

That goes back to what I said about the need for a seagrass code and the progress being made on the saltmarsh code. I have been told at events such as the one at the Crown Estate, which I mentioned, that there is plenty of private sector financing available for blue carbon projects. The problem is a lack of projects to invest in, a lack of data and a lack of certainty. We need to improve monitoring, verification and reporting. As the MCS report said:

“Without robust scientific data, creating investable ocean projects and markets is problematic.”

Last year, the Climate Change Committee recommended that saltmarsh and seagrass be included in the greenhouse gas inventory, and called for a roadmap to identify the additional data required to enable that to happen. In response, the Government accepted that there were

“significant data gaps surrounding emissions from coastal wetlands (including saltmarsh and seagrass habitats), activity data regarding extraction activities, and habitat extent which hinder the accurate reporting of emissions from these habitats.”

The Government said that such information must be collected before a decision on inclusion in the greenhouse gas inventory can be made.

As I understand it, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has established a cross-Administration UK blue carbon evidence partnership to make progress on the evidence base for blue carbon, and I hope that the Minister can give us an update on how that is going. I also remind her that she promised me a meeting when, at DEFRA questions, I asked how the Department was working with the newly created Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on nature-based solutions. I would like to gently chase her up on that, because it would be really useful to see how we can make progress.

I have talked about the positive side—the potential—and now I want to flag up something that is very worrying. This was contained in the briefing sent to MPs today by Uplift, an organisation that provides the secretariat for the all-party group for climate change. Some 900 locations in the UK’s oceans have been offered as sites of development for oil and gas extraction in the latest offshore oil and gas licensing round, and more than a third of them clash with marine protected areas. I do not expect the Minister to comment on the Government’s dash for more fossil fuel extraction—I know that is a matter for another Department—but she should be very concerned about the overlap with marine protected areas.

If this is approved by the Government, the UK’s largest undeveloped oil field, Rosebank, will have a pipeline through the Faroe-Shetland sponge belt marine

protected area, potentially harming this fragile ecosystem. It is a shame that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is not still present, because he might have wanted to intervene on me on that issue. This habitat is already assessed as being in an unfavourable condition, and efforts should be under way to recover it, not to approve a new oil and gas development. Modelling shows that a major oil spill from Rosebank could risk serious impact to at least 16 UK marine protected areas, so I hope that we can hear something from the Minister on how the desire to protect marine protected areas—which I am sure she will tell us all about—squares with what another Government Department is seeking to do in terms of our future energy use.

4.4 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. It is good to be back in Westminster Hall to discuss such an important topic, and I thank the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) for his interest in this matter and for bringing it before the House. I am pleased to see his progress—I hope that he will continue his journey of enlightenment and that we will see him on our Benches before too long.

This is a busy week for many across the House who represent communities who will be exercising their democratic right on Thursday. I am sure that if this debate was on at any other time, we would have seen a lot more Members taking part. Mindful of parliamentary convention, and the visit that Parliament received this morning, I extend my best wishes, and those of the Opposition and the people of Newport West, to all those involved in the coronation.

We are an island nation, and our seas, oceans, rivers and lakes have been at the core of what we are as a country for generations. As well as their economic power, our seas and oceans support a range of diverse marine ecosystems. They provide rich biodiversity and act as important carbon stores, as has been made clear this afternoon.

It is a matter of no surprise to anyone sitting here, or any of the millions of people throughout our country, that our marine environment and the creatures and species that call it home now face innumerable threats from human activity. That is made worse by inaction when it comes to cleaning and protecting our waters. We can all see the damage caused by waste and toxins from dredging and dragging the seabed, which also destroys corals, maerls and sandbanks. I suspect that all colleagues across the House will agree that marine protected areas are an important tool in safeguarding our ocean’s future. It is important that we are focused, committed and ambitious in how we protect our natural waters.

In advance of this debate, I received a very helpful briefing from the Marine Conservation Society, and I pay tribute to it for all the work it does to raise awareness and campaign to secure real policy change. In the briefing, it was noted that on the 28 February 2023, DEFRA announced three new highly protected marine areas: Allonby bay in the Irish sea; Dolphin Head in the channel; and the north east of Farnes Deep in the North sea. That is to be welcomed, but, as ever, it is simply not enough. Those sites represent less than 0.5% of English seas, and I urge the Minister to break the 13-year-long habit and show the ambition needed to respond to the climate and nature crises that we see all around us.

[Ruth Jones]

Marine protected areas play a vital role in combating climate change. We know that healthy seas enable the sequestration and storage of atmospheric carbon dioxide, as I touched on and as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) expanded on eloquently—I do not propose to go over what she already said. When blue carbon habitats, such as seaweed and seagrass ecosystems, are degraded and the seabed is disturbed, stored carbon is released back into the water column and could re-enter the atmosphere. By protecting and rewilding our marine environments, we can keep carbon locked in the ocean through increased numbers and biomass of marine species and healthier marine habitats.

Marine ecosystems will play a key role if the UK is to meet its ambitions for net zero by 2050, particularly as the UK has one of the world's largest exclusive economic zones and governs substantially more marine territory than terrestrial. The area of UK MPAs is 27% greater than that of the entirety of the UK land area. As such, by making MPAs rich with life, we will materially help carbon storage on a massive scale.

I would be grateful if the Minister outlined where discussions regarding the UK's largest undeveloped oil field, Rosebank, are now, as the hon. Member for Bristol East asked. I suspect the Minister will share the concerns that, if approved, a pipeline will be installed right through the Faroe-Shetland sponge belt marine protected area. That would potentially harm an already fragile ecosystem and the creatures within it, such as quahogs—who knew there was such a thing?—a type of clam that can live for hundreds of years. The area is visited by numerous species of dolphin and whales, as well as multiple species of seabirds, and commercial species, such as haddock. The habitat is already assessed as being in an unfavourable condition, and efforts should be under way to recover it as best as possible.

Climate change is already having severe impacts on the world's oceans, but oil and gas developments can have direct impacts, including: pollution from oil spills; the release of toxic chemicals through exploration, drilling and infrastructure decommissioning; the release of microplastic waste; and noise from seismic blasting. Will the Minister outline what safeguards will be put in place to mitigate any negative impact?

The matter of marine protected areas is an important one, so I thank the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell for bringing it before us today. I want to be clear that Labour wants to see—and we will deliver—a bold and comprehensive plan to protect and clean our waters. We all know that healthy seabeds are home to many species, and we need to see a broader programme of ocean and sea renewal. Will the Minister outline in clear terms her policy on ocean and sea renewal? I am happy for her to write to me, if she would prefer to do that.

I would also be grateful if she could outline what discussions—and when they took place—she has had with the First Minister and the Environment Minister in Wales, the Cabinet Secretary and First Minister in Scotland, and officials in the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland civil service about her proposals for ocean renewal. As all parts of our United Kingdom are bordered by sea, it is vital that comprehensive discussion takes place across devolved Governments.

Globally, saltmarsh and seagrass beds alone can store up to 450 million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. That is almost half the emissions of the entire global transport industry. Imagine what more we can do to preserve our planet and protect our environment by doing just a little bit more and going a little bit further, faster. Restoring and protecting key marine ecosystems can lock up billions of tonnes of carbon each year—as much as 5% of the savings needed globally. A sustained programme of ocean renewal must be part of any plan to tackle the climate emergency. It is time the Minister started to implement this plan, and fast.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. Mr Sharma. Although this topic does not fall under my brief at DEFRA, but rather that of my noble Friend Lord Benyon in the other place, I am pleased to represent his responsibilities today and to respond to a real champion for the environment in Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) has spoken on this subject and submitted parliamentary questions many times. I pay tribute to his advocacy for the marine environment in particular.

Marine protected areas are of particular importance to DEFRA because we recognise that they are one of the many tools in the toolkit to protect the wide range of precious and sensitive habitats, which all Members have recognised the importance of. We have created more than 100 MPAs since 2010, and now have 178, covering around 40% of English waters. MPAs protect specific habitats and species within the designated site, so that those features can recover to a favourable condition.

As set out in the environmental improvement plan published on 31 January, we have targets to ensure that percentages reach those favourable conditions. We are focusing on MPAs because we recognise that they are a vital part of the story. It is essential that they are robustly protected, as has been eloquently said today, otherwise they will do no good at all. I hope I can set out how we are protecting them, outline the progress that has been made, answer Members' points and possibly commit to writing to hon. Members where more detailed responses are required.

The EIP—environmental improvement plan—describes how fisheries byelaws in the first four offshore MPAs came into force last year, providing protection from bottom-towed fishing gear. The Marine Management Organisation is working speedily, has consulted this year on protections for a further 13 MPAs and is now analysing responses to that consultation. We aim to have all necessary byelaws in place in our MPAs to protect them from damaging fishing activity by the end of 2024. Since we are no longer bound by the common fisheries process, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell rightly pointed out, we will be able to make more progress. The Marine Management Organisation and the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities have engaged fully with the fishing industry and other stakeholders, and will continue to do so. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly referred to the importance of working with the fishing industry, and all Members agreed.

I will set out some of the financial support that has been given to the fishing sector. We have allocated £32.7 million a year to support the UK seafood sector through to 2024-25. That settlement enables each of the four fishing Administrations of the UK to invest in their industries by delivering financial support schemes tailored to the specific needs of their sectors. In addition, the £100 million UK seafood fund was announced on Christmas eve 2020, following the conclusion of the trade and co-operation agreement with the EU. The fund was set up to support the long-term future and sustainability of the UK fisheries and seafood sector.

I will give just a couple of examples of how the fisheries sector is being supported to transition. As I mentioned, the targets set out in the environmental improvement plan are published, and we have a statutory target to have 70% of designated features in MPAs in a favourable condition by 2042, with the remainder in a recovering condition. Our analysis shows that by putting in place by 2024 the MPA byelaws that I have mentioned we will be able to meet our interim statutory target of 48% of designated features in MPAs being in a favourable condition, with the remainder in a recovering condition, by 2028.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way; I am very grateful for her time today. She has talked a lot about the targets, and we all agree that we need to have objectives, but what about enforcement? I am listening carefully to her speech. What enforcement will be done? How will the enforcement be undertaken? I am not clear at the moment how we will protect the MPAs. Having them on paper is great, but we need to protect them.

Trudy Harrison: Earlier the hon. Member mentioned a potential oil and gas project. This is one example of how we will ensure that environmental concerns are fundamental to any approval. Clearly, that will be the responsibility of the Scottish Government, but the assessment is being done by OPRED, the Offshore Petroleum Regulator for Environment and Decommissioning, which is part of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. In response to the hon. Member's specific question about the regulation and perhaps any penalties that will be enforced, I would appreciate it if she would allow me or my noble Friend in the other place to write to her. We use a mix of strategies. The MMO ensures compliance by desk-based reviews of fishing vessel trackers and also site-based inspection, but I recognise that the hon. Member really wants to understand the regulatory and penalty process.

Following the work of my right hon. Friend Lord Benyon and the consultation last year, we have announced that we will be designating the first three pilot highly protected marine areas by 6 July and will explore additional sites later this year. These are areas of the sea that will allow for the highest level of protection in our waters and full recovery of marine ecosystems, and will exclude all fishing. For highly protected marine areas to be successful, we will need to work hand in hand with the fishing industry, other marine industries and sea users in designating, managing and monitoring them. I hope that that demonstrates the Government's ambition to restore our marine environment with strengthened protections.

We need to do all we can in a way that helps to deliver a thriving and sustainable fishing industry alongside a healthy marine environment, as set out in our joint

fisheries statement. We recognise that there are growing spatial tensions between industries such as fishing, the renewable energy sector, dredging, and the oil and gas industry, alongside the need to conserve and enhance our marine environment.

“Bottom trawling” is a broad term describing methods of pulling fishing gear along the seabed to catch fish and/or shellfish. Bottom trawls are used by all parts of the fishing fleet, from small day boats to large offshore vessels. It is important to recognise that approximately 30% of the tonnage and 45% of the value of fish landed by UK vessels in 2021—that includes cod, plaice and scallop—came from bottom trawling.

Bottom trawling and other fishing methods will be stopped only where they are having a negative impact on the habitats or species protected by each MPA. For example, netting and potting are allowed to continue in many MPAs, including Dogger Bank—which has been discussed today—given that they do not have the same impacts as bottom trawling. Bottom trawling can continue in parts of the Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge MPA, which does not contain protected features such as Sabellaria reefs, which are sensitive to bottom trawling.

A blanket ban on bottom trawling in all MPAs, which some are calling for, has the appeal of simplicity, but in some cases would involve unnecessary restrictions. We are determined to protect our MPAs as properly as possible, but want to do so in ways that will not involve unnecessary impacts on activities such as fishing. Ensuring that all vessels, including those under 12 metres in length, have inshore vessel monitoring systems installed will enable more efficient decisions on local and national management measures and policies.

The Marine Management Organisation and the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities have embarked on a programme of detailed site-by-site assessments of each MPA. Each assessment is informed by scientific advice on what types of fishing can take place. Byelaws are then designed accordingly, restricting those types of fishing found to be an issue in each site. I recognise that this detailed approach takes more time than a blanket ban, but it is well worth it to avoid unnecessary impacts on our fishing industry.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell referenced illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. That provides me with an opportunity to provide an update on the situation. We stand proudly on a global stage; my right hon. Friend mentioned the COPs, and a number of global collaborations and agreements. At the 2022 United Nations Ocean Conference, the UK, US and Canada launched the Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing Action Alliance, which brings together state and non-state actors to tackle the illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing of which my right hon. Friend spoke. Through committing to implement international agreements, promote active monitoring, control and surveillance, and encourage transparency and data sharing, the IUU-AA—a mouthful, Mr Sharma—is growing in momentum, and it has recently welcomed the EU, Chile, Panama and New Zealand to its membership.

The UK's blue belt ocean shield aims to tackle the challenges of IUU fishing and unlawful marine activities around the UK overseas territories, using innovative technology. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell said, that technology will be critical

[Trudy Harrison]

in this fight. Through surveillance techniques, alongside comprehensive compliance and enforcement frameworks, territories are ensuring that over 4.3 million square kilometres of ocean are protected under this measure.

We will continue to work with the industry to ensure it meets the requirements of the regulation and avoids those illegal, unreported and unregulated methods, as my right hon. Friend set out. The Marine Management Organisation and IFCAs have embarked on that programme. The site-based protection does not mitigate potential impacts from these vessels on the targeted, highly migratory stocks. Although most of what those vessels fish is covered by coastal state quota allocations, the Government are looking closely at what our policies for them should be. It is important that those decisions are based on evidence and that we work with the fishing sector.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell also asked me for an update on labelling. I am afraid I do not have specific information on the sustainability of seafood labelling, but will happily write to him on that point. He is correct that we are taking action under the forest risk commodities provisions to ensure that products bought in this country have not contributed to illegal deforestation. That same kind of sustainability must also be in place for seafood and the like, so I will endeavour to provide that information.

We do have seafood labelling that means that seafood must be traceable from catch—or harvest—to the point of retail sale. In England, the MMO is responsible for ensuring seafood traceability from catch to first point of sale. That is currently achieved through a range of controlled measures requiring the submission of data by both fishers and merchants. Traceability provides assurance to consumers and associated benefits to all fully compliant agents within the industry supply chain.

Finally—I hope that I have covered all points so far—we have taken huge strides in protecting and recovering precious marine life. I would like to be able to say more about seagrass and kelp, which the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned, but I am afraid that I will have to write to her because I do not have the information to hand. I was particularly interested to learn about her examples off the shores of Cornwall and Plymouth. When we arrange the meeting I promised a couple of weeks ago—which I will absolutely ensure happens—perhaps she could bring me further details, as I would certainly like to understand more about the benefits of seagrass and how we can support those organisations.

Highly protected marine areas will ensure that the UK plays its part in achieving the global 30 by 30 target. More broadly, we are also taking steps outside of protected areas, such as our consultation on banning the industrial fishing of sand eels and our progress on our six frontrunner fisheries management plans. I have set out the impressive rate of progress over the 178 marine protected areas, but there is always more to do. For further reading, I always recommend the environmental improvement plan—all 262 pages of it—which covers the 10 goals across DEFRA to ensure that we leave this environment in a better place than we found it in.

4.27 pm

Chris Grayling: This has been a helpful and informative debate. As the Minister said, the noble Lord Benyon holds this portfolio, but she will no doubt be assiduous in communicating the nature of what has been said to her colleague—as I am sure the officials will too—so I am grateful to her for stepping in and making some very helpful points.

I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones); I am not on a journey. Conservatives are, by nature, conservative, and I do not think that there is much contradiction in being Conservative and being focused on conservation—they do rather go together.

Since 2010, this Government have been to places that no previous Government have been, by putting in place measures that will be needed to reverse the loss of wildlife in this country. However, as the Minister says, although it is a good start, there is a long way to go and there is always more to do. The purpose of this debate is really to give DEFRA a hefty nudge. I know that officials like to take their time to go through the responses and work thoroughly to prepare the strategies, but we do need to get on with this. Of course, there is likely to be a major political event next year, and it would be very nice, by the time that we get to that, to be able to point to some real further steps in marine protected areas.

When arguing for change, I have always been careful not to say that a ban on bottom trawling in MPAs should be absolute; there will, of course, be localised exceptions for small boats—DEFRA can work with that—but I do not buy the argument that a blanket ban is wrong. I would prefer a blanket ban with some thoughtful exceptions rather than a whole paraphernalia of stuff that eventually, step by step by step, gets to something approximating a ban. Let's do it the other way around: let's look at where we need the exceptions and get on with it. Every week or month that goes past sees a continued degradation in too many areas, particularly from large industrial ships.

I agree with the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Newport West, on enforcement. We really need to get that right. I would like to see some measures to ban from UK waters all together vessels, such as big industrial trawlers, that break the rules when the ban is in place. I hope we will see proper enforcement and real consequences, so that people do not break the rules.

As I have said, this has been a good start—with a long way to go. We need a bit of a foot on the accelerator, as we cannot afford to wait longer for the measures that need to be taken. I have set out today some things that I want to see happen, but my message to Ministers is this: thank you for listening, but please accelerate now, because, both politically and naturally—in conservation terms—time is not on our side.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Marine Protected Areas.

4.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

Vaping: Under-18s

5 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered vaping among under-18s.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and it is great to welcome many colleagues from across the House to this important debate. I completely recognise that vaping has a vital role to play in supporting adults to give up tobacco smoking. However, vaping is a public good only if it is helping people to end addictions that they already have, not creating new ones, especially in our vulnerable young folk.

It is not an exaggeration to say that we are seeing an epidemic among our young people, which can be attributed to an increasingly popular and powerful market for disposable vapes. Action on Smoking and Health—ASH—said in its survey of 11 to 17-year-olds in Great Britain that 15.8% of 11 to 17-year-olds had tried vaping in 2022, up from 11.2% in 2021. It also said that in 2022, 7% of 11 to 17-year-olds were current users of vapes, up from 3.3% in 2021.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is currently illegal for young people under 18 to purchase vapes. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have a problem implementing the existing regulations, rather than anything else?

Dr Hudson: I completely agree, and I want to stress that key point: it is illegal to sell vapes to under-18s. I will be asking the Minister about that. I know that the Government are moving on it, and we need to address it going forward.

Similarly, an NHS survey in 2021 said that 9% of 11 to 15-year-olds, and 18% of 15-year-olds, had used vapes. Those are alarming statistics. ASH England also noted that the most frequently used e-cigarettes among young people are disposable vapes, with an astonishing increase from 7.7% in 2021 to 52% in 2022. Although this is not the main focus of my speech, I will point out that, quite aside from the health concerns associated with such a marked rise in the sale and consumption of disposable vapes, they are a major environmental concern, with over 1 million of them thrown away every week. It is estimated that the lithium used in those batteries equates to about 10 tonnes of lithium per year, which is equivalent to the lithium used in approximately 1,200 electric vehicle batteries.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware of my ten-minute rule Bill to ban disposable vapes for exactly the reasons he has described: the effects on children's health particularly, and on the environment. Does he agree that the Government should support the Bill?

Dr Hudson: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I thank her for intervening and I welcome her medical expertise in this debate.

I have touched on some of the environmental concerns, and there are also concerns about fires related to disposable vapes. However, at the heart of my speech is the impact that such a frightening level of vape use is having on our young people, even as young as primary age. I urge our policymakers not to underestimate it. There are increasing reports suggesting that the use of vapes has negative

effects on heart and lung health, and may be associated with tooth and gum disease. Other issues reported include coughs, shortness of breath and headaches. Nicotine, which these products often contain, is highly addictive with potentially harmful effects on the adolescent brain, which is still developing.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Enforcement is absolutely vital in this industry, but does my hon. Friend agree that there is a danger of demonising vaping for adult smokers? Vaping is 95% risk free, according to ASH, which he has mentioned, the British Heart Foundation, the British Lung Foundation, Public Health England and so on. It is therefore a vital part of a smoker's ability to come off tobacco use. It quite literally saves lives, and therefore should be promoted to smokers.

Dr Hudson: I totally agree. As I said, the use of vaping to help adults get away from tobacco smoking has significant health benefits, but today we are talking about stamping out its use by people who are not trying to give up smoking. We are trying to protect our young people, but I totally concur with my hon. Friend.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous in taking interventions. I concur with his last point, but does he agree that one of the issues that we face is advertising? Vapes are stacked up like sweeties in all sorts of outlets, which presents them as rather benign and makes them attractive to younger users.

Dr Hudson: I totally concur. My hon. Friend has read my mind: I am about to talk about the advertising, the colourful labelling, the fruit flavours and so on, which draw in young people.

I have asked a number of parliamentary questions about vaping, and the recurrent theme in the Government's answers is that they acknowledge that vapes are not risk free, and that nicotine is highly addictive and can be harmful. Some studies suggest that vaping among young people can be a gateway to risky behaviour such as drinking and tobacco smoking, which would be a perverse thing to happen. Vaping is supposed to get adults off smoking, but if it is leading young people into smoking, that is not a good thing.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech about the detriment to health of vaping for under-18s. He mentioned a study, but does he agree that there is not sufficient research on under-18s, so we do not know exactly how safe or unsafe these products are?

Dr Hudson: I agree. That is exactly right: there is a paucity of data. I will ask the Government and the Department of Health and Social Care to create the datasets so that we can make evidence-based decisions.

Concerningly, ASH Scotland suggests that children with mental health issues including mood disorders and eating disorders, who are among the most vulnerable people in society, are potentially more likely to use vapes. That is a real concern. I am passionate about mental health, especially among our young people, and I urge the Government to continue to protect the most vulnerable. That has been the hallmark of this compassionate Conservative Government.

[Dr Hudson]

Anecdotally, we hear much about the impact of these products. We hear reports of children's sleep patterns being disrupted. They set their alarms for 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning so that they can vape in the middle of the night to avoid withdrawal symptoms the next day. At school, there have been reports of students leaving lessons and even walking out of examinations because they simply cannot last without the use of a vape. If vaping is having a detrimental impact on our young children's life chances, this is a matter not merely of health but of social and educational development. One teacher in my constituency noted that the issue is so widespread that vapes are being illicitly traded in the school playground.

I want to touch on the marketing of vapes to under-18s, as colleagues have done. A particular issue with the vaping market is the flagrant targeting of under-18s as potential consumers through trendy advertising on social media. Products are promoted with bright colours and inviting fruit flavours—sweet flavours such as mango, bubblegum and cherry ice.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities annual review of vaping reveals that 39% of ex-smokers use fruit-flavoured vapes, against 17% who use tobacco. There absolutely are issues with marketing, advertising and presentation to young people, but does my hon. Friend agree that an overly simplistic blanket ban of flavours might have the serious unintended consequence of preventing some potential vapers from vaping, meaning that they would carry on smoking and thus massively increasing their chances of an early death?

Dr Hudson: Again, this is about the differentiation between adult use of vaping products and young people's use of vaping products.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for making such an excellent speech. Does he agree that recruiting a new generation of addicts is the business model that the industry has forever driven, no matter whether the product kills or harms? The industry itself needs to be tackled on the issue.

Dr Hudson: I agree with the hon. Member. The industry needs to take a close look at itself, but it is also the case that a lot of the vapes that are ending up with children are coming through illicit means. We need to have a targeted approach to look at how best we can prevent our young people from accessing those products.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My hon. Friend made a very good point about advertising. We need to get across the nuanced message that vaping may be beneficial to people who want to quit smoking—although I would argue that it could become an alternative addiction rather than a stop-smoking aid—but we must also prevent children from using vapes. In the past, nuanced advertising for formula milk stated that breast milk was better at the beginning but that formula milk was a reasonable alternative for six month olds. Could a form of words be used in vaping adverts to make it clear that the products should be for people who smoke, not for those who do not?

Dr Hudson: I agree with my hon. Friend that if we can get more nuance into the advertising and labelling of vapes, that would help articulate to people the benefits of using them for the legitimate purpose of getting off tobacco smoking. It could also serve as a stern warning that young people should not take the products, because of their significant health risks. As ASH notes, 57% of e-cigarette use among 11 to 17-year-olds involves fruit flavours. Clearly and deliberately, the marketing of fruit-flavoured and trendy products is driving demand among our young people. We need to be very careful.

Aside from the nicotine, there are questions over whether the flavourings and chemicals inhaled also impact on the health risks to people who vape. For instance, in 2019 *The American Journal of Physiology: Lung Cellular and Molecular Physiology* reported that the flavouring chemical cinnamaldehyde was associated with decreased mucociliary clearance in the respiratory tract due to dysregulation of mitochondrial function. That presents a compelling case to treat this issue as an urgent priority and, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) has said, to gather much-needed data in the area. We can then demonstrate the reality of what dangers our young people are potentially being exposed to in the long term.

As one teacher in my constituency has noted, the prevailing view seems to be that the use of such products is completely harmless. As the evidence I have mentioned suggests, however, that is very much not the case, as has also been acknowledged by health experts and, indeed, the Government.

Worse still, the potential impacts assume that the products are being sold in accordance with Government regulations. However, we have seen an increase in illicit and non-compliant trade of e-cigarettes. Checks on imports of these products find that regulations are regularly flouted, including higher numbers of puffs per vape and higher nicotine levels than those permitted. That also demonstrates that any Government action needs to remember online trading as well, not just physical sales in shops.

The Government are tackling the problem. I welcome the recent announcements by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), but I believe that the emerging reality of the dangerous effects that vaping may be having on our young people presents a compelling case for Government to act and move forward on the issue. His intervention on the subject last month was a welcome and major step, and a clear signal that this Government recognise the severity of the issue.

To successfully tackle a failure in any market, a holistic approach focused on both supply and demand needs to be examined. I am, therefore, heartened that that is exactly the line of travel that the Government are taking in their call for evidence on vaping plans. They are focusing not just on illegal sales, which is vital, but on what is driving up demand among our young people, such as the influence of advertising and social media. I strongly encourage those who are watching this debate, and people at large, to take part in that call for evidence, so that we can collate more data. I am thinking in particular of those who are seeing the impact at first hand, such as those involved in schools.

As I have raised with the Ministry of Justice, it is imperative that unscrupulous sellers of vapes to under-18s should feel the full force of the law if they break it.

I therefore welcome the Government's announcement of £3 million for an illicit vapes enforcement taskforce to tackle those who are illegally selling vapes to our young people, but also to look out for products that should not be on our shelves. It is an important reminder that laws are effective only if there is the determination and resources to enforce them.

To summarise, although vaping has an important part to play in supporting adults to quit tobacco smoking for good, it must not come at the cost of creating new addictions and health issues in our young people. I am very pleased that the Government recognise the severity of this issue and are acting with compassion by acting for those most vulnerable to serious harm. It must be a priority for our health policy, and in fulfilling our commitment to young people we must tackle this real threat to them and to gather information on the potential long-term effects of these products.

Mark Pawsey: I know that my hon. Friend is nearing the end of his remarks. Everybody in the Chamber acknowledges that the problem he has identified is that these products are getting into the hands of young people. He has already praised the work that the Government are doing, but what more should they be doing to prevent these products from getting into the hands of the wrong people?

Dr Hudson: I look forward to hearing from the Minister what he and the Government are going to do. Calling for evidence and having a taskforce is a good starting point, but I think that is just a staging post. We need to do more by tackling the advertising and making sure that the labelling is sufficient. The health warnings on cigarette packets are quite alarming now, and tobacco products are kept behind closed cabinets in outlets. We need to be moving in that direction, so that vapes are not like sweets on shelves for our young kids. That is the real issue: they are appealing, colourful and fruit-flavoured products, and people think, "Do you know what? I'd like to have a try of this." That is where people are slipping into this problem.

I fear that our young people face a public health ticking timebomb, and we as a Parliament and as a society must address it as a priority. I welcome colleagues' interventions today, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about what steps the Government are going to take to tackle this very important issue.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) for securing this very important and timely debate on youth vaping, and for his excellent speech. Lots of Members have made important contributions to policy in this area, and I pay tribute to them for that, as well as for their contributions today.

Until recently, our regulations—including on the minimum age of sale, advertising restrictions and the cap on nicotine levels—have been reasonably effective at keeping the rate of vaping among under-18s low. However, over the last 18 months we have seen a surge in the use and promotion of cheap, colourful products that do not always comply with our regulations, and there has been a sharp increase in the number of children vaping. NHS figures show that 9% of 11 to 15-year-old

children used e-cigarettes in 2021—up from 6% in 2018. That is a big concern, because there is every reason to think that the rate has continued to go up.

We know that vapes are not risk-free. Nicotine is highly addictive and can be harmful, and there are unanswered questions about the effects of long-term use, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) pointed out. Our message is very clear: vapes should not be used by people under the age of 18, or by non-smokers. That is why I announced on 11 April that we are stepping up our efforts to stop kids getting hooked on vaping. First, we launched a call for evidence on youth vaping to identify opportunities to reduce the number of children accessing and using vape products, and to explore where the Government can go further. That call for evidence explores a range of issues, including how we ensure regulatory compliance, the appearance and characteristics of vapes, the marketing and promotion of them, and the role of social media. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) rightly talked about them being stacked up like sweets, and that concerns me, too. On the other hand, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) warned that this is not a straightforward matter to regulate, and pointed out the need to avoid counterproductive changes that stop people swapping from smoking to vaping.

Our call for evidence will also seek to ensure that we understand the vaping market better. It will look at such issues as the price of low-cost products. The call for evidence also considers the environmental impact of vapes, particularly the disposable ones that have become so appealing to young people.

Ruth Jones: The Minister is talking about the environmental impact. How closely is he working with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs colleagues to ensure recycling, and to ensure a circular economy in the precious metals mentioned, which must be brought back into the economy?

Neil O'Brien: Closely. I am also listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who has led discussion on the subject through her ten-minute rule Bill. She is right to be concerned about the environmental impact of disposable products. The proportion of young people using those disposable products has gone up from 8% in 2021 to 52% by 2022. Clearly, they are an important part of youth vaping.

Gareth Johnson: We have heard a few calls for vaping products to be placed with tobacco products. Does the Minister agree that there is a danger in connecting vaping with tobacco to such a degree? It is not surprising that a disproportionately high number of people in this country believe that vaping is just as bad as smoking. People are put off going from smoking to vaping as a consequence. Should we not separate vaping from smoking wherever possible?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right, and I will come to that in a moment. The call for evidence that I talked about will be open for the next eight weeks, and we hope that everyone concerned will take the opportunity to share their views and put evidence in, to shape our future approach.

Caroline Ansell: In the review, will there be any consideration of the role of Trading Standards?

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely, and I hope people will put in evidence on that. I will touch in a moment on something else we are doing. In the speech I mentioned, I announced the new specialised illicit vaping flying squad, a team to tackle under-age vape sales and illicit products that young people are accessing. It will hold companies to account and enforce rules.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for vaping (e-cigarettes), said that we must enforce the rules, and he is absolutely right. That is why we are providing £3 million in new funding to Trading Standards, which will help share knowledge and intelligence around the country. The squad will undertake test purchasing, so that we find out who is selling to young people. It will disrupt illicit supply, and will also do work on organised crime gangs. It will remove illegal products, not just from our shelves but at our borders. It will undertake more testing to ensure compliance with our rules, bolstering the capacity of Trading Standards. Companies that fail to comply with the law will be held accountable.

It is important that we teach young people about the risks of vaping. That is why we have published new content on the potential risks of vaping for young people on the FRANK and Better Health websites. We have also provided extra input into educational resources produced by partners, including the PSHE Association.

Mark Pawsey: The Government has an objective to be smoke-free by 2030—that is, to get down to 5% of people smoking. Is the Minister concerned that if we continue to talk about the dangers and harms that may be associated with vaping, we are in grave danger of providing a disincentive for smokers to switch to a much safer alternative?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend has pre-empted my next paragraph almost perfectly. I was about to say that although we want to ensure that children do not take up vaping, vaping can play an important part in achieving our ambition of a smoke-free England by 2030. Vaping is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we do not want children to develop an addiction to any substance at a young age, but on the other, it is substantially less harmful than smoking, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said. It is 95% safer than smoking.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister also put in place services, similar to smoking programmes, to support people who are now addicted to vaping, to enable them to come off vaping?

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely, and I will touch on that in just one moment. Vapes—

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I think I should try to answer the last intervention before taking another one; I will come back to my hon. Friend in a second. Vapes are not yet being used widely enough to reach their full potential as a quit smoking aid, so on 11 April, I announced new funding for a new national “swap to stop” programme—the first of its kind anywhere in the world. We will work with councils and others to offer 1 million smokers across England a free vaping starter kit. Smokers who join the scheme, which will run initially over the next two years, will join on one condition: they must commit to quitting smoking, with support. We will provide additional support to help them quit vaping after they have quit smoking. We will target the most at-risk communities first, focusing on settings such as jobcentres, homelessness centres and social housing providers. I do not know whether my hon. Friend still has a burning question.

Dr Johnson: Yes, and I thank the Minister for giving way; he has been extremely generous with his time. He has talked about the importance of educating children about the risks. Does he agree that a key problem is that many young people and children who use vapes do not believe that they are harmful at all?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is quite probably right. There is a lack of understanding of some of the risks, and of the effects on mental health and wellbeing. I am very, very worried when I hear about young people at school smoking, and about the disruption that various hon. Members have raised in this debate.

I conclude by thanking all Members here for highlighting concerns about these issues, and for their contributions, not only in the debate but over a longer period. That has had an effect on Government policy, and will continue to. The Government are committed to doing all we can to prevent children and young people from vaping, while also ensuring that we use the full potential of vaping as a tool to help smokers quit.

Question put and agreed to.

Terminal Illness: Early Access to Pensions

5.29 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered early access to pensions for people with a terminal illness.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. In the United Kingdom, it is not possible under any circumstances to access a state pension before retirement age—not even if a person has paid national insurance contributions for the full 35 years, is terminally ill, and have less than a year to live. The purpose of the state pension is to support all of us towards the end of life, at a time when we are less capable or incapable of work, yet people with a terminal illness, who are nearing the end of life and, in the majority of cases, are no longer able to work, are not entitled to draw on their state pension, regardless of their contributions, financial difficulties or personal or family situation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Terminal cancer patients who have surpassed their life expectancy have been told by firms such as Legal & General that they are ineligible to access their pension early because they may live longer. People are being punished for defying their life expectancy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people with a terminal illness should be given the dignity and respect of being able to access their own pension early?

Dave Doogan: I absolutely agree. Dignity and respect is at the heart of that ambition, as she so clearly articulates.

I start the debate with an appalling statistic. More than a quarter of people who die before retirement age spend their final days in poverty. In my Angus constituency, that figure is 24%. It is awful to think that for so many people with terminal illness, their last days are filled with worry and fears that go beyond the illness with which they have been diagnosed. Marie Curie reports that many terminally ill people feel stress about keeping a roof over their head, paying for their children's school uniform or the energy use of their specialist medical equipment. As far as possible, the last days of life should be spent surrounded by friends and family, making happy memories in comfortable surroundings.

My constituent Ian Bain, from Forfar, was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2014. Mr Bain worked his entire life. He started work in 1977, and accrued 41 years of national insurance contributions—six more than necessary to entitle him to a full state pension on retirement. When he stopped working due to illness, there was no way for him to access his state pension, because he was not yet 65. Due to Department for Work and Pensions delays, he also did not receive any social security payments until nine months after applying. Mr Bain was not entitled to claim under the special rules, as he had been advised that he had more than six months left to live. When he did eventually start receiving payments, he received them only at the lower rate of the personal independence payment and employment and support allowance.

Although Mr Bain had been diagnosed as terminally ill by a medical practitioner, he was required to return annually for follow-up assessments to see if his incurable

degenerative condition had improved. He was even informed by one assessor that he “looked well”—cold comfort if ever there was. It was only in 2021 that Mr Bain started receiving the higher rate, when he was moved to the Scottish Government's adult disability payment. Mr Bain can no longer speak to me on the telephone and has to use a single finger to email me. He should not face the indignity and stress of continually having to jump through bureaucratic hoops for a pittance, while the pension that he has so completely paid into for decades is denied to him by the tightest of all fists.

Sadly, Mr Bain's situation is far from rare. Another Angus constituent, Ross, told me that his father “died of cancer in 2019 just 2 days before being able to draw on his pension, he had spent his whole life working. He paid his contributions religiously from the day he was able to work and got nothing back.”

My constituent Malcolm advised:

“When you hear someone tell you that you have cancer, you immediately think you are going to die. That thought automatically triggers the need to make sure for the provision for your loved ones. The only thing we should have to deal with is building up happy memories for those left. This is more difficult when money is in short supply due to escalating costs.”

Another Angus constituent said that her husband died of a glioblastoma

“4 months before he retired. He worked his entire life and was never off sick or claimed benefits once. Once he was diagnosed I had to battle to get assistance. He should have been able to access his state pension early.”

It would have made all the difference. She continues:

“it would have helped with the financial strain.”

Access to funds for the terminally ill is a problem across these islands. People are twice as likely to die in poverty if they are terminally ill and under 66 years of age. The reasons for this poverty are well understood. People with terminal illnesses very often cannot work. Two thirds of terminally ill people rely on benefits as their main or only source of income. At the same time, costs can often increase dramatically at the end of life. The additional cost of terminal illness can reach up to £16,000 a year. There is often a need for energy-intensive specialist medical care in the home. Many people need to keep their home warmer, and their energy bills increase dramatically. All of us in the United Kingdom are exposed to inflationary pressure and sky-high energy costs, but for the terminally ill, the situation is permitted to become even more dire.

The Scottish Government have acted to mitigate some of the financial and bureaucratic pressure on those experiencing terminal illness. Scotland is introducing its own extra costs disability assistance benefit, having already introduced the child disability payment and adult disability payment, which replace the disability living allowance and personal independence payment. It is working towards the introduction of a further payment to replace the attendance allowance.

The Scottish Government have also changed the definition of “terminal illness” used to allow access to benefits from the 12-month special-rule definition used in England to an indefinite definition that includes all people diagnosed with a terminal illness. This allows people to be fast-tracked to receive the highest rate of payment as quickly as possible, and for longer. The central principle of the approach is to ensure that terminally ill people are provided with the support that they need,

[*Dave Doogan*]

when they need it. That approach represents nothing more than the dignified acceptance of a terminally ill person's circumstances. It is simply doing the right thing. Those changes are welcome and will do much to improve the experience of those with a terminal illness living in Scotland, but the fact remains that their state pension is kept from them, no matter how long they have paid into the system. The Scottish Government have no power to intervene when it comes to that injustice.

People with terminal illnesses have often paid enormous amounts of national insurance. On average, people aged 20 to 64 who are in their last year of life have accrued 24 years of national insurance contributions, and will never see the benefit of that investment, yet the path to improving the situation is straightforward and affordable. France, Germany, Italy and Spain all provide for early access to the state pension in the event of disability, and for those found to have a terminal illness.

Research conducted by Loughborough University found that giving working-age terminally ill people access to their state pension could almost halve the rate of poverty in that cohort, lifting more than 8,600 people a year out of poverty at the end of their life. That change would be not only effective but extremely affordable. It is estimated to cost £144 million per year—just 0.1% of the annual state pension bill—and would make an immeasurable improvement to the dignity and life of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, and their families. It is also fair. People pay into a state pension their whole life to ensure a comfortable end of life, but when they reach end of life, the UK Government tell them that they will keep the money. How can that be? To put it another way, the UK Government are saving £144 million per year by withholding access to state pensions from terminally ill people. That is unconscionable.

Members not just from my own party but from across the House have asked the UK Government to consider permitting terminally ill people to access their state pension, regardless of age. Many Members in this debate and beyond fear that the Minister's response will echo previous Government responses—that she will say that terminally ill people already get access to benefits, or that those in their final years of life will have their applications fast-tracked. Those measures have failed to avoid the extraordinarily high rates of poverty among the terminally ill, they do very little for those diagnosed as having more than 12 months to live, and they are clearly insufficient in supporting people during what can be one of the most devastating and frightening periods of anyone's life.

I hope that the Minister will give this humane and decent aspiration the due consideration it deserves, and that the Government will change the rules for terminally ill people not just in Angus but across these islands.

5.41 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I wish that more Members had attended this very important debate so that I could sum up some more contributions, but I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (*Dave Doogan*) for securing it and delivering a powerful speech in which he entreated

the UK Government to act with compassion. It is vital that terminally ill people are finally given the respect they deserve in UK Government circles.

When terminally ill people get their diagnosis, they are absolutely devastated, and so are their families. It is a situation that none of us wants to face, and nor do we want members of our family to face it. It is absolutely devastating, and grief kicks in immediately. That is just one of the pressures facing terminally ill people and their families, which my hon. Friend laid out.

Margaret Ferrier: Terminal illness puts an emotional, mental and financial strain on the individual and their family. More than four in five families living with advanced cancer face income losses as a result. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that allowing early access to pensions will enable people with terminal illness and their families to focus on the quality of their end-of-life experience and not worry about money?

Drew Hendry: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. This should be about making the people who are facing this most dreadful situation and their families as comfortable as possible and helping them to move forward. The cost is small, although as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus said, by not paying out the £144 million a year, the UK Government are running a lottery; they hope to get that dividend in from people. That is a small amount for dignity and fairness for the people in that situation and their families.

My hon. Friend shared the damning statistic that terminally ill people are twice as likely as others to die in poverty. They have bigger costs; it costs more to be terminally ill. For a start, they are ill, and most are homebound, which increases energy costs. There is the cost of the adaptations that they have to make, and increased costs for their families, who have to visit more to provide support.

The issue should be very simple for the UK Government. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness, and although our entreaties about the six-month rule were listened to—on every occasion, Ministers said, “Yes, we must do something about this”—the change to 12 months took years in which thousands of people died waiting. I welcomed the change from six months to 12 months because it made life marginally more easy for people, but the fact that the effect is marginal—the very minimum that could be done for terminally ill people—is the most damning thing about this. As has been stated, this is about fairness and dignity, and people's ability to have a quality end of life. The power is with the UK Government to make a very simple and fair adjustment. As has been underlined, in the scale of things, the cost is small, but the scale of the impact on the lives of people who are terminally ill and their families is enormous.

Nobody is asking for things that people have not earned; these pensions are something that people have earned throughout their lives. The Government can look at it this way: when someone gets that devastating note that says they are terminally ill, the Government know they will save money from the fact that that person is not going to be around for years collecting their state pension. Therefore, the Government can at least make this gesture towards making people's lives easier. Why do we not see more compassion from the

UK Government over this very simple matter? People are dying; why not treat them the way they should be treated? Why not strain every sinew and make every move to ensure that people in this situation have the best possible end of life? It is one thing that all of us could achieve by working together, and that the UK Government could commit to.

We heard about the tragedy of Mr Bain, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, who spent 41 years paying into his pension. He earned it but he is not going to get it. Think of my hon. Friend's other constituent, Malcolm, who is quoted as saying when his diagnosis of cancer came in, "You immediately think you are going to die." Of course he thought that, with that diagnosis. People are going to die; the problem is that, with the best will in the world, doctors cannot put a definitive timescale on when. However, they can often say that, "You are going to degenerate and your life is going to get more difficult as you go towards the end of life."

This is a simple act. State pensions are reserved to the UK Government, so only they can act on this for people in Scotland and the other nations of the UK. Other nations can, as we have heard, make provisions like this; they can do the right thing for people. My hon. Friend the Member for Angus laid it out very clearly, but I will say it again: this is not a mammoth choice, and it is not going to destroy the UK budget. It is a small step that, along with other measures, should be taken to assist people who are terminally ill and their families.

When the Minister sums up the debate and answers our questions, I ask her not to just give out platitudes and promises of long-term action, as we have heard so many times before from so many other Ministers in the UK Government. I am not saying she will do that, but I believe the debate deserves answers on how she will take the issue back to her Department and work out a proper plan for people who are terminally ill and their families, so they can have the dignity, respect and fairness they deserve. She can give a reassurance that she will fight tooth and nail to get state pensions released for people who are terminally ill.

5.48 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) and colleagues from across the House who have contributed to this important debate. I hope the Government will take this issue seriously and find ways to improve the lives of people with a terminal illness.

I am pleased that legislation was passed last year to support people with a terminal illness in having fast-track access to benefits. I hope that we can develop a consensus on other matters, including the related issue we are discussing today, but I would sound a note of caution following on from the debate last September on the Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Act 2022, where the House worked together to allow people in the last years of life to receive increased benefits. One of the challenges raised at the time was whether the Government were able to deliver on their promises, given the series of failures over the last decade. I hope that the Minister will ensure that DWP runs smoothly and that the errors

we have seen in some aspects of the pensions and benefits system will be addressed, so that the people in that greatest need are protected. I ask the Minister to reassure Members that the Department will be able to provide individual pension savers and people in need with the level of service they would expect.

On the substance of the debate—early access to pensions—I want to cover two aspects in my speech: the issue of occupational pensions, and then the issue of access to the state pension, which the hon. Member for Angus mentioned. Occupational pensions play a very important role in allowing constituents to save for their retirement, and it is only right that people who have saved all their lives and contributed to the system should be able to access the money that they have saved. I understand that people with less than a year to live are already able to withdraw their entire pension in some cases, and a substantial amount in other cases, and even those who are younger may be able to take advantage of that facility through the pension freedoms that are normally available at the age of 55. I ask the Minister to reassure Members about her work with the pensions industry to develop this further, so that we can have a further discussion and perhaps gain further understanding of the possible ways to support people. Given that a great deal of many constituents' income in retirement does not come from money that is saved through occupational pensions, it is very important that the money that people have saved is available to them at their time of need.

On the state pension, I want to put on the record my thanks to Marie Curie and other campaign groups for raising this issue. It is very important that we listen to the voices of those campaigners, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Angus for securing the debate so that we can discuss them. I understand that the Government's current position is not to allow early access to the state pension. I would be very grateful if the Minister confirmed that that and set out the evidence on which the decision is based. I am sure that the Department will have explored the issue in detail, and I ask her to consider publishing some of the research carried out by the Department on this matter, so that we can understand it better and have a fuller debate in future.

I want to take this opportunity to raise some other points that have been made by campaigners. I am worried by some of the research that outlines the scale of the problem that energy bills can cause those facing the awful diagnosis of terminal illness, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Angus for mentioning that point. For example, research by Marie Curie explains that after a terminal illness diagnosis, energy bills may rise by as much as 75%. I think I heard the hon. Member refer to some of the additional medical needs, the need for greater home heating and sometimes the need for expensive equipment, such as oxygen tanks, in a person's home. It is very important that we understand that, take it into account and see the wider needs of somebody facing an awful diagnosis and suffering a terrible challenge.

There is a lot of independent research on the consequences of living in damp, under-heated properties, which we should also bear in mind when we consider this issue. For example, the World Health Organisation estimates that about 30% of excess winter deaths are directly attributable to living in cold, damp environments, and we have to take that point into account, as well as

[*Matt Rodda*]

the additional cost of heating for medical reasons and of paying for additional energy to support machinery. That is why it is really important that we take steps to reduce energy bills in a sustainable and long-term way. As the official Opposition, we are calling for energy bills to be cut for good, which should obviously start with a proper windfall tax on oil and gas giants, continuing with our long-term mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030.

Campaigners have highlighted other financial and family impacts of having a terminal illness diagnosis, and one difficult challenge faced by some families is that other forms of support may not be available to them. For example, access to paid childcare may diminish as a result of not being able to work, although a family may still need it. I would like the Government—I hope the Minister will address this in her speech—to look at not only reforming the childcare system in broad terms but addressing the specific issue faced by those who have a family member with a terminal illness diagnosis. They should look at the need for childcare at that difficult time and at the unintended consequences of some aspects of Government policy. There is a need for wider reform because, sadly, families, children's education and our economy are paying the price for our current childcare system.

To conclude, I hope the Government will respond and continue to work with the pensions industry. I look forward to the Minister answering my questions about her work with the industry, confirming Government policy on the state pension and committing to publish suitably informative material about the research carried out by the Department.

5.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. We have been discussing a very sensitive issue, and I thank the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) for bringing forward the debate, and all hon. Members for their contributions.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that all citizens can live with the dignity and respect they deserve. I think it would help if I first set out the principles behind the state pension, which is the foundation of state support for older people. In 2016, the system was reformed, with the introduction of the new, simpler and more straightforward state pension as the basis for private saving, to which people can add throughout their lives.

The state pension is a contributory social benefit, financed through the national insurance fund. The national insurance system operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, meaning that today's contributors are paying for today's social security entitlements and pensions, while those who paid contributions in the past were paying for the pensions of that time. In other words, the contributors to the national insurance system do not accumulate an individual pot of money that is personal to them.

People's national insurance contributions do not just pay for the state pension. They also entitle them—or, in certain circumstances, their spouses—to contributory social security benefits such as unemployment and bereavement benefits, which are available on the basis of

the rules applicable at the time the claim is made, and about 20% of national insurance contributions are paid into the NHS. Therefore, it is a question not so much of a person paying for their own benefits, but of a general pooling of resources to meet current benefit claims for all those covered by the national insurance system.

A person's contributions are geared towards liability to pay rather than any likelihood of future benefit entitlement. In that sense, it is similar to income tax rather than a private insurance or pension scheme. It has always been an overriding principle of the national insurance system that liability to contribute exists, whether or not those contributions will eventually give entitlement to a particular benefit. That is very different from private pensions, where a person builds up a pool that is specifically theirs, and where different laws rightly exist.

Therefore, early access to a state pension would not be appropriate in the case of terminally ill people, but there are a variety of other benefits available to them. For those nearing the end of their life, significant support is already available through the welfare system. Hearing that an illness cannot be cured must be a frightening and devastating experience, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for all his work on that with the APPG. Our priority within the DWP is providing people with financial support quickly and compassionately. The main way we do that is through the special benefit rules, which have been mentioned today and which are sometimes referred to as the special rules. They give people nearing the end of their life faster and easier access to certain benefits, without their needing to attend a medical assessment or serve waiting periods. In most cases, people will receive the highest rate of benefit.

Changes to the special rules mean that thousands of people nearing the end of their life will be able to claim fast-tracked financial support from the benefits system six months earlier than they were able to previously. Historically, people had to be assessed by their healthcare professional as having six months or less to live. That is known as the six-month rule, which the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey referred to. In July 2021, the Government announced that they intended to replace the six-month criteria with a 12-month, end-of-life approach. Last April, the Department made those changes to the special rules for eligibility for universal credit and employment and support allowance. In April 2023, the Department made similar changes for PIP, disability living allowance and attendance allowance. Those changes have been welcomed—as they have been today—by the key charities active in the area, by the public and by parliamentarians.

I will now expand on my earlier remarks on early access to state pension. Unlike a personal or workplace pension, which can potentially be drawn earlier, it has always been the case that nobody can claim their state pension before they reach state pension age. There are a wide range of working-age benefits available to support people who are below state pension age. Removing the clear boundaries between working-age and pensioner benefits would create complexity and confusion. This is not simply a monetary issue.

As an example of the complex issues relating to early access, the value of an individual's state pension is based on their contribution record. Is the intention here to base it on the contribution record of those who are,

sadly, at the heart of today's debate? If the value of that state pension, based on the person's record, is deficient, would they be entitled to means-tested pension credit? If they took their state pension early, would it need to be actuarially reduced to reflect that? Early access actually means lowering the age of entitlement to state pension. At what age would it be set for this group? Would it be 16, in line with the age—

Drew Hendry: I appreciate the Minister's position, but I am not sure that many people who are terminally ill, or those who work with them, will be comforted by the technicalities she is laying out. She is laying out the rules as they stand, but does she see no opportunity for things to be adjusted so that the entitlement age for those who are terminally ill could be adjusted, as it is in other countries? Is there no opportunity or intention for the UK Government to look at that?

Laura Trotter: The Department's position is that help is available through benefits other than the state pension. The state pension is not an entitlement pool that exists; it is done on a pay-as-you-go basis. Of course, it is different from private pensions, which I will come to in a second, and there is more that we could do on that front to make the situation easier and more straightforward.

I of course accept the sentiment on which this proposal is based—that those who are terminally ill should be financially supported—but grounding this support on the state pension system, because it is there, does not make for a practical proposition, and that is in addition to my earlier points on the nature of the state pension.

Hon. Members will be aware that the second Government review of state pension age was published on 30 March 2023. The Government noted the independent report's recommendations on the rise from 67 to 68, but highlighted that Baroness Neville-Rolfe was unable to take into account the long-term impact of recent significant external factors, bringing uncertainty to the data on life expectancy, the economic position and labour market.

I raise that point because, as part of that process, independent reviewers looked at early-access policies that would allow variation in state pension age for certain groups. John Cridland covered that in his 2017 independent review of state pension age. More recently, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, in her independent review, recommended that the Government should look at such a scheme for people who had spent long periods of their lives doing physical work.

However, both reviewers recognised the real, practical difficulties of designing and delivering such a scheme. We are aware that when and why people leave the labour market will vary and will be affected by a host of factors, including their national insurance record, savings, health, caring responsibilities and other factors. It would be impossible to take account of all those factors in setting the state pension age or to create rules for one particular group that would be fair to others. In addition, the Government are mindful of the fact that a universal state pension age has many benefits, including giving a clear signal to those planning for retirement.

Private pensions are very different. Through automatic enrolment, we have extended pension saving, so more individuals will have access to choices at retirement, with more than 10.8 million people automatically enrolled into a workplace pension as of March 2023. If someone

has a defined benefit private or workplace pension, they may be able to begin taking an income and/or lump sums from their pension at any age due to ill health. That provision is dependent on the rules of the scheme.

In addition, the generous tax benefits of saving into a defined contribution pension provide individuals with the ability to accrue savings for their retirement and provide them with freedom and choice about how they access them. Individuals can normally access those savings, without penalty, from age 55. However, to address the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), they may be able to access their pension as a lump sum from any age if the scheme administrator has received evidence from a registered medical practitioner that the member is expected to live for less than one year.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) raised a specific example of where there were difficulties. I would be grateful if she would write to me about that, and we can see whether there is anything we can do to help.

The hon. Member for Reading East raised some points on energy. The energy price guarantee has been extended for an additional three months at its current level, from April to the end of June. That will bring a typical household energy bill for dual-fuel gas and electricity down to around £2,500 per year in Great Britain and around £2,109 per year in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I have set out the range of support that the Government provide for people with terminal illnesses. Although I of course have the greatest sympathy for anyone in that position, the Government do not believe that adjusting the state pension system to support that group is the right approach, although early access to private pensions is obviously a different matter.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I call Dave Doogan to wind up.

6.5 pm

Dave Doogan: Thank you very much, Mr Sharma. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this important discussion. I am disappointed, if I am honest, that so much of the oxygen in the room has been devoted to private pensions. There is a fundamental—and, dare I say it, fundamentally clear—distinction to make between private pensions and state pensions. People in the workplace have a choice over whether to take out a private pension or not; they do not have a choice over whether to pay their national insurance contributions. I would suggest—respectfully—that that is a fundamental, fairly obvious difference between private and state pensions.

In her summing up, the Minister talked about the pay-as-you-go nature of national insurance contributions. I think that most of us, as Members of Parliament, already understand that there is no national insurance pot and that national insurance is, in effect, a distinct version of general taxation.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is making a point about the state pension and the mechanics that have been described. However, this situation—where there is no specific pot—is the same in other countries, such as Australia and Canada, which do allow early access to the state pension. There is no difference in the mechanism for it, or indeed the principle behind it; they have just applied the compassion that is missing in this situation. Does my hon. Friend not agree?

Dave Doogan: I agree entirely. A narrative has been advanced this afternoon that, because this does not happen, it cannot happen. But, of course, if we want to make it happen, it can happen. As my hon. Friend points out, that is the case in other jurisdictions that have more cognisance of, and respect for, not just the fiscal elements, but the social contract that exists between society, individuals and the Government that seek to represent them.

I think the point the Minister made in her summing up was that it has never been possible to draw down a state pension early. Well, I think we know that too. What we are seeking to debate here is that that is not a cogent or sustainable position and that the Government should therefore introduce legislation that makes it possible—in very distinct and challenging circumstances—to draw down that state pension early.

Of the range of reasons or excuses for not doing what has been proposed, I would suggest that “introducing complexity to the system” will fall on fairly stony ground with people who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. I am sure they would imagine that a bureaucracy the like of which the UK has at its command could sufficiently marshal the resources to tackle the complexity of a very distinct change to the state pension regime to allow them the dignity they sorely deserve.

The benefits system was also talked about a lot this afternoon. Well, again, a bit like private pensions, that issue is distinct from this one. Those state benefits—whether personal independence payments or employment and support allowance—are a function of the person’s or underlying health, whether or not they have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. As every hon. and right hon. Member can attest, many case studies show that those lumbering regimes take a long time—too long—to come to fruition, and they do not recognise the fact that, whether there is a pot there or not, those people have substantively contributed to a system that, in their time of need, has abandoned them. I respectfully suggest to the Minister that she and the Government really should think again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered early access to pensions for people with a terminal illness.

6.9 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 2 May 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Closure of Gov.UK Verify

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I would like to update the House on the Gov.UK Verify programme, following the written ministerial statement in April 2022 made by my colleague Heather Wheeler MP. As planned, the Gov.UK Verify programme has now closed. The final Government service stopped using the platform on 30 March 2023.

Many services which used Gov.UK Verify have moved to Gov.UK One Login—the new Government-built solution which enables users to prove their identity and access central Government services online. The Government Digital Service is using lessons learnt from Gov.UK Verify to help in the development of Gov.UK One Login and provide people with an experience that is representative of a modern, forward-looking democracy. [HCWS755]

Circumstances leading to the Resignation of a Senior Civil Servant

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): On 6 March 2023, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and HM Paymaster General announced in reply to an urgent question that the Cabinet Office had been asked to look into the circumstances leading to the resignation of Sue Gray, the former Permanent Secretary for the Union and the Constitution, and committed to update Parliament as appropriate.

This process has involved interviewing relevant persons to establish further details on the contact between Ms Gray and the Leader of the Opposition. I can update the House that Ms Gray was given the opportunity to make representations as part of this process but chose not to do so.

I hope the House will understand that, in order to maintain confidentiality towards an individual former employee, I am unable at this stage to provide further information relating to the departure of Ms Gray whilst we consider next steps.

All civil servants are required to follow the civil service code which sets out the four core values of the civil service:

Integrity—putting the obligations of public service above your own personal interests

Honesty—being truthful and open

Objectivity—basing your advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence

Impartiality—acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving equally well Governments of different political persuasions.

Section 4.4.9 of the civil service management code sets out that all members of the senior civil service are in the “politically restricted” category, which places further restrictions on their political activity.

In addition, there is a requirement under the directory of civil service guidance, which underpins the civil service code, that

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

The impartiality and perceived impartiality of the civil service is constitutionally vital to the conduct of Government. 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.

Separately, the Cabinet Office has made submissions to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACoBA), the independent appointments watchdog, in relation to Ms Gray’s application for advice under the business appointment rules, prior to her taking up an appointment as chief of staff to the Leader of the Opposition. The Government’s confidential assessment is in line with the usual process and ACoBA will consider evidence from a range of sources to make a recommendation on any appropriate restrictions on the appointment. As set out in the business appointment rules, the aim of the rules includes avoiding any reasonable concerns that

“a former civil servant might improperly exploit privileged access to contacts in Government or sensitive information”.

The decision on any recommended restrictions on the appointment is for ACoBA.

The Government will provide a further update to the House in due course.

[HCWS757]

TREASURY

Notification of Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The independent Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stocks of UK Government bonds and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the Asset Purchase Facility by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities. The Bank ceased reinvestment of assets in this portfolio in February 2022 and has since commenced sales of corporate bonds on 28 September 2022, and sales of gilts acquired for monetary policy purposes on 1 November 2022.

The previous Chancellor agreed a joint approach with the Governor of the Bank of England in an exchange of letters on 3 February 2022 to reduce the maximum authorised size of the APF for asset purchases every six months, as the size of APF holdings reduces.

Since 16 January 2023, the total stock of assets held by the APF for monetary policy purposes has fallen from £851 billion to £821.3 billion. In line with the approach agreed with the Governor, the authorised maximum total size of the APF has therefore been reduced to £821.3 billion.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and HM Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government’s broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, the APF and its directors from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS756]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Appointments Update: BBC Board Chairman

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): On Friday 28 April, Richard Sharp submitted his resignation as chair of the BBC Board. On the same day, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments published the decision notice on the inquiry into the appointment process for the chair of the BBC Board.

I understand and respect Richard Sharp's decision to stand down, and following his resignation letter to me I wrote to him. A copy of this exchange of letters will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The board proposed that Richard Sharp stay in post until the next board meeting on 27 June 2023, while an acting chair is appointed in line with the charter. This will provide certainty and stability. A process will also commence to appoint a permanent new chair.

[HCWS753]

UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I wish to inform the House that His Majesty's Government announced the UK concussion guidelines for grassroots sport in conjunction with the Sport and Recreation Alliance on Friday 28 April:

<https://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/concussion-guidelines>

The vast majority of people participate in sport safely, but reducing the risks associated with concussion and making sport even safer for everyone is an ambition shared by both Government and the sport sector. Ultimately, we want more people to participate in sport and have a positive, enjoyable and safe experience.

The new UK concussion guidelines for grassroots sport are, therefore, a significant step forward. The most important message is: "If in doubt, sit them out", and the new guidelines are designed to help those at grassroots level:

RECOGNISE the signs of concussion;

REMOVE anyone suspected of being concussed immediately and;

RETURN safely to daily activity, education/work and, ultimately, sport.

The guidelines are designed for everyone involved in grassroots sport from school age upwards—participants, coaches, volunteers, parents—as well as those working in education settings and healthcare professions. The guidelines are aimed at grassroots sport where trained healthcare professionals are typically not available to manage concussed individuals.

The guidelines have been developed by an independent drafting group of leading UK and international experts in the field of sport-related concussion who used the latest and most robust scientific and medical evidence available. The guidelines have been endorsed by the Royal College

of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and supported by the NHS and the home nations' chief medical officers.

The UK-wide high level guidelines are part of a wider package of work being taken forward under the Government's Action Plan on Concussion, as set out in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Command Paper of December 2021.

Since publication of the Command Paper, through the action plan, the Government have created a distribution network of key stakeholders to share the new concussion guidelines and directed UK Sport and Sport England to ensure that the guidelines are implemented where appropriate by sports in receipt of public funding.

We have also encouraged sport national governing bodies to discuss training protocols with player associations. For the longer term, we have also created an Innovation and Technology panel of experts to work with companies in the tech industry to explore technological solutions, and established a new Sports Concussion Research Forum to identify the research questions that need answering in this important area.

We encourage Members of the House to share this important message widely to ensure that the benefits of sport are enjoyed safely.

[HCWS754]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Draft Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the draft Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, also known as Martyn's law, for pre-legislative scrutiny by the Home Affairs Committee. The draft Bill (CP 840) has been laid before the House and is also available on www.gov.uk.

The Government confirmed their intention to bring forward Martyn's law in December 2022. Since this announcement, officials have been working at pace to finalise the proposals.

The plans have been developed following extensive engagement with security partners, business and victims' groups, including Figen Murray and the Martyn's Law Campaign Team. The Government would particularly like to thank Figen Murray, whose son Martyn Hett was killed in the Manchester Arena attack, for the significant contribution she has made through her tireless campaign to introduce the Bill.

The threat from terrorism is evolving and enduring. One of the most significant long-term trends, irrespective of ideology, is individuals—or small groups—who plan or carry out terrorist attacks without being part of an organised terrorist group. This type of terrorism is not new, but it is now the most prevalent, and it presents unique challenges for our counter-terrorism response.

Attacks have tended to be "low-complexity" involving "low-sophistication" attack methodologies. For example, we have seen attacks that utilised knives and vehicles. Individuals may not have any relationship with or direction from established terrorist groups—but just because an attack is low-sophistication, it does not mean it is less deadly.

This trend is not exclusive, as such individuals are capable of higher-complexity attacks involving more sophisticated attack methodologies, such as the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing. This trend of radicalised self-initiated actors makes identification and disruption difficult, and it becomes increasingly challenging to predict threat at specific locations.

This is why it is right that Martyn's law should seek to improve protective security and organisational preparedness at a wide range of public premises across the UK. Those responsible for certain public premises will be required to consider the threat from terrorism and implement reasonably practicable and proportionate mitigating measures. It will also establish an associated inspection and enforcement regime, which will seek to educate, advise, and ensure compliance with the requirements of the Bill.

The requirements within the Bill will only apply to qualifying premises—in short, qualifying premises have specific uses and a large capacity. Qualifying premises are split into two tiers, the “standard duty” and the “enhanced duty”. Standard duty premises are those with a capacity of 100 to 799 people. Enhanced duty premises are those with a capacity of 800 people or more. The Bill allows for provision to be made for some qualifying premises to be treated as standard duty premises when they would otherwise be enhanced duty premises, and vice versa.

Standard duty requirements have been developed to ensure there is a baseline level of protection and preparedness throughout the UK. These requirements will help keep the public safe, while at the same time not unduly burdening business. The enhanced tier requirements are more extensive because those premises have a responsibility to keep larger numbers of people safe.

The regulator will apply a “reasonably practicable” test to carefully consider what it is reasonable to expect of a specific premise; there will not be a one size fits all approach. In all instances, the Government and the regulator will provide guidance and support to ensure we do everything possible to alleviate the burden on business.

The requirements that apply to enhanced duty premises will also apply to large events held at non-qualifying premises, known as qualifying events. These are public events with a capacity of 800 or over that require express permission for entry—with or without payment.

We recognise that it would not be appropriate for all locations to consider and put in place security measures. Striking the right balance between protecting the public and proportionality has been at the heart of policy development and the Bill.

I am looking forward to working with the Home Affairs Committee to ensure that the legislation is robust and delivers on its core aims ahead of a formal introduction into Parliament.

[HCWS751]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Product Security Regime: Implementation Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for AI and Intellectual Property, Viscount Camrose:

The Government are determined to cement the UK's place as a science and technology superpower by 2030. We will grow the UK economy, create high-paid jobs of the future, protect our security, and radically improve people's lives through science, innovation and technology. To ensure that consumer connected technology is more secure against cyber threats, the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022 (PSTI Act) will mandate that minimum security requirements must be complied with before consumer connectable products can be supplied to UK customers. UK consumers will be the first in the world to benefit from these protections.

I have now made commencement regulations which will bring part 1 of the PSTI Act into effect on 29 April 2024. The Government are also today publishing the technical wording of the new security requirements within the full draft text of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure (Security Requirements for Relevant Connectable Products) Regulations 2023. Manufacturers and other businesses in the supply chain of these products now have 12 months to transition their businesses to comply with these new security requirements.

From April next year, consumers and businesses across the UK will benefit from world-leading security protections from the threat of cyber-crime:

Universal default and easily guessable default passwords will be banned on consumer connectable products—meaning UK customers will enjoy additional protections from their products being compromised by hackers, and used to launch cyber-attacks against citizens, businesses, critical national infrastructure, and nation states.

Device manufacturers will have to publish contact information allowing vulnerabilities relating to their devices to be reported to them. This will enable manufacturers to maintain an awareness of, and therefore address, existing or future cyber security risks.

Manufacturers will have to be transparent about how long their products will receive security updates for. This will provide security-conscious consumers with vital, standardised security information, that they can use to inform their purchasing decisions, and drive the provision of longer security update periods through market forces.

Manufacturers will also be required to ensure that a customer is made aware of a product's security update support period before allowing them to purchase the product on the manufacturer's website.

Officials at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology have been working closely with industry, consumer rights organisations, and cyber security experts, to ensure the requirements this legislation will set out satisfy the Government's ambitions. Today, in addition to making commencement regulations, the Government are publishing the technical wording of the new security requirements within the full draft text of the PSTI (Product Security) Regulations 2023:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/secure-by-design>

Once the notification requirements of international bodies, including the World Trade Organisation, have been complied with, the final draft regulations will be laid before Parliament for scrutiny.

[HCWS752]

Petitions

Tuesday 2 May 2023

OBSERVATIONS

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Fuel Utility Company Fixed Tariff Cancellations

The petition of Adrian Paul,

Declares that energy companies are able to charge new home owners or renters higher prices by automatically placing them on new standard tariffs compared to their previous fixed tariffs; notes that a home owner may only have insufficient funds for just one monthly Direct Debit payment to be kicked off a fixed tariff; further notes that direct debits can be cancelled accidentally and that direct debits can be wrongly cancelled or set up incorrectly, causing further issues.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with OFGEM to make sure utility companies are not to be able to end home owners and renters lower fixed tariffs without a two month period of non-payment.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 1P.]

[P002804]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway):

Energy suppliers are required to offer terms to all domestic customers. However, the setting of energy tariffs is a commercial matter for individual energy suppliers.

Where a customer pays by fixed direct debit, energy suppliers are required to ensure that the amount is based on the best and most current information available, including energy consumption, and are required to explain the basis of how any amount has been determined. Energy suppliers typically review their customers' direct debit arrangements twice a year, but customers can also contact their supplier at any time to request a review of their direct debit arrangement in line with their estimated annual consumption. A supplier must explain the reasons for any changes it makes to a customer's direct debit arrangement and normally inform them of any change at least 10 days in advance.

The independent regulator, Ofgem, is required by law to set the energy price cap so that it protects customers of default tariffs from overpaying and allows an efficient supplier to finance its supply activities. All elements of the energy price cap are kept under review and adjustments can be made reflecting changes over time.

The energy price guarantee (EPG) currently supersedes the energy price cap as the main price protection for consumers. The EPG protects customers from increases in energy costs by limiting the amount suppliers can charge per unit of energy used. As announced in the spring Budget, the EPG will be extended at £2,500 for an additional three months to the end of June 2023.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Nurses, Paramedics and Auxiliary Staff Pay Rises

The petition of Adrian Paul,

Declares that millions of employed lower-tier nurses, paramedics and auxiliary staff, who are working directly for the NHS, are already significantly struggling to pay their rent or mortgage payments and pay their bills; notes that with the cost of living increase and inflation the ability for nurses and other NHS workers to pay their bills will become increasingly difficult.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to increase NHS salaries in line with inflation, year on year alongside free hospital parking for all nurses, doctors, paramedics and auxiliary staff.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 1P.]

[P002805]

Observations from the Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince):

On 16 March 2023, following constructive talks with health unions, the Government put forward a best and final offer for more than 1 million NHS staff on the Agenda for Change contract.

Under the offer, Agenda for Change staff would receive a non-consolidated award of 2% of an individual's salary for 2022-23. This is on top of the pay increase they received for 2022-23 last year, as recommended by the independent pay review body process, worth at least £1,400. In addition, they would receive a one-off "NHS backlog bonus" which recognises the sustained pressure facing the NHS following the pandemic and the extraordinary effort that staff have been making to hit backlog recovery targets. The recovery bonus would be worth at least £1,250 to full-time staff and would be determined by an individual's pay band. The average full-time nurse in pay band 5, for example, would receive £1,350.

For 2023-24, the Government are offering Agenda for Change staff a 5% consolidated increase in pay, worth at least £1,065 to full-time staff.

As a result of this package, a newly qualified nurse would see their salary go up by more than £2,750 over two years, from 2021-22 to 2023-24. On top of this they would also receive over £1,890 in one-off payments this year.

On top of the pay package, the offer includes a series of non-pay measures to support the NHS workforce.

The Government firmly believe this is a fair offer that rewards Agenda for Change staff and commits to a substantial pay rise in 2023-24 at a time when people across the country are facing cost of living pressures and there are multiple demands on the public finances.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN), UNISON, the GMB, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and the British Dietetic Association recommended the offer to their members in pay consultations.

Unison and RCN consultations closed on 14 April and these unions have announced their results: RCN has rejected the offer, with 54% of RCN members voting to

reject; and Unison has accepted the offer, with 74% of those voting opting to accept. Members of the other unions continue to vote in their consultations.

Free Hospital Parking

This is an issue for individual trusts to decide.

All NHS trusts that charge for hospital car parking provide free hospital car parking for those in great need, including NHS staff working overnight, frequent out-patient attenders, parents of children staying in hospital overnight and disabled blue badge holders.

NHS trusts should follow the NHS car parking guidance, which sets out best practice principles—for example, where charges exist, they should be reasonable for the area.

Throughout the pandemic, this Government supported our NHS staff however they could. That is why in March 2020 we introduced free hospital car parking for all NHS staff during the emergency covid-19 period.

It was right that this policy ended in April last year as we continue living with the virus.

The Government want to continue working constructively with trade unions to make the NHS a better place to work.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Child Maintenance Services

The petition of Craig Bulman,

Declares that the petitioner is concerned regarding the number of suicides that have been linked with the activities of the CPA and the CMS, notes that incorrect assessments and inflation of arrears may have played a factor in the mental health of those who committed suicide.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urge the Government to open an independent investigation into the Child Maintenance Service and their assessment procedures.

And the petitioners remain etc. —[*Official Report*, 1 March 2023; Vol. 728, c. 5P.]

[P002810]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):

The Department strongly denies any suggestion of a causal link between the Child Maintenance Service and suicide. Suicide is a very complex and emotive issue and over-simplifying the causes and circumstances surrounding it is dangerous and misleading.

The Department recognises that socio-economic factors such as deprivation, unmanageable debt, poor housing, and unemployment may increase suicide risk. We also recognise that, tragically, some people experiencing an emotional crisis, such as a family break-up, may be more prone to suicidal ideation, but we refute the idea that this is attributable to the CMS in any way.

The maintenance calculation is designed to be affordable for paying parents, while ensuring they contribute a significant proportion of their income to support their children.

All calculation decisions made by the CMS can be appealed through the mandatory reconsideration process and beyond that, to the independent Tribunal Service.

Where arrears do accrue, paying parents are notified immediately and the CMS will work with them to get payments back on track and discuss how to clear the arrears. Paying parents can ask to negotiate their arrears payments at any time which is made clear in the letters they are sent, and in conversations with the CMS.

The CMS has robust processes in place so that its caseworkers know how to respond if customers express an intention to harm themselves. Caseworkers use a complex needs toolkit with clear steps to support vulnerable clients including those at risk of suicide or self-harm as well as those who are facing domestic abuse. It is the CMS's priority to handle these cases in a sensitive manner and ensure that vulnerable customers get the help and support they need to use the CMS safely.

In the rare instances where the Department is informed of a suicide, the case is moved to a specialist team to investigate. Any suggestion or allegation that the Department's actions may have negatively contributed to a customer's circumstances are fully investigated and the Department will conduct—or participate in—any inquest, internal process review or adult safeguarding board as necessary.

The Department would encourage anyone going through a difficult or traumatic time to seek help via their GP and/or access support such as that which is offered by the Samaritans and/or the mental health charity MIND. The Samaritans are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They can be called on freephone 116 123, emailed at jo@samaritans.org, or to find the nearest branch, visit www.samaritans.org.

Child Support Act

The petition of Craig Bulman,

Declares that the petitioner is concerned with section 33 of the Child Support Act 1991 and its compatibility with Article 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998; notes that the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) is securing liability orders for debts that are not owed and are in dispute; further notes that no evidence is provided by the CMS to substantiate the debt is owed by the Paying Parent, further declares that Section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 states that it is unlawful for a public authority to act in a way which is incompatible with a Convention right.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to address these concerns surrounding section 33 of the Child Support Act 1991 and its compatibility with Article 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2023; Vol. 728, c. 5P.]

[P002808]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):

The Child Maintenance Service always encourages paying parents to pay their maintenance on time in order to avoid accrual of arrears. Where the paying parent fails to pay on time or in full, and arrears have started to accrue, the CMS will attempt to regain compliance. Paying parents are given warnings of the consequences of non-compliance and caseworkers will seek to establish reasons for missed payments, help parents get back on track with their payments and put a repayment plan in place. If an arrears notice has already

been issued within the last 12 months, the CMS is not required to issue another before taking enforcement action.

If negotiations are unsuccessful and no payment is agreed, then enforcement action can be sought to restart the flow of money to ensure children get the financial support they deserve. The CMS must consider the welfare of any children involved in any decision regarding enforcement action. Safeguards are in place throughout the process to ensure enforcement action is reasonable and proportionate, and that paying parents are given adequate opportunities to raise any issues or objections. We are satisfied that section 33 of the 1991 Act, and the statutory child maintenance scheme and its operations as a whole, are compatible with article 6, and all other relevant articles of the ECHR, and with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Prior to enforcement action being taken, a liability order must be obtained. A liability order allows the CMS to have the debt the paying parents owes legally recognised by the court.

The CMS must make an application to the magistrates court—or sheriff court in Scotland—for an LO against the PP. In the application, the CMS must provide evidence that the debt has accrued and payments have been missed. The court will consider whether the debt in question has become payable and whether it has not been paid. However, the court has no jurisdiction to question the calculation on which the debt is based. If an appeal against the liability or calculation is pending, the court may decide to adjourn. The PP has the right to appear at the hearing but is not obliged to as the LO can be made in their absence. An LO can be appealed in a magistrates court under the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980.

The CMS generally would not proceed with the LO application if there is an ongoing appeal or any outstanding calculation issue where the outcome may impact arrears for the period of debt covered by the LO application. The CMS can however proceed with an application for any safe period of debt such as any period prior to the effective date of the disputed maintenance calculation, or if they are confident that the arrears balance is correct and will not be altered.

The Department recognises the importance of supporting individuals in order to protect their rights. There are steps the Secretary of State takes to ensure this happens.

The CMS will issue arrears warnings at least every 12 months, informing PPs of the consequences of non-compliance. Once a decision is made to proceed with an LO, a further specific warning letter is issued to inform the PP that the CMS will apply for an LO within seven days if the paying parent is in the UK, or 28 days if they are abroad. No further action is taken until the warning period has elapsed.

If the PP pays the full amount due within the notice period, the CMS will not proceed with the LO application. If part of the amount is paid, a decision will be made on whether the application will continue for the outstanding balance. The PP can still contact CMS to arrange an acceptable arrears arrangement.

If the PP disagrees with the amount of arrears due, they can appeal through the mandatory reconsideration process and beyond that, to the independent Tribunal Service. This must be done within the notice period

otherwise the application will be made. The PP can only dispute the amount of arrears due, not the LO itself prior to the liability order being granted.

Before proceeding with an LO application, the CMS will attempt to contact the receiving parent to check whether they agree to enforcement action being taken, however the ultimate decision on whether to proceed with the LO sits with the CMS. If the circumstances of the case are not appropriate for LO action at that time, the CMS can consider pausing the case for a suitable period of time before reinstating action to commence recovery of the arrears.

Lastly, a PP can ask to negotiate their arrears payments at any time. This is made clear in the letters they are sent.

Detachment of Earnings Orders

The petition of Craig Bulman,

Declares that the Child Maintenance Service's current policy on the enforcement of Detachment of Earnings Orders is not in accordance with the principles it should apply; notes that the CMS must provide factual evidence to the Paying Parents employer and Bank Manager that arrears are owed before such enforcement can commence; further notes that if arrears are in dispute DEO's must not be enforced bank accounts must not be garnished and liability orders must not be granted; furthermore that the burden of proof lies upon the accuser to prove with factual evidence that a debt is owed by the Paying Parent.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioner and work with the Child Maintenance Service to prevent the improper use of the Detachment of Earnings Orders.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2023; Vol. 728, c. 6P.]

[P002809]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):

The Child Maintenance Service always encourages paying parents to pay their maintenance on time, in order to avoid accrual of arrears.

What a paying parent has to pay is determined by their maintenance calculation. If the paying parent is not happy with the calculation, they can ask for a mandatory reconsideration of it by the CMS, and if they remain unhappy, they can appeal the calculation in an independent tribunal. If a paying parent does not dispute the calculation, or if any dispute results in its remaining unchanged, and the paying parent does not pay it, then collection methods are used which are intended to re-establish full compliance as quickly and effectively as possible.

Therefore, where a paying parent fails to pay maintenance payments on time or in full, the CMS will take action to re-establish compliance and collect any unpaid amounts that have accrued.

Paying parents are given warnings of the consequences of non-compliance and caseworkers will seek to establish reasons for missed payments, help parents get back on track with their payments and put a repayment plan in place. If an arrears notice has already been issued within the last 12 months, the CMS is not required to

issue another before taking enforcement action. If negotiations are unsuccessful and no payment is agreed, then enforcement action can be sought to restart the flow of money to ensure children get the financial support they deserve.

If the paying parent is employed, the CMS will instruct that child maintenance payments are deducted from their salary using a deductions from earnings order. Employers are obliged by law to take this action. When a DEO is served, the CMS provides the employer with a figure to be deducted which usually includes ongoing maintenance, collection fees and arrears.

To ensure that the CMS protects the paying parent against financial hardship, the maximum amount an employer can deduct is 40% of the paying parent's net wage. The 60% of net income that the paying parent is allowed to keep is known as the protected earnings proportion and helps to ensure parents have enough money for their living costs. If the paying parent's protected earnings proportion means that the employer cannot deduct the full amount that is instructed because

they have not received sufficient earnings, the employer deducts as much as possible while leaving the paying parent with 60% of their net earnings.

If the paying parent does not agree with the decision or they think it is wrong, they can formally ask for the decision to be changed. This is called an appeal. An appeal can only be based on one or both of the following reasons:

The order is not correct or does not contain enough information for the deductions to be made by an employer,

The payments made to the paying parent by the employer are not classed as earnings.

To appeal against the deduction from earnings order, they must write to the local magistrates court if they live in England, Wales or Northern Ireland; or to the local sheriff's court if they live in Scotland. The appeal must be made within 28 days of the date on which the deduction from earnings order was sent—56 days if they do not live in the United Kingdom. They must specify which of the above reasons are applicable to the appeal.

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