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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 5 June 2023

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I would like to inform the House that I have written to the Speaker of the Lok Sabha to express the deepest condolences of all Members following the tragic train collision in Balasore. I know Members will wish to extend their sympathies to all those affected.

Oral Answers to Questions

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Deposit Return Scheme: UK Internal Market Act

1. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on an opt-out under the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 for the Scottish Government's deposit return scheme. [905265]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): It is nice to see you in your place, Mr Speaker, particularly after the FA cup weekend, when the blues beat the reds again.

Mr Speaker: As a Bolton fan, I have no worries or sympathies.

Michael Gove: I appreciate that. It just shows that even though the reds had a good run, in another contest the blues managed to out-class them in the end.

I have regular discussions with Cabinet and devolved Administration colleagues on our shared ambition to deliver the priorities of the people of Scotland. That includes the drive to increase recycling across the UK, while also addressing the needs of businesses within our shared internal market for drinks manufacturing.

Patrick Grady: I am reminded of the old adage that had the Scottish National party invented the lightbulb, the Secretary of State would call it a dangerous anti-candle conspiracy. The reality is that in 1997, his party's manifesto opposed devolution. It said it would "create strains which could well pull apart the Union" and

"would risk rivalry and conflict between these parliaments and assemblies and the parliament at Westminster."

His 2019 manifesto committed to a

"deposit return scheme to incentivise people to recycle plastic and glass."

Why is he working so hard to fulfil the vision of 1997, and not his commitment of 2019?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to reply that if I ask the question, "How many SNP MPs does it take to change a lightbulb?" the answer is, inevitably, "Well, we have to wait for the motorhome to arrive." [Interruption.] I have to try, don't I?

On the central question, we want a deposit return scheme that works across the United Kingdom. The strongest critics of the Scottish Government's approach have been within the Scottish Parliament and within the hon. Gentleman's own party. If they cannot satisfy Fergus Ewing—the Minister who was responsible for environment policy in the Scottish Government with such distinction for so long—they will not be able to satisfy manufacturers, consumers and citizens in Scotland and across the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Let us quote from the 2019 Conservative party manifesto—in this job, reading fiction is a necessary evil. It says:

"We will crack down on the waste and carelessness that destroys our natural environment and kills marine life...and introduce a deposit return scheme to incentivise people to recycle plastic and glass."

The Conservatives even put it in bold to show how serious they were. Other than a decision to oppose and undermine devolved Parliaments and Governments, what has changed from the manifesto, or are the UK Government simply bottling it?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to say that the SNP should can it on this question, because the businesses with which the Scottish Government have been interacting have been uniform, loud and clear in their determination to ensure that the scheme works interoperably across the whole United Kingdom. We have been very clear that an exclusion can be granted, but only if the Scottish Government work to ensure a scheme that works for all the citizens of the UK and all the businesses of Scotland.

Chris Stephens: The First Minister of Wales has now been contacted by the UK Government to make changes to the Welsh DRS scheme to remove glass, which reneges on what was previously agreed in the UK Government's consultation with the Northern Ireland Executive. The Welsh First Minister's own words are:

"The English Government is the outlier here."

Surely, instead of walking on broken glass, they could simply recycle it?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that wonderful reference to the Eurythmics classic. We are both Annie Lennox fans, whatever else may divide us.

The Scottish Government have singularly failed to carry Scottish business, Scottish public opinion, Scottish consumers and even their own MSPs with them. We stand ready to help—to rescue the Scottish Government from their own folly—but that relies on the Scottish Government doing something that they have been singularly reluctant to do: to take a small slice of humble pie and acknowledge that in this area, they have got things wrong.

Cladding and Building Remediation

2. **Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What plans he has to help leaseholders affected by potentially dangerous cladding with increases in insurance charges. [905266]

17. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on cladding and non-cladding remediation for residential buildings. [905284]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): The Government intend to enact reforms to improve the buildings insurance market by banning commissions, increasing the transparency of information and preventing unjustified legal costs when premiums are challenged. We are also pressing the insurance industry to launch its scheme. In 95% of all identified unsafe high-rise aluminium composite material buildings, and in 400 buildings supported by the building safety fund, remediation works have been either completed or started.

Sir Stephen Timms: I have raised before in the House the predicament of residents of Barrier Point, in my constituency, whose insurance premiums have risen sixfold. The Secretary of State told me in January that such insurers were

“squarely in our gun sights”.—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2023; Vol. 727, c. 55.]

Can the Minister offer any prospect of imminent relief to my constituents, some of whom face a demand of an additional £6,000 this year?

Lee Rowley: I completely appreciate the point the right hon. Gentleman makes. That is why I have met with the Association of British Insurers multiple times in the last few weeks alone. I am hopeful that the scheme it hopes to bring forward with the insurance industry will come forward in the next few weeks. Later today, I am meeting the British Insurance Brokers' Association again to talk about how it will reduce commissions, in advance of the work that the Secretary of State has already announced to ban such commissions.

Janet Daby: In my constituency, there are two main housing developments where remediation work has been promised to fix unsafe cladding on buildings. I hope that the Minister is fully aware that living in unsafe buildings has meant individuals and families have had to put their lives on hold. Leaseholders cannot sell, move or staircase their homes, and some have had to put starting a family on hold. Will the Minister acknowledge that that is unacceptable? Will he agree to implement a timeframe so that work is prioritised by housing providers and building firms?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the challenges her constituents are facing. I appreciate the point that she is making about challenges. That is why we are trying to push forward with remediation as quickly as we are able to do so. Since the announcement by the big six lenders in December, taking effect in January, it should now be possible for more owners and leaseholders in properties like these to be able to buy, sell or remortgage. Early data received by the Department indicates that while the market will take some time to become more functional, it is moving in the right direction.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Minister recognise that this is not just a question of ridiculously escalating premiums? There is also the problem experienced by my constituents in Northpoint in Bromley, which I have mentioned in the House before. The previous insurer, Aviva, which had insured the building up until the Grenfell fire, is refusing to quote at all. That withdrawal from the market is putting many people under real pressure. The cladding has already been removed from the building, the risk has gone and there is a zero claims record, but a major firm like Aviva will not even quote. There is a market failure here. Just as we did with the EWS1 fire safety certificates, when there was a withdrawal of professional negligence insurance, please can we intervene and make sure that people at least come into the market properly?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is exactly why we are trying to encourage and work with the ABI and the large insurers, to bring forward this new scheme that should help with the kind of issues that he has highlighted. I hope we will have more news on that in the coming weeks. If not, I would be very keen to talk to my hon. Friend and his local residents about how we can move forward.

Levelling-up Fund: Delivery of Funds

3. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the process of delivering funds for successful levelling-up fund bids. [905267]

19. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of criteria for awarding levelling-up funding. [905287]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): My Department has undertaken a robust assessment and decision-making process in both rounds of the levelling-up fund. Taking on board feedback, we made a number of improvements to better support applicants in the most recent round, including by making £65 million of support available to help with the delivery of projects. We are currently reflecting on the lessons learned from the first two rounds of the fund, and we will be making an announcement on round 3 shortly.

Chris Elmore: It is deeply concerning to hear from Bridgend County Borough Council officers that the Minister's officials are suggesting that any local authority that was successful in the second round will get no additional funding in the third round. My Ogmore constituency has lost out on all levelling-up funding, despite Department for Transport officials suggesting that the only way I could get a level crossing closure in my constituency was by accessing levelling-up funds. What assurances can the Minister give the officials in Bridgend County Borough Council and my constituents that the much promised levelling-up funding will be delivered to the people of Ogmore? Or is it another case of the Tories misleading the people of Wales?

Dehenna Davison: I know the hon. Gentleman has been campaigning hard for the level crossing in his constituency. As I said, we are reflecting on lessons learned, but no decision has yet formally been made on allocations in round 3. We will keep the House updated.

Christine Jardine: North Edinburgh Arts in my constituency recently joined the City of Edinburgh Council in a project to provide a new state-of-the-art venue in a deprived area, building on already vital work, but that project failed to receive funds in both levelling-up rounds. Only 21% of bids are currently successful, and only 8% of the funds are going to Scotland. Does the Minister think we should review the criteria to make applications more efficient, so that communities can benefit from the levelling-up fund?

Dehenna Davison: I am certainly willing to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the project. It is worth noting that the allocations we have made to Scotland meet the commitments that we made in our first levelling-up fund prospectus, but of course we want to ensure that the funds reach the areas that need them most.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Given the soaring costs in the construction sector, many local authorities, including Pembrokeshire County Council in my constituency, will find it a real challenge to meet the full scope of their successful levelling-up bids. I know that the Minister has been proactive in reaching out to councils, but can she assure the House that she and her team will continue to provide all possible support for local authorities to ensure that money is spent well on meaningful projects that fulfil our levelling-up objectives?

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his engagement with his own levelling-up funding projects. As I have said, we have made £65 million available specifically to support the development and completion of projects, which will include some cost engineering in some cases, because we recognise that inflation has been extremely hard on the construction industry, but my officials and I stand ready to help in any way we can.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Halesowen town centre has recovered well from the covid pandemic, not least as a result of the work done by Vicky Rogers of the Halesowen business improvement district and Eve O'Connor of the Cornbow shopping centre, but we were not successful in the last round of levelling-up bidding. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the Halesowen bid and how it might need to be improved to meet any criteria for the third round?

Dehenna Davison: My hon. Friend's council will now have received written feedback explaining why the bid was not successful, but he is a fantastic champion for Halesowen, and I shall of course be happy to meet him to discuss the project further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Committee recently produced a report on levelling-up funding, which I hope the Minister has had a chance to read by now. Commenting on the current arrangements, we said that despite the Government's commitment to reducing requirements for competitive bidding, we had seen no evidence that it had yet been implemented. We were also shocked to discover that the Department did not know how many "pots of money across Government contribute towards levelling up".

Does the Minister accept the Committee's finding that the policy currently lacks

"a long-term, substantive strategy and funding approach",

and does she agree that the Government need to sort this out if levelling up is to be delivered—given that, in principle, there would probably be widespread support for that on both sides of the House?

Dehenna Davison: I disagree with the Select Committee Chair, in that we do have a long-term vision for levelling up. Indeed, our White Paper "Levelling Up the United Kingdom" set out our 12 core missions. I have engaged with the hon. Gentleman in the past about the funding point. I have also told the House that we will be publishing a funding simplification plan; that is coming soon, and I shall be happy to meet him to discuss it when it has been published.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Nearly 18 months after the publication of the levelling up White Paper, instead of meaningful levelling up, all that we have is disorganisation and disappointment. The levelling-up directors were supposed to cut through the dysfunction to help areas obtain the support that they needed, and it was announced with great fanfare that there were nearly 600 applications for those roles. But as with everything this Department does, it was all smoke and mirrors, because the roles have now been quietly dropped and no levelling-up directors are to be appointed. Will the Minister come clean? The Government have given on levelling-up directors because they have given up on levelling up, have they not?

Dehenna Davison: Absolutely not.

Local Authorities: Inflation

4. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help local authorities with budgetary pressures caused by inflation. [905268]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I am not sure that I can respond with quite so much brevity, Mr Speaker!

In the most recent financial settlement, the Government provided billions more in taxpayer subsidy to support councils, including funds to mitigate inflation. Councils are always under a duty and a responsibility to improve and transform services and make them more efficient, but the Government continue to support them when we are able to do so.

Ian Byrne: A recent report from our Select Committee highlights the fact that local authorities' revenue funding from central Government has been reduced dramatically since austerity began in 2010, and notes that levelling-up funds generally do not replace grant funding because they are capital, not revenue. Can the Minister be honest and admit that the latest local government finance settlement will entrench and widen already huge regional inequalities, leaving the levelling-up agenda in tatters?

Lee Rowley: Absolutely not. [Laughter.]

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am sure that many Members of the House will share my experience that, on the doorstep, an issue that comes up almost more than anything else is potholes. Barnet Council is clearly failing in its duty to fill them in. Does the Minister have any advice for our failing local council on how it can improve its record on filling in potholes?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that one of the core responsibilities of local councils is to do the basics, and one of the basics is potholes. That is why the Chancellor recently announced additional money for local councils to ensure that they are filled, and it is for local councils to translate that into reality on the streets.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Under a Government who created a cost of living crisis that has sent inflation levels soaring, there are now 4.2 million children living in poverty, and 70% of them are in working households. One third of children in the west midlands and 200,000 children in the north-east live below the poverty line. Shockingly, a quarter of all children growing up under the Scottish National party in Scotland now live in poverty. What support can local authorities expect in order to deal with this increase in child poverty, and is the Department's decision to award levelling-up funding to only one in four deprived areas a factor in the heartbreaking levels of child poverty we see in Tory Britain today?

Lee Rowley: The Government offer a huge amount of support to the most vulnerable in our society. We have seen that all the way through covid and through the inflation and energy issues, and we will continue to do it through the welfare system as a whole. The best way out of poverty, where it is possible, is to work, and that is why this Government are ensuring that work pays, work matters and work achieves.

UK Levelling Up

5. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to level up all parts of the UK. [905272]

12. **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps he is taking to level up all parts of the UK. [905279]

16. **Boris Johnson** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): What steps he is taking to level up all parts of the UK. [905283]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Levelling up is a central mission for this Government. We want to ensure that the full potential of our economy, businesses, people and places is reached. The Government have allocated £9.9 billion to my own Department alone since 2019 to support levelling up, in addition to the £7.5 billion committed to the nine mayoral combined authorities in England.

David Duguid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. May I ask him to join me in congratulating the towns of Peterhead and Macduff in Banff and Buchan on the success of their levelling up bid? Can he confirm that the success of that bid does not necessarily

disqualify future bids, particularly if they are of a strategic transport nature, such as the much-needed safety improvements on the A947, which my right hon. Friend, being from the area, will be familiar with? That road travels not just through my constituency but through multiple others in the Aberdeenshire Council area.

Michael Gove: I congratulate Aberdeenshire Council on its success in levelling-up fund round 2. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: success in that round does not preclude further investment. One thing, though, that would be devastating for Aberdeenshire and the north-east of Scotland would be if the Labour party's policy of stopping all new oil and gas development in the North sea were taken forward. That would be catastrophic for levelling up and for the north-east of Scotland.

Paul Howell: I thank the Secretary of State for his efforts on levelling up, but I must stress to him the importance of speed in reaching the communities of my Sedgefield constituency. It was disappointing that the knife was applied to the second round, knocking out many Durham bids, particularly mine in Newton Aycliffe, and it is painful to see the slow progress on the restoring your railway fund bid for Ferryhill station. It is critical for my constituents that these initiatives get past the decision stage so that we can get spades in the ground. When does my right hon. Friend think we will see delivery?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is important that we support the work that is anticipated for Ferryhill station. In his constituency, Hitachi produces state-of-the-art railway investment, and we need to make sure that its vision is matched by the Government's commitment.

Boris Johnson: Given that the UK is one of the most regionally imbalanced of all of the major economies, and given the massive potential that is waiting to be unleashed, is it not time to accelerate the now stalled Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and push forward urgently with Northern Powerhouse Rail, planning reform, devolution, secure affordable energy supply, gigabit broadband and all the other levelling-up measures that will make this the strongest and most prosperous economy in Europe?

Michael Gove: I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for his leadership on this issue. The levelling up White Paper would not have been published without his determination to ensure that there are 12 clear missions at the heart of Government to ensure that this country achieves its full potential. It is interesting that the Leader of the Opposition, as he currently is and will long remain, decided that the way to endear himself to this country is by having five missions. As ever, he has nothing like my right hon. Friend's scale of ambition and vision when it comes to making this country great.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Government took £15 billion from local authorities—local communities—and set them a “hunger games” competition to fight over £3 billion. How is that levelling up?

Michael Gove: I do not recognise that characterisation. Once again, I smile at the way in which “hunger games” trips from the lips of Labour MPs. Only this Administration have been responsible for devolution in England outside

London. In 13 years in power, Labour had an opportunity to institute meaningful devolution, and it did not do so outside London. Now Labour is attempting to deny the people of the north-east of England a democratic choice to have Jamie Driscoll as their Mayor. I will not take anything on this from the hon. Gentleman.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I place on record my sincere condolences to the family of stalwart trade unionist Tyrone O’Sullivan, who recently passed away. Tyrone was a typical Welshman: proud of his roots while always fighting for more for our communities. He was an inspiration to us all.

The all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities will soon publish a landmark report on the next steps for levelling up. As it stands, millions of our constituents across the country are being left behind, so will the Secretary of State commit to meeting me to discuss the report’s recommendations?

Michael Gove: I also pass on my condolences to Tyrone O’Sullivan’s family. The coalfield communities’ travails throughout the 1980s and ’90s weigh with us, and some of the investment made since then has seen many of those communities turn the corner, but there is more to be done. I look forward to talking to the hon. Lady about what more we can do.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): On any index we choose—social mobility, inequality, deprivation, the funding of public services and so on—our constituencies in the so-called red wall have been sinking throughout this Administration. A Minister recently told the House that we will get £20 million from the levelling-up fund, but it never came. In any case, £20 million would not transform our constituencies. What does the Secretary of State say to the old miner I met in the Co-op on Saturday afternoon in our village, who said, “Will you say to Mr Gove, ‘Levelling up, who does he think he’s kidding?’”?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is a very effective and passionate advocate not just for his constituents but for coalfield communities more broadly, but recent work by the Onward think-tank has pointed out that, under this Government, coalfield regeneration—the establishment of new enterprises and the creation of fresh opportunities—has accelerated at a rate not seen under the last Labour Government. That is why so many coalfield communities, from Blyth to Derbyshire, voted for the Conservatives, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), in 2019.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Thanks in part to £20 million-worth of levelling-up money, Peterborough University has constructed a brand-new research and innovation hub and is constructing a new living lab. We are turning Peterborough into a high-skill, high-wage economy. Will my right hon. Friend come to Peterborough and visit the university to see our progress and to congratulate everybody who is transforming Peterborough?

Michael Gove: I can think of few things I would enjoy more. I always enjoy visiting Peterborough, which gives me an opportunity not only to work with my hon. Friend, who is such an effective advocate for Peterborough,

but to meet the stellar council leader Wayne Fitzgerald, who did so well in the recent local elections—a vote of confidence in Conservative leadership in Peterborough.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): One of the clearest examples that rural communities are in desperate need of levelling up is the shocking state of bus services and the decline in access to them. The £2 fare is very welcome, but it is of no use to people who live in a community with no bus service. In the next few weeks, we face the withdrawal of the 530 Cartmel Peninsula service and the S1 Sedbergh to Kendal service. What funding and additional powers can the Secretary of State promise to the new Westmorland and Furness Council to make sure such communities retain their buses and that less well-served areas get new services?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that bus services are vital, not least for rural communities such as those he represents. I would like to talk to him and to Westmorland and Furness Council, which is relatively newly formed and Lib Dem-led—at the moment. I am looking forward to talking about what we can do to provide, with the Department for Transport, suitable services for his constituents.

Planning Authorities: Designation Warnings

6. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): For what reason he has written to 10 planning authorities in England warning of designation. [905273]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): The Government expect all local planning authorities to deliver an efficient and effective planning service. On 12 April, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to 10 local authorities that did not meet the required performance levels for speed of decision making on non-major applications. Those local authorities have been given the opportunity to demonstrate improved performance. If the performance falls below the required threshold, the Secretary of State will use his powers to designate the local planning authority later this year.

Dr Evans: There are 329 local planning authorities in England, 315 of which performed above the 70% expected performance rate. With others in Leicestershire all above 84%, my local council, the Lib Dem-run Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council, was at 46%, which is the lowest level in the country. The staff in the department are doing their best with the Lib Dem failures, but what more can a local MP and the Government do to help support the staff and our community to get the support they need?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important matter to the House’s attention. Where authorities fall behind, as in the case of that Lib Dem-run local authority, which he has highlighted effectively, we will not hesitate to take action. We are working to provide all local authorities with the support they need, including by increasing planning fees and ensuring that planning departments have the skills and capacity they need. I am happy to meet him to discuss this further.

Short and Long-term Rentals

7. **Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): Whether his Department is taking steps to change the balance between short and long-term rentals. [905274]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): We are consulting on a registration scheme for short-term lets and on the introduction of a short-term let use class and associated permitted development rights. Those changes would give councils more control over the number of new short-term lets and help them to meet local housing needs.

Anthony Mangnall: I appreciate the Minister's response, but where we have non-unitary councils it turns out that the Government's measure of 200% council tax will see 92% go to counties and only 8% to districts. Will that be looked at? In addition, will we also examine how we can incentivise long-term landlords? We demonise landlords at our peril and we need to make sure that if we are going to repeal section 21, we do it in a way whereby we can offer them justice on being able to remove tenants where they need to do so.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the Government's progress on all the work we are doing to be fair, not only to landlords, but to tenants, who have suffered some appalling experiences in many cases. That is why we are bringing forward the legislation, which will be a balanced package, but he is right to highlight the issue of council taxes and I know he is having discussions with the Treasury on that matter. We are determined to make sure that local authorities have the right balance between having those holiday and tourist areas, and homes for local people.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): We are only a few months away from having millions of people surging to the west country, and to rural and coastal communities right across the land. That puts enormous income into rural and coastal economies, which is very welcome, including in places such as Plymouth. However, it is also another nail in the coffin of people being able to locally rent and locally afford a home, as more homes are flipped to be second homes and more Airbnbs are created by chucking families out of long-term rentals. Will the new measures that the Minister has announced and is consulting on be in place by the summer recess, so that families know that when they visit a location they are not taking away the possibility of living locally for the people who provide the services on which those tourists will rely?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman has set out clearly the reason why the Government are taking these significant steps to make sure that we get the balance right between tourists visiting an area, bringing in vital income and supporting local businesses, and those local communities having the necessary housing for people and workers to live in and to buy. We are progressing this consultation as quickly as possible and will make further announcements in due course.

Leasehold Reform

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests and to

the fact that I am a leaseholder. Ten days ago, I met some of my residents who are leaseholders. They are yet another group of residents in Hackney who are frustrated by the inaction and slow actions of their freeholder. They desperately want commonhold and yet, despite a manifesto commitment in 2019 and promises from Secretaries of State in each of the past three years, we have seen nothing from this Government. Why is this dither and delay continuing?

Rachel Maclean: I do not agree that there has been dither and delay. We have already capped ground rents for significant numbers of leaseholders. We are committed to creating a housing system that works for everyone. We are determined to better protect and empower leaseholders to challenge unreasonable costs, extend the benefits of freehold ownership to more homeowners, and introduce more legislation within this Parliament.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): There is no clearer example of the need for leasehold reform than in my constituency. The leaseholders from Rathbone Square and their affordable housing neighbours at 14 Newman Street are having a nightmare with their co-owners, WestInvest and Deka, and the managing agents, CBRE. There is no transparency. The affordable housing residents are being charged five times more for their energy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we do need to ensure that there is a complete shake-up of leasehold reform and of property management in general?

Rachel Maclean: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank her for bringing the concerns of her residents to the Floor of the House. We are determined to reform this system. It is a hugely complex reform. I point out to the House that Labour had the opportunity to do this in its 13 years in government and did nothing.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Almost every country in the world has banned leaseholds. We are tired in York of nearly every development putting in place new leasehold arrangements, extracting thousands of pounds from residents, so that when they move into what is often their "forever" home, they are having to pay out more and more, which then leaves them trapped in that form of accommodation. When will the Government bring forward commonhold, because we have been waiting for it for far too long and seen no action?

Rachel Maclean: It is right to point out to the hon. Lady that, since the Government's announcement in December 2017 that we would ban the sale of leasehold houses, the number of newbuild leasehold houses coming on to the market has significantly decreased. Land Registry records show that 1.2% of newbuild houses were registered as leasehold in 2020 compared with 17% previously, so the Government's reforms are already working, but we need to bring forward more legislation, and we will do so.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Perhaps the Minister could clarify the situation at the Dispatch Box today. She could say that this is a priority of the Government and that the leasehold reform Bill will come forward in the next King's Speech, because, after 21 years of not seeing any reform, it is high time that we had some.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Obviously, as a Minister at the Dispatch Box today, I cannot pre-empt what is in the King's Speech, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will recall the number of times that not only I, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, have stood at this very Dispatch Box and made those commitments very strongly and I am happy to repeat them today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In an Opposition Day Debate that took place before the recess, the Minister claimed that there has been no Government U-turn on leasehold reform. She also refused to commit to the fundamental and comprehensive reform package that leaseholders had been led to expect was forthcoming. Can she give the House and the country a straight answer today: will the Government legislate to implement all of the Law Commission's recommendations on enfranchisement, commonhold and the right to manage before the end of this Parliament—yes or no?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman will remember I am sure the detailed debate that we had on this very issue where we dug into many questions that he and many others asked. I have given my answers from this Dispatch Box. I have been very clear that we will bring forward comprehensive reforms to leasehold, which is something the Opposition failed to do for the whole time they were in Government. We have made a start, and we will make good on that promise.

National Planning Policy Framework

9. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform the national planning policy framework. [905276]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (**Michael Gove**): The consultation on our new national planning policy framework closed on 2 March. We received more than 26,000 responses. We are giving them consideration at the moment, and we will publish a response in due course.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): My understanding is that the framework currently states that housing developers only have to ensure that drainage is in place for a building site once the last house is completed. For residents in Orchard Close in Burton Joyce in my constituency, that was too little, too late, because heavy rain and insufficient drainage from a building site at the top of the hill caused their road to flood, damaging the street and property. I am looking into a similar situation at a building site in Hamilton Close in Arnold. I understand Gedling Borough Council is looking at introducing a supplementary planning document to require developers to install drainage first. Will the Government consider introducing such a requirement nationally, so that others do not have to go through what some of my Gedling residents have gone through?

Michael Gove: As well as being a brilliant constituency Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend makes an important point that will resonate with many Members across this House. I hope that we will be able to see more about sustainable drainage systems in the NPPF.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Some 2.6 million homes are at risk of flooding, so we urgently need to take action to improve flood resilience and mitigation. In Hull we have our first permeable street as part of the Living With Water initiative, designed to look at new and innovative ways to deal with excess floodwater. Will the Secretary of State use this opportunity to reform the national planning policy framework to make it stronger in dealing with floodwaters, and will he attend an event I am hosting on this issue—all Members are welcome—on 5 July?

Michael Gove: I know Hull is the second most flood-prone city in England and I applaud the work undertaken by the local authority and championed by the hon. Lady. I do not know whether I will be able to join her on 5 July, but I will be visiting Hull soon, and I hope that when I do so I will have the opportunity to talk to her and others who are making sure that people's homes are adequately protected.

House Building: Densification of Urban Areas

10. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If he will take steps to increase house building through densification of urban areas through the use of local authority-approved building codes that pre-approve buildings. [905277]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (**Rachel Maclean**): We are committed to ensuring that the planning system promotes the efficient use of land and creates more well-designed places in collaboration with local people. We are introducing street vote powers in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to allow residents to come together and propose additional developments on their street in line with their design preferences.

John Penrose: I am delighted that street votes, which I and others have campaigned for for many years, is in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. However, we need even stronger measures to stimulate housebuilding now that housing targets are rightly going to be much weaker. Will my hon. Friend consider building up, not out, which is street votes on steroids and is supported by many in the construction industry as the fastest, greenest and cheapest way to build many more beautiful urban homes for owner-occupiers and renters alike?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for his determination in bringing forward this innovative measure, which will enable the Government to meet their ambition of delivering the houses that are needed all over our community. He is right to say that local communities should be able to set their own local design codes. That will be a fantastic way for them to create a huge number of houses, building up, out and possibly around and across as well.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol is committed to building more houses, and we know that density is very much part of that, but with that comes pressure on local infrastructure. Can the Minister update the House on what the successor is to the housing infrastructure fund and on what funds will be available to ensure that local communities can cope with that new density?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is quite right: not just in Bristol, but across the country, pressures on infrastructure are one reason why communities sometimes have concerns about new housing developments. It is right that we are reforming the planning system to make that infrastructure available in advance of developments so that we can deliver the housing the country needs, in Bristol and elsewhere.

Awaab's Law: Private Rented Sector

11. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): If he will take steps to extend Awaab's law to the private rented sector. [905278]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): Any preventable death of a child is heartbreaking. Awaab's law will require social landlords to remedy hazardous conditions quickly. For private rentals, we have given councils strong powers to force landlords to remedy hazards, and the Secretary of State has made it clear that he expects councils to use them.

Dan Carden: May I remind the House of the tragic case of Awaab Ishak? He was a two-year-old boy, living with his parents in a one-bedroom flat in Rochdale, who tragically and needlessly died following prolonged exposure to mould. Despite several complaints from his family over a number of years, his social landlord took no action and shamelessly blamed the extensive mould on the family. The coroner in Awaab's case stated that damp and mould are not simply a social housing problem, but a significant issue in the private rented sector. My understanding is that the decent homes standard will not appear in the Renters (Reform) Bill and there is no equivalent to Awaab's law either. Will the Secretary of State go back to the Department and put in proper measures to ensure that we have decent homes in the private rented sector?

Rachel Maclean: I think the whole House is united in expressing our sincere sympathies about the tragedy that occurred in the case of Awaab Ishak. It is completely wrong that people are living in homes that do not meet decent home standards. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the debates that we have had in this place. We are improving the quality of properties all across the private rented sector. We are introducing a decent homes standard. We will do that at the first legislative opportunity and we will be the first Government ever to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The Government's lack of strategy to combat all forms of homelessness is failing our most vulnerable children. Over the past 13 years on the Government's watch, the number of households in temporary accommodation has doubled to more than 100,000. That includes 127,000 individual children. The number of households with children in bed-and-breakfast accommodation for longer than the statutory maximum is up 196% on the previous year—many are in appalling conditions. That should shame everyone on the Government Benches. My question is simple: when on earth do they intend to do something about it?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady highlights the problem of homelessness, which, of course, the Government take extremely seriously. I point out to the Opposition that we have already introduced the Renters (Reform) Bill, which is the biggest reform of the private rented sector in a whole generation. That key measure will abolish section 21 evictions, which are one of the major causes of homelessness. We, on the Conservative Benches, are going to end them.

Elections Act 2022: May 2023 Local Elections

13. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the impact of changes introduced in the Elections Act 2022 on the local elections in May 2023. [905280]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): We are encouraged by the first roll-out of voter identification, and we are confident—based on sector feedback and our own observations—that the vast majority of voters will have cast their votes successfully. We have also been pleased to see initial positive feedback to the accessibility changes for disabled people. We will, as set out in legislation, conduct an evaluation and publish the report no later than November.

Patricia Gibson: Of course, the UK Government rejected the Electoral Commission's suggestion and advice to delay voter ID until after the council elections last month. Does the Minister agree with her former Cabinet colleague, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)? He said:

“Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding their clever scheme comes back to bite them, as...we found by insisting on voter ID for elections”

and that the Government had

“upset a system that worked perfectly well.”

Does the Minister not accept that voter ID has disenfranchised voters across the political spectrum? Does she want more voter ID restrictions, including for postal votes?

Felicity Buchan: The anecdotal feedback is very much that this has been a successful enterprise. We will have our report come November, and the Electoral Commission's interim report in June and full report in September. We are prepared to learn lessons, but our evaluation from anecdotal feedback is that it has been a successful roll-out.

Social Rented Housing Provision

14. **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the provision of social rented housing. [905281]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): The Government are committed to increasing affordable housing of all kinds, which is why we are investing £11.5 billion, through the affordable homes programme, to deliver tens of thousands of homes for rent and sale right across the country.

Karin Smyth: The availability of social rented and affordable housing is the No. 1 issue that my constituents contact me about. Although Bristol's Labour council is building more social homes for the future, the Government's decision to scrap targets means that neighbouring authorities are not rising to the challenge. What analysis has been conducted by the Department on the impact on local housing supply of the Government's decision to water down its housing targets?

Rachel Maclean: I would like to gently correct the assertion that the hon. Lady made about watering down housing targets. The Government are committed to building 300,000 houses across the country. We are building them in the right places, with community support. We understand the importance of social rented housing, and that is why we made a commitment in our levelling-up White Paper to ensure that more are built with the £11.5 billion of Government funding that her Labour-run council is no doubt benefiting from.

Topical Questions

T1. [905290] **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This Government are committed to ensuring that we have a fitting memorial to the holocaust, and we will be bringing forward legislation to ensure that we can do just that. That legislation has been designated a hybrid Bill, which, Mr Speaker, you and others will be aware adds an additional layer of complexity to legislating for that memorial. I repeat at this Dispatch Box my commitment on behalf of this Government: we will do everything possible to legislate, consonant with our responsibilities to this House and to the other place, with the maximum level of speed and with unwavering commitment, because we know that, as the voices of those directly affected by the holocaust fade, we must do everything we can to ensure that there is a fitting memorial to this country's role and place in supporting them.

Sir Christopher Chope: Why is my right hon. Friend refusing to let Members of this House see the original and revised impact assessments of his neo-socialist Renters (Reform) Bill? The independent Regulatory Policy Committee rejected the first impact assessment as not fit for purpose. Will he ensure that we see that and the second version before we debate the Bill on Second Reading?

Michael Gove: I am hugely in favour of publishing impact assessments, but I reassure the House that the proposal that my hon. Friend mentions as neo-socialist was in the manifesto under which we secured a record-breaking majority in 2019, and the key provisions of it were backed not just by my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) but by other noted neo-socialists, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss).

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): It is nice to see an outbreak of consensus in the House; the Secretary of State is a neo-socialist, and the Bert and Ernie of British politics have been reunited once more. Will he tell us, though, why he did not decide to allow the National Audit Office to investigate the serious allegations about misuse of public money and assets on Teesside?

Michael Gove: We consulted with the NAO and with others, and we felt that it was most appropriate to have a genuine independent inquiry. It is important to state that there is no evidence that has come to light hitherto of any suggestion of corruption, as has been alleged by some in this House. What we need to do—this was the explicit request of the Mayor of Tees Valley—is quickly, expeditiously and authoritatively to provide people with the reassurance they all want. I am afraid that at the moment there is a real risk that investment in Teesside could be frozen or chilled as a result of the programme of misinformation that has been sedulously spread by Labour party colleagues in Tees Valley.

Lisa Nandy: It really does beggar belief. The Secretary of State knows very well that the Mayor in question asked specifically for an NAO investigation, and that that request was backed by three Select Committee Chairs, the official Opposition and countless others. Instead, the Secretary of State has chosen to launch an investigation on his own terms, hand-picking a panel to investigate an issue where accountability has totally broken down as a result of a flawed system of accountability over which he has presided for years, without heeding the concerns of Members on both sides of the House and the NAO itself. These are not his assets; they belong to the people on Teesside, and those people deserve answers, so I ask him, seriously: how could anyone possibly have faith in this investigation process or this Government when they have chosen to block the NAO from investigating?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady once again seeks to raise question marks over what has happened in Tees Valley, as her Labour party colleagues have done. I gently point out that, under the 13 years of Labour Government, the constituencies and communities of the Tees Valley were neglected. That is why Ben Houchen was elected as Mayor. He is bringing investment to the Tees Valley that never happened during the 13 years that Labour was in power; and because it hurts so much for the Labour party to acknowledge that it is a Conservative Mayor who is delivering for working people in Tees Valley, it engages in a campaign of innuendo unworthy of the party of working people.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): According to the ONS, Kirklees Council is significantly underperforming in delivering education, health and care plans within the 20-week target, particularly compared with the national average and other councils in West Yorkshire. Does the Minister agree that the council is letting our children and parents down, and that we need to see a real improvement when the next ONS report is published later this month?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): That policy area is led by the Department for Education, but I agree that Kirklees Council needs to improve its

performance on EHCPs. I understand that colleagues from the Department for Education have been working closely with that council to support it in doing so. We are awaiting the most recent publication of figures, which are due to be released imminently.

T2. [905291] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): Over 1 million households are waiting for social homes, including more than 9,000 in Nottingham alone, but rather than expanding our council housing stock, there was a net loss nationally of 14,000 council homes last year. When will the Government take action on our housing crisis and enable council housing to be built en masse?

Michael Gove: I share the hon. Lady's commitment to making sure that there is more socially rented housing, and indeed more affordable housing overall. Again, I would gently point out that we have built more social homes under this Administration than were built under the previous Labour Government. I should also point out that, under the previous Conservative Mayor of London, more homes were built than under the current Mayor of London.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): And the previous Labour Mayor.

Michael Gove: And, indeed, the previous Labour Mayor. If you want affordable urban housing, you need to have Conservative leadership in City Hall.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): After speaking to residents in Mercer Park in Hyndburn this weekend following the successful "Let's Move Hyndburn" event, it came to my attention that we have a real lack of disabled facilities in parks across Hyndburn and Haslingden. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss how we can provide local authorities with the funding that they need, so that people do not have to travel outside of the constituency?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. Whether it is Oswaldtwistle or Accrington, we need to make sure that people living with disabilities have the support they need, and we will make sure that a meeting happens quickly, whether with myself or with another Minister in the Department.

T3. [905293] **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of families in my constituency are living for months on end in hotels, as they can no longer afford to rent and the council has no suitable temporary accommodation left. Local authorities currently do not have the powers or funding they need to tackle the crisis, so will the Secretary of State confirm how he is going to change that and give councils such as Enfield the resources they need to end this hotel crisis?

Michael Gove: I appreciate the nature of the problem that the hon. Lady mentions: too many people are in temporary accommodation. I will look at the challenges that Enfield Council faces in terms of the delivery of housing, including affordable housing for the vulnerable families that she champions, and hope to be able to report back more in due course.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): House prices are all over the headlines yet again, but affordability is the key issue. Does my hon. Friend the Housing Minister agree that when we do get new houses built, often taking years and years to go through planning, they all look like identikit estates, just like the estates we have already? We need affordable homes that local people can aspire to and retirement homes for later living. Does she agree that we need to build the right houses in the right places?

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): I thank my hon. Friend very much. He represents a new town, as I do—I am very proud to represent the new town of Redditch. We are absolutely committed to building the right houses in the right places, and that includes enabling local communities to have more say over the design and type of housing. We are doing that through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: through design codes, street votes and reforming the planning system. I am pleased to report to my hon. Friend that I have also launched a taskforce for older people's housing to address the housing needs of older people.

T4. [905294] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I do not think that the staggering complacency of the Secretary of State in dismissing legitimate, serious complaints and concerns about the use of hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money will have passed anybody's attention. I warn him that that type of response may well come back and bite him. However, if there is to be any possibility of this House and the people of Teesside having any confidence in the findings of the inquiry that he has commissioned, that inquiry must have all the powers it needs to demand and secure whatever evidence and documentation it determines is necessary, and anyone must be able to submit that evidence to the inquiry. Will the Secretary of State give those commitments?

Michael Gove: I am tempted to say that if the hon. Gentleman has evidence, he should please share it. It is the case that Labour in Teesside, including Labour in Middlesbrough, has consistently sought to undermine, thwart and oppose those efforts at economic development and investment that the Mayor of Tees Valley has brought forward. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has made a number of allegations in this House that he has been reluctant to repeat outside. We look forward to him putting us right in a way that actually contributes to the welfare of the people of Tees Valley, rather than advancing the agenda of the Labour party.

Mr Speaker: I have allowed some contributions to stretch, but we are on topicals, so you will not mind staying a while.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Wiltshire urgently needs a lot more housing, and the good news is that we are getting it. For the past six years, we have met our house building target by 130%, with 4,000 new houses in Wiltshire every year, but because developers routinely underestimate their future building forecasts, we have a theoretical shortage in the five-year land supply. Because inspectors routinely declare that local plans are out of date, it means that developers can impose unwanted and ugly developments that communities do not want. Will the Secretary of State use the NPPF review to exempt—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but topical questions are meant to be short and punchy. It is not like your previous question. You have just got to shorten it down. Can somebody answer that question please?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is on exactly the right lines. That is what the NPPF consultation hopes to do.

T6. [905296] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I have raised the issue of overseas voters in this place before, and I understand that the regulations will be brought forward by the end of the year, but we might have a general election by then, and we need six months between the regulations being made and a general election in order for them to take effect. Can the Secretary of State provide more clarity on the guarantee that overseas voters will be able to vote?

Michael Gove: I will do everything in my power to ensure that there is at least six months between those regulations coming forward and any general election.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for levelling up, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), has been generous with her time in discussing the future of Essex. Can she reassure the House that no plans for a combined authority will go forward without the support of the majority of Essex MPs, because at the moment I am pretty sure that none of us wants it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): We are absolutely clear that any devolution deals must be locally led with local consent. I have consulted my hon. Friend, and we will continue to have such conversations, but ultimately this is about getting the best for the people of Essex, and I know he shares my ambition to deliver that.

T7. [905297] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Homes England's new strategic plan contains commitments to work with local leaders to deliver "a brownfield first approach" and to "support biodiversity" by working with partners

"to protect, enhance or create new environmental assets",

yet there are plans to put 260 housing units on Brislington meadows, a beautiful nature-rich site in my constituency, going against the wishes of the council, local residents, the mayor and me. Does the Secretary of State really think the plan is worth the paper it is written on if Homes England does not put its principles into practice?

Michael Gove: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Lady's position, and I will look closely at that proposal. I agree with her and, indeed, with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), that the green belt is a valuable environmental asset that we need to protect, but sadly that is not the view of the Leader of the Opposition.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In reforming planning policy to deliver more homes, can I have an assurance that the brownfield-first policy will be paramount to protect the green belt and green fields from development?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely. As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has pointed out, that is absolutely at the heart of the strategic plan for Homes England.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with devolved counterparts on the potential location of investment zones in Scotland? What steps is he taking to tailor those zones to Scotland's economic strengths and the Scottish Government's ambition of transitioning to a wellbeing economy?

Michael Gove: I have had good conversations with the SNP leaders of Aberdeen City Council and Dundee City Council and, indeed, the SNP leader of Glasgow City Council, as well as with the Deputy First Minister about precisely this issue. We want to make sure that investment zones, such as freeports, are an example of the Scottish Government and the UK Government working in a way that is better together.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): To hit the Government's new sewage reduction targets, water companies such as South West Water must make sure that the infrastructure can cope with new housing developments. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend update the House on what plans the Government have to make sure that water companies are statutory consultees in major housing developments?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has talked to me about this issue before, and I think his concerns are absolutely on the button. I should say that proposals have been brought forward by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to dramatically improve the way in which waste water treatment works operate, but there is still more to do, and his point is very well made.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We now come to Clive Efford, who has the final question.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Residents in Master Gunner Place in my constituency are still paying for a waking watch, despite a new fire alarm being introduced. These properties were built with major defects by Countryside Properties, and they are now owned by Samnas. I want to know what the Minister is going to do to take these people to task, because they are costing my constituents a lot of money, which should have been resolved before.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): The hon. Gentleman will have seen that we have recently reopened the waking watch fund, but on the specific issue he has raised, I would be happy to meet him, because I also want to understand why this has not been removed as a result of the money spent.

Personal Statement

Mr Speaker: I call Matt Hancock to make a personal statement.

3.35 pm

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Ind): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to make this personal statement at the earliest possible opportunity.

In March, I wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to give context to an investigation he was leading about actions taken in response to a Government call to arms during the pandemic. The commissioner found that, in doing so, I inadvertently committed a minor breach of the House rule that forbids Members from lobbying the commissioner or members of the Committee on Standards over an investigation. The Committee found that I did not seek to break the rules, had no prospect of personal gain and acted without malice. However, it recommended that I apologise to the House and to the commissioner for this minor breach and underlined that respect for the code of conduct and the processes of investigating potential breaches of the code is an important and necessary part of the code. I am happy to do so.

Mr Speaker: That closes that matter.

Kosovo

3.36 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will give an update on the situation in Kosovo.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The latest spike in tensions in northern Kosovo is deeply concerning. Violent protests in northern Kosovo on 29 May resulted in injuries to at least 30 troops from NATO's KFOR mission, along with 50 civilians, including journalists. Since then, the mood has calmed slightly, but tensions remain high. Daily protests are continuing around municipal offices in the four Kosovo Serb-majority municipalities, where Kosovan authorities are insisting that newly elected ethnic Albanian mayors should work and be based.

We are working closely with international partners to de-escalate the situation and encourage a return to dialogue. On 18 May, along with the United States, France, Germany, Italy and the EU, we called for work towards a long-term solution for representative democracy in these municipalities in northern Kosovo. We also warned against the use of force or actions that might heighten tensions. On 26 May, we expressed strong concerns about the move to install mayors in municipal buildings by force, and Serbia's raising of the state of its forces' readiness at the border. We are urging the Government of Kosovo to withdraw special police forces from the immediate vicinity of the municipal buildings, and to allow mayors to discharge their functions from alternative locations.

The Prime Minister's western Balkans special envoy, Lord Peach, visited Kosovo on 30 May, where he met political leaders, the KFOR commander and other key actors. Alongside France, Germany, Italy, the US and the EU, we have raised strong concerns with Serbia's President Vučić and urged moves to de-escalate. The Foreign Secretary will meet Serbia's Prime Minister Brnabić in the coming days. We welcome all efforts to chart a path forward towards de-escalation and dialogue, and are playing an active part in international efforts to that end. The Prime Minister reiterated this message when he met Kosovo President Osmani at the European Political Community summit on 1 June, as did Lord Peach during his visit to Kosovo.

Managing down current tensions is a first and necessary step towards this goal. We support the call made by France, Germany and the EU on 1 June for fresh and inclusive municipal elections, and work to establish the association of Serb-majority municipalities. We welcome the initiative and current follow-up by the EU special representative, Miroslav Lajčák, and his US counterpart in the region, Gabriel Escobar, for meetings today.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this important urgent question. Kosovo is often faced with a cycle of escalatory and de-escalatory violence on its streets. I wish to set the context: Kosovo is not Serbia. Earlier this year, however, Belgrade orchestrated a boycott of democratic elections. As a result—a result that we in the west recognise, although we are now asking them to

rerun it—there was only a 3% turnout. That was due to foreign interference, which so often seems to be missing from the discussion.

Last week, elected mayors did seek to take up their roles, not in a violent manner, although it became violent due to orchestrated violence around the mayoral offices. While I recognise that this was an escalatory action, it would not be. Should hostile forces take control of a mayoral office in the UK, we would not say, “Well, you just need to go and work from home.” We would say, “This is an unacceptable attempt to suffocate democracy.”

We then saw orchestrated violence on the streets, by Belgrade-funded and armed militias against KFOR and the police. There were Molotov cocktails, the firing of guns against them, and police cars were set on fire. Why was there such a disproportionate and unbalanced response by our allies? It is wrong that the United States and the European Union chose to attack Kosovo, with no criticism of the armed militias who created the situation. A democratic ally bore the brunt of those sticks.

What counter-measures are we putting in place in Belgrade, because at the moment it appears to be a failure of deterrence diplomacy? How does our policy differ from that of the US and EU, because we are too quiet about what is happening right now? Will we finally call out those Belgrade-armed and funded militias, because when an individual says, “No, I don’t want to support your militia,” they find a grenade on their child’s doorstep the next day. That is intimidation in its worst sense. Finally, how are we supporting Serb-Kosovan communities to ensure that they can live the lives they want, and participate in democracy without foreign interference having a chilling effect on that democracy in Kosovo?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for raising this matter. She has followed this area of policy closely, and the House will recognise her expertise.

The Government are exercising a very responsible role in this matter and, as she knows, we know that part of the world extremely well. We emphasise the importance of dialogue and de-escalation. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had a chance to mention those matters when he met the President of Kosovo on 1 June, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who has specific responsibilities for that part of the world, visited Kosovo and Serbia in mid-December.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton will feel that we are trying to de-escalate the situation. I know that our ambassador will be speaking with her later today, and I hope she will be reassured by what he and I am saying about the contribution that Britain is making.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The situation in northern Kosovo is extremely precarious and warrants the urgent attention of this House. Last week, 30 NATO peacekeepers and more than 50 Serbian protesters were injured. Labour pays tribute to the NATO mission

and our troops, and condemns all actions that raise tension, lead to violence and undermine efforts towards normalisation.

I visited Kosovo in January. Its people remain hugely grateful for the NATO intervention in 1999, led by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and President Clinton. That intervention brought bloody violence not witnessed on European soil for decades to a halt. We are proud of our historic actions, but it is crucial that Britain plays its part now too. We must remain focused on de-escalation and the re-establishment of constructive dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, uphold the sovereignty of both Kosovo and Serbia, ensure the rights of minorities on both sides of the border, and protect democracy. This matters for the strategic interest of our whole continent. We must seek difficult conversations today to avoid further violence and escalation tomorrow. Labour is committed to that, and that is why I visited earlier in the year, when tensions began to rise.

Despite our historic role in the region, the UK has all too often been absent from it. The issue has been absent from the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary’s diaries, despite the important work of the UK envoy; the UK has been absent when it comes to taking actions to prevent interference in the region by bad actors such as Russia, which has been sowing the seeds of discord in the region; and, most crucially, we have been absent from the EU-led dialogue process. Does the UK support the rerunning of elections in the four municipalities concerned, and does the Minister agree that Kosovo’s Serbs should be expected to take part? Does he share my serious concern about the fact that the Serbian armed forces have been placed on the highest alert? Why has no UK Foreign Secretary visited Kosovo since 2016? It is time that the UK remembered its historic role in the region, and urgently started to show some leadership.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his contribution. He emphasises the significant British involvement in the region, and its importance to Europe, and to the United Kingdom in particular. On his question about the Foreign Secretary visiting, I point out that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot, was in Kosovo and Serbia at the end of last year. As recently as 1 June, the Prime Minister had a brush-by with the President of Kosovo.

I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about the appalling attack on NATO forces. We have condemned without qualification that attack on the troops. I emphasise that additional Turkish troops will now be joining. As he will know, there were serious casualties among Hungarian and Italian soldiers; I join in what he said about that.

We are working very closely with our Quint partners to ensure rapid de-escalation of the violence. As Lord Peach, the Prime Minister’s envoy, has said, the UK has stood by Kosovo in the best and worst of times, and will continue to do so. On the elections that took place, we are clear that they are legal, but it does look as though they lack legitimacy.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Kosovo has not been absent from my interests over the past few months, and distinguished international lawyers have been appointed by the Council of Europe to take further Kosovo’s membership of it. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Serbs participate in the elections?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He knows much about the issues that the House is discussing. The UK supports Kosovo's wish to join the Council of Europe. The Council of Ministers has referred the matter to the Parliamentary Assembly, and I hope that it proceeds in the manner that he and I would wish it to.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I saw for myself the work of NATO's Kosovo Force troops when I visited Kosovo on a cross-parliamentary delegation last year. Their work is really important, but it is not given the significance that it should be given by national capitals, including London. Will the Minister put more emphasis on building on the UK's unique position as an ally of Kosovo? Next year will be the 25th anniversary of the NATO-led intervention. How can we use Kosovo's substantial good will—it is probably the country in Europe with the most good will towards the United Kingdom at present—to bring about greater understanding between communities, and a de-escalation of the dangerous rhetoric coming from Belgrade, potentially with involvement from Russia? I fear that it is not a coincidence that this is all happening at the same time. What can the Minister do to ensure that we really use our position, and are not just a commentator but a participant in finding a solution?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his perceptive and accurate comments. I reassure him that we will do everything we possibly can to advance the aims that he set out, and I underline the point that he made about Britain making a unique contribution. I will ensure that his comments are relayed to the Foreign Secretary and to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot. The hon. Gentleman may rest assured that the essence of what he says is precisely in line with the policy of His Majesty's Government.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to the western Balkans, I have a brief that includes both Serbia and Kosovo. I recognise the importance of stability in encouraging UK businesses to take advantage of the great opportunities that exist in the area, so I fully support my right hon. Friend's comments about de-escalation. Only if we reduce the tension can British businesses benefit the economies of Serbia, Kosovo and the wider region. May I urge my right hon. Friend to do all he can to, as he said, de-escalate the situation?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend, on behalf of the House, for all the work he does in his role as an envoy, and I underline the important point he made about steps towards de-escalation. Both Kosovo and Serbia have a role to play in de-escalation. Kosovo must now enable mayors to work from locations outside municipal offices and withdraw special police units from the vicinity. Serbia needs to reverse its decision to raise the level of readiness of its armed forces at the border with Kosovo and use its influence to encourage an end to the violent protests. All parties must exercise maximum restraint, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric and actions. That is the essence of what my hon. Friend is calling for, with his experience of that part of the world and those specific issues, and I strongly agree with what he said.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We all agree with the UK Government's joint statement condemning the violence. No one in the House, or in any part of Parliament, wants a return to the terrible violence of the 1990s. We all agree on the need for de-escalation, but what actions precisely—as opposed to just words—are the UK Government taking to achieve it? What investigation is the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office undertaking into the involvement of Belgrade, and possibly the Kremlin, in manipulation and misinformation around the elections that led to such a poor turnout? Prime Minister Kurti said that he is open to rerunning the elections to try to establish support and legitimacy, but if they go ahead, what actions will the Foreign Office and embassy officials take to ensure that they do so safely and that both communities take part? Finally, what actions are the UK Government taking to bring the recent agreements, of February and March, to fruition and establish the association of Serbian-majority municipalities?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady very much for what she says. I reassure her that we are not in any way naively equating the two sides. She asked at the beginning of her question about the action we were taking to deter the violence. We view the attacks on KFOR personnel as completely unacceptable. We have been clear in Belgrade that attacks on NATO personnel are unacceptable and that any claims KFOR attacked peaceful protesters are completely unfounded. Many of those responsible for attacking KFOR troops were not peaceful protesters. They came with the means and intent to pursue violence. As far as her comments about the activities of the Russians are concerned, the British Government, along with our allies—in particular those in the Quint—are acutely aware of the issues to which she refers.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I ask for a bit more detail from my right hon. Friend on what the Department is doing to oppose Russian attempts at destabilisation in the western Balkans?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will, I hope, allow me not to get ahead of ourselves in respect of specific details on that, but his point is noted.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): In the region there is, as we all know, a hidden agenda being pursued by Russia and its supporters. But at this precise moment, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that what is needed is a real, huge effort to de-escalate the situation? The former UN special envoy to the Balkans and former Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, has called for an unprecedented "robust diplomacy" to be exercised by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that must be the priority at this precise moment?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reinforcing the wise words of Carl Bildt. The specific issue he raised is very much at the top of the Quint's agenda.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Kosovo is a much valued and very active member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I chair.

It is my privilege to work with its representative in the alliance on a regular basis. Other countries in the region are also members of the alliance. Will the Minister indicate how other means can be used to strengthen diplomatic relationships between countries in the region, and so de-escalate tensions?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work in this area, which the House has acknowledged on many occasions. On the last part of what she said, the work of Lord Peach is particularly helpful in trying to achieve that. The whole House will want to thank Lord Peach for his work.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): As the Minister has acknowledged, the whole world will be watching the UK's response for the impact it will have not only on Kosovo but in the wider Balkans region. The comments about the legitimacy of the elections are welcome, as is de-escalating Serbia's heightened military alert. Can the Minister say what the UK is doing to strengthen civil society in Kosovo—those bringers of peace, women's groups and other organisations who are working for peace alongside military and diplomatic means?

Mr Mitchell: The embassy, on behalf of the Foreign Office and the Government, runs a range of programmes that engage specifically with civil society. We will look at whether we can do more to energise the excellent work that the embassy is already doing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Thirty peacekeepers and 52 Serbs were injured while protesting the installation of the mayor. NATO has sent additional troops, on top of the 700 already there. Everyone recognises that NATO has a key peace role to play; will the Minister indicate what the position will be for those peacekeepers? Will they be respected by

both sides? We should be ever mindful that the innocents suffer the most—the women, the children and the elderly. What discussions have Government had with officials in Kosovo to reduce any possibility of an escalation of violence and to protect civilians?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his perceptive comments, as usual, about what is going on, particularly his focus on the abhorrent violence committed against the peacekeepers in the way that he described. He may rest assured that Britain, through a whole series of different international and local entities, is doing everything it can to protect peacekeepers from vile attacks. We will continue to do exactly that.

Mr Speaker: Before I come to the statement, is the shadow Home Secretary happy to continue, or does she want me to suspend the sitting to give her time to read it?

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I received the statement only at half-past. If it is possible to have a further 10 minutes, that would be appreciated, but I do not want to inconvenience the House. Unfortunately, we have become used to late statements from the Home Office.

Mr Speaker: In fairness to the Home Secretary, I understand that the statement was available; it was very late coming to me. I have not had time to look at it, and the shadow Home Secretary has not been given sufficient time. The Home Secretary said that, unfortunately, it was ready but it did not arrive at our office. I will suspend the sitting for 10 minutes to give us time to read it.

3.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Illegal Migration

4.8 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the progress of the Government's plan to stop the boats. This is a complex and enduring problem, which we must tackle on multiple fronts. It is a moral imperative. That is why the Prime Minister, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, made stopping the boats one of his five pledges to the British people.

While Labour has no plan, we are getting on with our plan to stop the boats, and although there is a long way to go, there are several outcomes to note. First, the small boats operational command was established in December to oversee operations in the channel, with a new senior director, Duncan Capps, a former general, appointed to lead it. We have doubled the funding for Project Invigor—which brings together the National Crime Agency, Home Office intelligence and policing—over the next two financial years to help disrupt the people-smuggling gangs upstream.

Secondly, freeing up immigration enforcement officers meant that there were over 50% more illegal working raids between January and March this year than in the same period in 2022. Since the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 in June last year, Immigration Enforcement has doubled the number of arrests, charges and convictions in comparison with the figures in the same period in the preceding year. We have established the UK's first cross-Government ministerial taskforce on immigration enforcement, so that only those who are here lawfully can work, receive benefits or access public services. Meanwhile, data sharing with the financial sector recommenced in April, as we crack down on illegal migrants accessing banking services.

Thirdly, the asylum initial decision backlog is down by 17,000 and we are on track to abolish all legacy cases by the end of this year, having doubled the number of asylum decision makers over the last two years. We continue to improve the system and aim to boost the productivity of the caseworkers by simplifying the process with shorter interviews and the removal of unnecessary steps.

Fourthly, the current accommodation system is unsustainable and hugely unfair to taxpayers. We recently set out to the House our plans for a fairer, more cost-effective asylum accommodation system, starting with the former Ministry of Defence sites at Wethersfield and Scampton. We will see an accommodation barge arrive in Portland within the next fortnight and we have secured another two to accommodate another 1,000 individuals. We are also making more efficient use of hotels by asking people to share rooms where appropriate.

Fifthly, on the international front, we have signed the biggest ever small boats bilateral deal with France and strengthened co-operation with a range of other European partners including Belgium, Italy and the EU. In 2023 so far, more small boat migrants have been intercepted by France than have reached the UK's shores. French interceptions this year are more than double what they were two years ago. Additional drones, aircraft and other surveillance technologies will be deployed to support French law enforcement. French forces have increased the proportion of small boat launches that are prevented

and have arrested more than 200 people smugglers so far this year. As part of the new deal, France will establish a new 24/7 zonal co-ordination centre in Lille, with permanently embedded British officers. My right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister was in France last week to see at first hand the impact of UK funding and to discuss a joint plan to intensify our engagement on the channel as we move into the summer.

Sixthly, the Government continue to prioritise the return of individuals with no right to remain in the United Kingdom. We established through the Nationality and Borders Act a disqualification from modern slavery protection for individuals who meet specific criteria, including foreign national offenders with custodial sentences of 12 months or more and individuals convicted of terrorism offences. Between January and March this year, over 4,000 people with no right to be in the UK were removed or departed voluntarily—an increase of more than 50% compared with the same period last year.

We recently signed the UK-Georgia readmissions agreement and have made significant progress on our returns relationship with Pakistan. We are also continuing to progress our returns relationship with India following the implementation of our migration and mobility partnership. Since the Prime Minister signed a joint communiqué with Prime Minister Rama in December, nearly 1,800 Albanian nationals without the right to be in the UK have been returned to Albania. We are not complacent. We will continue to monitor this as we enter the summer, but the number of Albanians arriving by small boats so far this year is almost 90% less than in the same period last year. Last month, we delivered a groundbreaking new arrangement whereby Albanian prisoners will be sent home to serve the remainder of their jail sentences.

Seventhly, we continue to prepare to deliver the Government's migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda. This partnership is an innovative international solution to an international problem. The Home Office has always maintained that this policy is lawful, and the UK High Court upheld this in December 2022. Legal proceedings are ongoing, but we are committed to delivering this policy and getting flights going as soon as legally practicable. I visited Kigali in March and saw that Rwanda is more than ready to help people thrive in a new country.

These efforts demonstrate our commitment to doing all we can within the existing legislative framework, but we have also been clear that, to stop the boats, we must go further, and that the framework needs to change. That is why, lastly, we are reforming our laws. This is what the public want, and all politicians should get behind our Bill. Our Illegal Migration Bill will make it clear to anyone coming here illegally that they will not be able to build a life in this country. Instead, they will be liable to be detained and will be swiftly removed either to their home country or to a safe third country like Rwanda. This is the deterrent factor we need to break the people smugglers' business model.

We will introduce new safe and legal routes for those at risk of war and persecution to come to seek refuge and protection in the UK, within an annual quota to be set by Parliament and informed by consultation with local communities. The British people are generous and welcoming, but they rightly expect immigration to be controlled. Coming here illegally from other safe countries

is unnecessary, unsafe and unfair. It must stop. We have a long way still to go and we are not complacent but, unlike the Opposition, we have a plan. We are delivering that plan, and we will not rest until we stop the boats.

Before I finish, I put on record my apology to the Opposition for the late delivery of this statement.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.17 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your response. I thank the Home Secretary for her apology.

The Prime Minister flew to Dover today to congratulate himself and to tell us that his plan is working, even though the asylum backlog he promised to clear is at a record high, decisions are down, caseworker numbers have dropped, hotel use is up, returns are still down, only 1% of last year's small boat cases have been processed, and seven and a half thousand people arrived on dangerous small boats in the last few months alone. The massive gap between the Tories' rhetoric and reality shows that the Home Secretary still has no grip on the system. This Conservative chaos is letting everyone down.

The Prime Minister claimed today that he is stopping the boats, but the 7,600 people who have arrived in the last few months alone is three times more than two years ago and eight times more than before the pandemic. We all hope that the limited reduction in the winter months, compared with last year, will be sustained when the weather improves, but criminal gangs have already made an estimated £13 million in the last few months alone from putting lives at risk and undermining our border security as a result of the Conservative failure to go after the gangs and maintain that border security. The Home Secretary boasts about an increase in enforcement, but that is compared with the covid period. Compared with before the pandemic, enforcement visits are down 22% and arrests are down 17%. This is not an achievement.

The Home Secretary also says she has cut the backlog, but the backlog is at a record high of 170,000. It has gone up, not down, since December. There has been an 18% drop in asylum decisions in the last quarter, and it is no good claiming they are only clearing a so-called legacy backlog of cases from before June 2022. What about the growing backlog of 60,000 people and more who have arrived in the last 12 months? They are still in the asylum system, still in hotels and still in limbo. A backlog is a backlog, no matter how much the Government try to spin it away. The only legacy we are talking about is the legacy of Tory failure to tackle the problem. All the Home Secretary has managed to do is take a few decisions on cases that are more than a year old. That is not an achievement—that is her job.

The Prime Minister and Home Secretary promised to end hotel use, but it has gone up, to 47,000 people, which is higher than the 40,000 she told us about in December. The Prime Minister also said in December that he already got locations for accommodating 10,000 more people, but now the Home Secretary says it is only 3,000, from the end of this year. What she has not admitted is that this is not instead of hotels—it is additional, because of their failure and the consequence of their new immigration Bill, the bigger backlog Bill, which is just

going to make the backlog worse. Today's press release reveals the truth. It says that these accommodation changes

"could reduce the need to source an additional 90 hotels."

Why are the Government in such a mess that they need to be thinking about sourcing an additional 90 hotels? Why have they so totally lost any grip that the backlog and costs are getting worse and worse?

Enforced returns are lower than they were pre-pandemic, and only 23 of the 24,000 people the Government have tried to return to safe countries they have travelled through have actually been returned. Even in the case of Albania, with which there is a return agreement in place, we find that 12,000 people arrived on small boats last year but fewer than 1% of those cases have been decided and barely a few hundred people have been returned. As for Rwanda, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has said, the Government have sent more Home Secretaries there than asylum seekers, and no one expects the numbers to be high. The taxpayer is already footing the bill for Conservative failure, and now we hear reports that the new legislation will cost £6 billion. Is that true—yes or no?

The Home Office has already had to claim £2.4 billion extra from the Treasury reserve, so how much more will it claim this year? *The Times* reports that illegal immigration will have to fall below 10,000 a year for it even to be possible to implement the new legislation, because the Home Office says that Ministers' plans are "based on demented assumptions". So will the Home Secretary tell us whether the demented assumptions are hers or the Prime Minister's?

Time and again, the Government have voted against Labour proposals to help stop dangerous crossings. They have voted against action to go after criminal gangs; against the cross-border police unit, against fast-track decisions for safe countries; and against new return agreements and legal routes with Europe. People want to see strong border security and a properly controlled and managed asylum system, so that our country does our bit, alongside others, to help those fleeing persecution and conflict. Under the Tories, we have neither of those, because the gangs have been allowed to let rip across the borders and the asylum system is in chaos. All we get is rhetoric, while the reality gets worse; we get demented assumptions, unworkable plans and empty spin. Instead of all the press conferences, we need a proper plan. The asylum system is broken, the Tories broke it and there is still no plan today to sort it out.

Suella Braverman: I thank the right hon. Lady again for her extensive words. The theatrics get even more colourful every time we meet. I say "words" because, as ever, that is all we get from the Opposition; we get no serious alternatives and no credible plan, just empty rhetoric and endless noise.

Last December, the Prime Minister and I set out a plan to stop the boats. Since then, we have been working flat out to deliver that programme. What has the right hon. Lady been up to? It is hard to say. The question is: will Labour ever bring forward a plan of its own, a plan with details, a plan that delivers? I am sorry to say that the answer is that Labour does not have a plan and does not care that it does not have one. It is this Conservative Government and this Conservative Prime Minister who are dealing with the priorities of the British people.

[*Suella Braverman*]

So what is Labour actually doing? Labour Members are good at carping from the sidelines, but when it comes down to it, how do they actually act? They have voted against every single measure that we have put forward to stop the boats. They would scrap our world-leading plan with Rwanda, and they continue to oppose our laws to detain and remove. Contrast their opposition to our common-sense proposals with their urgent activism when it suits them. Let me tell you, Mr Speaker, more than 100 Opposition Members—over half the parliamentary Labour party—signed a letter campaigning for dangerous foreign criminals to be spared deportation. Those criminals included murderers and rapists who went on to commit further terrible crimes here in Britain. Indeed, 14 of the current shadow Cabinet campaigned to stop those vile criminals from being deported, including the shadow Foreign Secretary, the shadow Attorney General, the shadow Health Secretary and even the Leader of the Opposition. I will spare the rest. I am still waiting for an apology, Mr Speaker, but I fear that it will never come.

I know that the right hon. Lady did not sign that letter. Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition should take that into account before he decides to remove her from the Front Bench. Labour Members continue to oppose our Illegal Migration Bill, saying that it will not work. Frankly, that is totally unsurprising, because, unlike the British people, Labour wants more migration, not less; it wants open borders, not control.

I am a democrat. The British people have spoken clearly and repeatedly. They welcome genuine refugees and do not want people to come here illegally. The Opposition parties and the right hon. Lady are supremely indifferent to this problem. They are happy with the status quo that lines the pockets of the gangsters, is lethally dangerous and grossly unfair on taxpayers, and puts intolerable pressure on our local communities. We on the Conservative Benches are committed to stopping the boats. We have a plan to do so and we are delivering that plan.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The Home Secretary will know that I am a big supporter of her hard work to sort out this crisis, but sharing rooms, using barges and drones and relying on the French is not the answer. I think that anyone with any common sense in this place knows what the answer is, and that is to get the flights off to Rwanda as quickly as possible. Can she please advise me and the great people of Ashfield when these flights will go ahead?

Suella Braverman: I have huge confidence in our world-leading plan with Rwanda. As my hon. Friend will know, that plan was endorsed by the High Court in a legal challenge at the end of last year. We have had a Court of Appeal hearing, and we now await its judgment. As soon as we complete the full legal process, we will ensure that the flights take off as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Home Secretary comes here with selective statistics that she has put together to suit the press release that she wants to put out, but the reality is that the total asylum backlog has increased by more than 40,000 people since this time last year. There are fewer decision makers in

the Home Office now than there were in January. It is all distraction and sleight of hand. There is no evidence that the plans so far have had any impact or that the heavy-handed deterrence, which is based, as her own officials say, on demented assumptions, works. Policies such as the hostile environment, which were started by Labour, have been turbocharged by successive Tory Home Secretaries. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Rwanda plan, deals with Albania and the Illegal Migration Bill are not working because the central fact remains that people are coming here in small boats because they are desperate and they have no other choice.

The latest Office for National Statistics figures for May show that just 54 Afghans were resettled under pathway 1 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme since August 2021. There have been 40 under pathway 2 and only 14 under pathway 3. At the same time, 8,429 Afghans arrived in the UK on small boats. They are coming because they cannot get here to safety any other way.

I do agree slightly with what the Home Secretary said in her statement about the accommodation system being unsustainable and unfair. It is also absolutely brutal for asylum seekers, such as those in my constituency, who are being left to wait indefinitely. Yet the Home Secretary proposes to throw yet more money, reportedly £6 billion, at private providers and prison ships instead of tackling the real problem: the outstanding backlog she has created. She gives no thought to the trauma and stress that has caused incidents such as that at the Park Inn in my constituency and led to reported suicides of those stuck waiting under her incompetence.

At Napier Barracks, sharing spaces caused the spread of infectious disease and had a significant impact on mental health, so what safeguarding consultation has the Home Secretary done on the proposal to make total strangers share hotel rooms? How will she ensure that people from rival factions do not get put in a room together, which could be incredibly dangerous? Will she fast-track Afghans, Syrians, Eritreans, Sudanese and Iranians, who have a very high grant rate, and let them work and contribute, as they dearly want to do? Finally, will she accept that all she has done so far is make life significantly worse for some of the most vulnerable and brutalised people in the world?

Suella Braverman: I refute the characterisation the hon. Lady puts forward. I am proud of this Government's track record of welcoming hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people from across the globe over several years, through schemes that have offered them sanctuary. It is a track record of which we can be incredibly proud. The SNP's criticism is frankly astonishing, talking piously about wanting to provide more sanctuary despite doing virtually nothing to help. As we have said before, there are almost as many contingency hotels in Kensington as there are in the whole of Scotland. The truth is that the SNP is all talk and no action; until it gets real, I really must question its seriousness on this subject.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary. This is progress, and I hope it will accelerate at pace. However, I ask her to investigate a recent incident, a boat crossing where it was alleged that the French border force co-operated with the British Border Force, but in so doing escorted a

boat from French territorial waters to the British Border Force. I assume this is not the kind of co-operation she was alluding to earlier.

Suella Braverman: I will look into the incident to which my hon. Friend refers, but on the whole we are seeing improvement and very positive collaboration with our colleagues in France. For example, for the first time we now have embedded Border Force officials working side by side with their French counterparts, and the French are preventing more crossings than previously. There is a long way to go, but there is some improvement.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I ask about those who are seeking sanctuary, as the Home Secretary said? Uganda has just passed the most virulently and appallingly homophobic legislation, which outlaws not only homosexual sex, but promoting homosexuality or using one's premises to be used for homosexuality. Some 34 countries in Africa have made homosexuality illegal. If somebody comes to the UK by whatever means, lands on these shores and seeks asylum because they are Ugandan and because of their sexuality, will she grant them sanctuary?

Suella Braverman: Every application for asylum is determined on its own merits, in conjunction with consideration of human rights laws, international conventions and our domestic laws. Depending on the circumstances of the case, all applications for asylum are considered.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): If we reduced the waiting time from, say, a year to three months when making a decision on an illegal migrant, would that not cut the accommodation and other public service costs by three quarters and relieve a lot of the pressure? What is a reasonable time to come to a conclusion on whether someone is illegal and should not stay, or is welcome here and can get a job?

Suella Braverman: That is why I am encouraged by the progress we are making on our initial decision backlog, cases preceding last summer where people have been waiting for many months and in some cases years for a decision on their asylum application. It is essential that we bear down on that backlog, shorten the time that people are waiting for a decision and fundamentally reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): If the Home Secretary's approach were cruel but effective, it would at least be effective. If it were generous and well-meaning, but was accidentally leading to too many people coming here, it would at least have the merit of being generous. But her entire approach has been both cruel and hopelessly, woefully ineffective. When she comes here to make a statement and the reality is that the backlog is actually increasing, why should anyone watching have any confidence that she has a grip on this situation?

Suella Braverman: As I said, we have set out the progress that we have made on all aspects of the plan. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he should consult his constituents, because the vast majority of the British people support the Government's plan to stop the boats.

They back the Government in tackling illegal migration, and they want to see a response. I only wish that he would get behind them, too.

Jack Breerton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Increasing capacity for deportation and processing overseas is key for dealing with illegal migration. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what more is being done, in addition to Rwanda, to increase that capacity?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the processing of asylum claims is fundamental to bearing down on the backlog and reducing the number of people accommodated in hotels, which costs us £6 million a day right now. That is why I am very pleased that we have increased the number of caseworkers making those decisions and improved and made the process more efficient and speedier, so that we can make progress in bearing down on the asylum backlog, ensure that we save money for the taxpayer, and, ultimately, fix the challenge of illegal migration.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I take the Home Secretary back to the point about Afghan asylum seekers made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss)? As my hon. Friend said, the latest ONS figures show that only 108 people have been resettled under pathways 1, 2 and 3 since the fall of Kabul nearly two years ago. At the same time, 8,429 Afghans arrived in the UK by small boats in the year ending March 2023, as compared with 2,466 in the previous year. Can the Home Secretary not see that the absence of functioning safe and legal routes means that many eligible Afghans to whom the United Kingdom owes a debt of honour, including war veterans, feel that they have no choice but to use small boats to get here? Can she not acknowledge that Home Office intransigence on the Afghan schemes is pushing vulnerable Afghans—some of them veterans, as I say—to come here by small boats?

Suella Braverman: I disagree. I am very proud that a high number of Afghans have been resettled in and welcomed to the United Kingdom between 2015 and 2022. Almost 50,000 people have been resettled or relocated; more than 21,000 of them went through the Afghan schemes—the ACRS and ARAP—and more than 28,000 went through established resettlement schemes relating to other countries. I think that that is a good track record. There is a high number of people coming from those countries where there are troubles. The simple truth is this: there is never a good reason to pay a people-smuggling gang to embark on a lethal journey and take an illegal crossing over the channel to get to the UK.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome this real progress on gripping the problem of illegal small-boat crossings, but does the Home Secretary share my alarm that 70 Labour MPs signed a letter to stop the deportation of foreign criminals, some of whom went on to commit serious further offences?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. That says it all about Labour party policy: quick to campaign against common-sense measures to deport dangerous foreign criminals; slow to support

[*Suella Braverman*]

our measures to stop the boats. I am still waiting for the apology, and I will keep her updated on my progress on that front.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware of what happened last week in Whitechapel in my constituency and in Westminster. It was all over the press: asylum seekers were dumped by Clearsprings, the agency that her Government have appointed. She is spending £7 million a day, yet these people were left in the streets because the accommodation was not suitable. The local authority and I have sought information so that we can work with the Home Office and the agency to ensure that the process is done properly so that the far right does not target our community, as has happened in the past. The Home Secretary has failed to get a grip. The examples we have experienced—people sleeping rough in the streets because she is paying companies that are not providing the accommodation—are scandalous. She should be ashamed of that company's record. She should take the contract off it and give it to agencies that can accommodate people in our communities, otherwise, she will be responsible for creating unrest in local communities up and down the country.

Suella Braverman: As I announced, we are making progress on delivering alternative and more appropriate accommodation for asylum seekers. Those under our care are made appropriate offers of accommodation, and it is right, fair and reasonable that we maximise the accommodation within legal limits so that we get value for money for the taxpayer and offer asylum seekers a safe form of accommodation.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. We saw the consequences of illegal immigration last week when 40 asylum seekers refused to share rooms in a hotel in Pimlico, in my constituency. I thank local Councillors Jim Glen, Ed Pitt Ford and Jacqui Wilkinson, who worked with me to liaise with the Home Office and the council to ensure that the matter was resolved quickly. Will the Home Secretary confirm whether Westminster City Council was informed that the hotel was to be used, as the leader of the council has claimed it was not? Will she also meet me to discuss that incident and whether central London hotels are suitable to house asylum seekers in this way, as they tend to be much smaller and more expensive for the British taxpayer?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work for her local constituents in handling this challenging matter. I am cognisant of the fact that there is a very high number of asylum seekers in her constituency. The individuals in question were properly notified of the changes to their accommodation and were offered appropriate accommodation at all times. Our contractors work closely with the local authorities that are supporting asylum seekers all over the country. I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend, and if I cannot the Immigration Minister will; we will definitely liaise with her more closely.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Prime Minister has today made a migration statement to the media off the back of half-baked statistics—not even

based on the usual full quarter—and the Home Secretary is too busy on manoeuvres for the Tory party leadership to do her job properly. Originally, both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister promised that they would clear the backlog by the end of this year, but that definition has now somehow cunningly shifted to clearing the legacy backlog. Is that change anything to do with the fact that less than 20% of cases have been cleared so far this year?

Suella Braverman: With respect, the hon. Gentleman really needs to pay more attention. When the Prime Minister set out our plan, he made the goal clear: to reduce the initial decision backlog, which stood at about 90,000 at the time of his statement and has come down by a considerable amount as of today. We are making steady progress. If we continue on this trajectory and with the measures we are putting in place, we are on track to eliminate the backlog, and I look forward to updating the hon. Gentleman when we do so.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): A number of my constituents found the demonstration outside the Pimlico hotel quite peculiar; I think if these were genuine refugees, they would be very grateful that the British taxpayer was paying for them to be put up in a hotel at all, not demanding en-suite singles.

The situation with the Novotel in Ipswich continues to have a negative impact on the town's economy. Ipswich Town football club has just been promoted, which is good news and the hospitality sector is excited about the promotion, but it means that the requirement for hotel accommodation has increased and the need to get the Novotel back into use as a proper hotel to support the town is more vital than ever. Will the Home Secretary get close to giving us a timeline, outlining when hotels such as the Novotel will be put back to their proper use?

Suella Braverman: Our goal is to significantly reduce the use of hotels for asylum seekers. That is why we have announced several sites around the country where we are rolling out bespoke accommodation that is much more appropriate for asylum seekers, much fairer to the taxpayer, and better all round. I cannot give my hon. Friend the timeline that he wants, but I am very encouraged by the sites and the barges that we are going to be rolling out to accommodate asylum seekers in the near future.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It is not just that the Government have broken the immigration system: in so doing, they have destroyed trust within local authorities and communities through their heavy-handed and chaotic approach to placing asylum seekers around the country, and now they are haemorrhaging taxpayers' money. The Liberal Democrats have said time and again that the Home Secretary should scrap the unworkable, expensive and immoral Rwanda scheme and spend that money instead on recruiting people into the Home Office to process claims and reduce the backlog. Why on earth is she refusing to take that pragmatic, sensible approach?

Suella Braverman: I am very disappointed by the tone that the hon. Lady adopts when talking about Rwanda. I have been to Rwanda and met our partners there. I am very grateful for, and encouraged and impressed by, the co-operation that our partners in Rwanda are extending

to the United Kingdom in helping us with the very challenging problem of illegal migration. I am afraid that the hon. Lady's views are based on outdated and frankly ignorant assumptions about Rwanda, and I really encourage her to review them.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary and the fall in the number of people arriving illegally, but I would like to question her further on her statement on the use of RAF Scampton, which she described as fairer and more cost-effective. Who is it fairer to? Is it fairer to the asylum seekers themselves, left in a remote rural location? Is it fairer to the many veterans in my constituency who are very concerned about the heritage, or is it fairer to the wider Lincolnshire population who may now miss out on a £300 million investment in the Scampton site?

Suella Braverman: I put on record my gratitude to everybody in the local community of RAF Scampton. I understand that it is a challenging situation for those communities and, indeed, the local MPs who are doing a very good job of standing up for their constituents. The challenge we face is that we have 40,000 people in hotels all over the country, costing the taxpayer £6 million a day—that needs to stop. We therefore need to identify and deliver alternative accommodation, and we are looking at a wide variety of sites and locations all over the country. Asylum seekers will be housed on these new sites. They will receive all appropriate support. As we bear down on our asylum backlog, they will eventually move on and, when we pass our Illegal Migration Bill, if they do not have a right to be here, they will be removed to a safe country.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary confirm that her own Department estimates that the measures within the Illegal Migration Bill could cost the taxpayer up to £6 billion?

Suella Braverman: What I can confirm is that the taxpayer is currently paying £3 billion a year to service this problem—£6 million a day—and therefore I know that our Bill, combined with our partnership with Rwanda that will help us to stop the boats, will save the taxpayer huge amounts of money once we stop illegal migration.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I support the Home Secretary in what is a very difficult task ahead of her, but I disagree with her comments on Rwanda. There are legitimate concerns about that country, and people in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo claim that Rwanda is funding a terrorist organisation, the March 23 movement, which is destabilising north-east Congo and resulting in the deaths of many Congolese citizens. I would very much like the Home Secretary to recognise that and explain to the House what she is doing, in conjunction with the Foreign Office, to ensure that this unacceptable behaviour by Rwanda towards Congo is stopped.

Suella Braverman: Having visited Rwanda very recently and having met some of the migrants who have been resettled successfully in Rwanda from countries in the region, I have confidence in our scheme with Rwanda for the resettlement of asylum seekers and other migrants.

Rwanda has a strong track record of supporting resettlement. Most importantly, our partnership with Rwanda has been exhaustively tested in the High Court and found to be lawful and compliant with international law. We are now awaiting the judgment in the Court of Appeal and we will review its decision when it emerges.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The hostile environment is the United Kingdom Government's attempt to make the UK's immigration system as cruel, inhumane and draconian as possible, placing refugees and asylum seekers in what are essentially floating internment camps. Given the situation in Manston and Napier led to overcrowding, appalling conditions and the worst spread of diphtheria in decades, can the Home Secretary reassure the House that those conditions will not be repeated on these barges or at the recently identified MOD sites?

Suella Braverman: The new sites that are being rolled out will obviously meet all the requisite standards for accommodation for asylum seekers. The asylum seekers will be provided with the necessary support—health and otherwise—so that they are appropriately supported. That is our legal duty, and we will comply with it.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): We are still accepting the majority of asylum claims from a number of safe countries, in stark contrast with many other European nations, which reject a far higher proportion of claims from those same countries. While we all want to reduce the asylum case backlog, does the Home Secretary agree that that must be done properly and that we cannot merely accept claims in a cynical attempt to drive down that backlog quickly?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Unlike the Opposition, we will not grant an amnesty to people in our system. It is important that all cases are considered on their individual merits, but that we take a robust approach to applications that makes it clear that, if someone comes here illegally, they will be detained, removed and not entitled to a life in the UK.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This morning, I met with the Law Society and it tells me that France receives three times the number of illegal migrants into their country compared with the UK. It also tells me that France is three times faster in processing the applications. Can the Home Secretary tell me why the Government are failing so badly compared with France? Does she think there are lessons to be learned from France?

Suella Braverman: I am grateful to my French counterpart in the French Government for their very good co-operation on this challenge. It is clear that we have a common challenge. The illegal migration problem that many European countries are facing is similar to the one we are facing. Almost all my European counterparts are grappling with this issue, because we are facing a global migration crisis. That is why it requires a collaborative approach, and that is why I am pleased that the Prime Minister has been working hard to achieve consensus among European allies.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In this month of all months—Pride month—I want to follow-up on the answer that the Home Secretary gave to my hon.

[Stella Creasy]

Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). We know that Uganda has introduced a law that brings in the death penalty for what it terms “aggravated homosexuality”—goodness knows how that would go down in Soho. Is she saying that, if a Ugandan was on a boat and came here on a boat, she would deport them to Rwanda when, in 2021, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, it was detaining LGBT people and claiming they did not represent Rwandan values? Has she even read her own Home Office equality impact assessment that details the illegal treatment? Will she rule out today deporting any Ugandans to Rwanda from the UK?

Suella Braverman: I ask the hon. Member whether she has even read the High Court judgment that looks extensively at our agreement with Rwanda. It looks in detail at our arrangements with Rwanda and concludes emphatically that our agreement is lawful and that, when it comes, for example, to article 3—the kind of claims she is talking about—there is no issue with the treatment of asylum seekers if they were to be in Rwanda. So I encourage her to do her homework before she makes gross misassumptions about Rwanda.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Home Secretary keeps talking about achieving value for money for the taxpayer. Has she made a calculation of what the net gain to the Treasury would be if asylum seekers were granted the right to work? They would then be able to pay for their own accommodation and pay taxes into the system, instead of taking money out.

Suella Braverman: I disagree with the hon. Member’s ingenious proposal because the reality is that the right to work would act as a magnet. It would act as a pull factor in this very complex issue that we are trying to stop. We want to disincentivise people from coming here, not incentivise them with the right to work.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Local residents and I are very concerned about the Home Secretary’s proposals to house 200 asylum seekers in the Stradey Park hotel in my constituency. Will she agree to meet me to hear about our concerns and to explain what she is doing to increase the pace of clearing the backlog of 160,000 undetermined asylum claims, so that those from safe countries can be returned and there will be no need for her to consider using the Stradey Park hotel?

Suella Braverman: I can give the hon. Lady some advice for free. The best way to stop the use of hotels is to stop the boats, and I encourage her to back our legislation, which will enable us to stop the boats and stop the use of hotels.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I want to raise the use of divisive language by the Home Secretary throughout this statement on immigration, and a few weeks ago when she described multiculturalism as a “recipe for communal disaster”. As a product of multiculturalism myself and representing Luton North, a town proudly multicultural, let me tell her that she is wrong. There are thousands like me from multicultural families. Does she really want to deny our right to exist? Is not the truth

that the use of such vile rhetoric is just a cynical ploy to turn people against each other, rather than on those truly responsible for the backlog, the boats and the needless deaths—this Conservative Government?

Suella Braverman: I prefer to focus on the problem and the solutions to the problem. The problem we have here—one on which the British public overwhelmingly support the Government’s plans—is to stop the boats. The Leader of the Opposition does not even really want to talk about it, but this Prime Minister and this Government have delivered a plan, and are delivering on our plan to stop the boats and to deliver for the British people.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Home Secretary has said today that she wants to use the armed forces estate and barracks. Does she understand what condition they are in? Does she understand what the additional costs are going to be to repair them to make them habitable? How much will that add to the already £6 billion that she is spending on this new Bill? How will that affect our hospitals, our schools and our children’s education?

Suella Braverman: The answer is yes. I have been working flat out with the Prime Minister on identifying alternative sites and rolling out alternative accommodation on those sites. We are very much aware of the particular nature and characteristics of the different sites, and of the needs that their occupants will have. Those needs will be met, and people will be housed in a humane, appropriate and cost-effective way.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Home Secretary claimed in her statement that “the asylum initial decision backlog is down by 17,000”,

but the Home Office’s own statistics say there are now 173,000 initial decision cases, up from 161,000 in December. So will the Home Secretary admit the colossal scale and epic costs of her failures, running into hundreds of millions of pounds to the British taxpayer, and will she withdraw that incorrect claim?

Suella Braverman: As I said to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Gentleman really needs to listen more carefully to what the Prime Minister promised in his statement. We are on track to deliver on reducing the backlog of initial decisions and the legacy backlog. Those are decisions that have been waiting in the system up until July or June last year. Those are the backlogs that we are working on, and we are making good progress on eliminating it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Home Secretary’s statement on the boats mentions the need to acquire two further prison boats, but the Prime Minister is refusing to say where those will be located. Have there been any relevant discussions with local authorities, and does the Home Secretary plan to recruit more staff to fix the broken immigration system and its 172,000 backlog?

Suella Braverman: Our new sites will be rolled out following and in conjunction with close consultation with the relevant authorities—local authorities, health

authorities and education authorities—so that the occupants receive the appropriate care. We have doubled the number of caseworkers in our asylum case working team, which is why we are making progress on bearing down on our backlog.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Children who have been brought into this country from desperate situations will bring with them not simply the trauma of events, but also the real physical ailments that are part and parcel of fleeing from persecution—the Secretary of State has referred to that. Will she outline how their needs can possibly be met by the proposed housing arrangement, and will she allow for the fact that exceptional family circumstances deserve to be part of that key family consideration?

Suella Braverman: Asylum seekers, whether they are accommodated in the UK or relocated to a safe country such as Rwanda, will always receive the appropriate level of support to which they are entitled. Where we have legal duties, we abide by them; and where we have a duty of care to asylum seekers, we meet it.

Yvette Cooper *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Ordinarily, points of order are taken only after all statements and urgent questions are finished. However, I will take a point of order from the shadow Home Secretary if it relates specifically to the statement that has just been delivered.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is specific to a sentence in the Home Secretary's statement and her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). It is a factual issue. She said that

“the asylum initial decision backlog is down by 17,000”

whereas Home Office official statistics say that the asylum initial backlog is now over 170,000, up from 160,000 in December. The facts are that the asylum initial decision backlog is up by over 10,000, not down by 17,000. I know that there was a lot of nonsense in what the Home Secretary said, and sometimes it is hard to know where to start, but this is about the facts given

to Parliament. Will she now withdraw the incorrect statement that she has made, because her facts are wrong?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let us remember that this is not a continuation of a debate; it is a point of order to the Chair, and it is not a matter for the Chair. The way in which facts are presented here in the Chamber is entirely—*[Interruption.]* Who is shouting at me? The way in which facts are presented in the Chamber is entirely a matter for the Minister, or any other Member who is presenting the facts. If the Home Secretary wishes to say anything further to the point of order—*[Interruption.]* She does not. *[Interruption.]* No, that is enough. This is not a matter for the Chair and we cannot continue the debate. It is a matter of debate and interpretation of statistics. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for drawing her concerns to the attention of the House, the Chair and, indeed, the Home Secretary.

Sir Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think this is a matter for the Chair. Will you confirm that the ministerial code states that a Minister must always present the facts as they believe them to be true? However, sometimes, inadvertently, Ministers make mistakes, and there is a proper process for correcting the record. It may be that the Home Secretary, when she gets back to her office, will realise that the Home Office statistics are not quite as she has presented them to the House. If so, there are means of correcting the record, and you can confirm that to her.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is a point of order for the Chair, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for it. There are indeed means of correction, and I think all Ministers in the House are well aware of that. Indeed, it is open to any Member to correct the record if they consider that a mistake has been made.

Sir Chris Bryant: No.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I take a point of order from the hon. Gentleman and he wants to argue with me! It is not a matter of argument; anyone can correct the record. However, what he said is absolutely correct: when a Minister is delivering complicated statistics provided by a Department, and it transpires that there is a mistake—I have no idea whether on this occasion there is such a discrepancy—there is a procedure for correcting that.

Covid 19 Inquiry: Judicial Review

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have a short statement to make about sub judice, which is important in connection with this statement. Some of the matters covered by the statement are currently being considered by the courts, but given the national importance of the issue, Mr Speaker is exercising his ability to waive the sub judice resolution in order to allow references to them, both during proceedings on this statement and on an ongoing basis.

5.7 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I am grateful for permission to make a statement on the Government's decision to seek a judicial review on a specific point of law relating to the public inquiry on the covid pandemic. The whole House will recognise that, as you so eloquently said, Madam Deputy Speaker, on any issue that is before the courts, a Minister needs to act and speak with extreme sensitivity. We fully respect the difficult role that judges need to perform, and I appreciate that the conventions of this place are designed to ensure that we do not make their role—the sober and detailed consideration of facts of law by those qualified to do that—any harder. I am sure that the House will respect the fact that, for those reasons, it would be inappropriate for me to debate the fine details of this case.

Notwithstanding that, we felt that there was very real public interest in the broader issue of why the Government would take the unusual step of asking for a judicial review on a point of technical difference between the Government and an inquiry that the Government have established. That being the case, we felt, as ever, that the matter should be raised in this House.

The Government fully support the vital work of the inquiry, which seeks to establish the facts, and the lessons to be learned from the response to the pandemic. It is right that the inquiry on covid-19 be comprehensive and rigorous. It is being chaired by Baroness Hallett, an eminent former Court of Appeal judge. In this dispute, the guidance of the courts is sought on a narrow and technical point of law. It does not touch on the Government's confidence in the inquiry. Nor does it in any way affect the Government's intention to continue full co-operation with the inquiry. To date, the Cabinet Office alone has submitted 55,000 documents to the inquiry. We will continue to provide any and all covid-related materials requested.

We are grateful for the work being undertaken by the inquiry chair and her team. The pandemic was one of the most difficult times for our country in living memory—so many people lost so much. The inquiry's task is challenging. It must have the support of us all in conducting its work, and in bringing forward its conclusions in a timely way. The core point of principle that is raised is whether there are limits to the power of the inquiry to compel information and documents to be produced.

Specifically, the question raised by the compulsory notice under the Inquiries Act 2005 that was served on the Cabinet Office is whether the inquiry has the power to compel production of documents and messages that are unambiguously irrelevant to the inquiry's work, including personal communications and matters unconnected to the Government's handling of covid. The notice received

is bound to include a range of material of that nature. It covered a two-year period and a range of documents, including WhatsApp messages relating to my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and a former special adviser.

I reiterate that all material that is relevant to the inquiry's work has been and will be provided to the inquiry; likewise, material about which there might be real questions about its relevance to that work. There is no question but that all internal discussions on covid, in any form, requested by the inquiry will be made transparently available to it. What has been redacted, and so not provided in response to the notice, is material that the Cabinet Office considers to be clearly and unambiguously irrelevant to that work. That material includes, for example, communications about purely personal matters and about other aspects of the Government's policy and work which have nothing to do with covid. It is that material, and that material alone, that is subject to judicial review. Hon. Members wanting to see more detail of our concerns may be interested in our letter to the inquiry, sent last Thursday, which is available on the Government's website and a copy of which I will deposit in the House of Commons Library.

As in any such dispute, there are two sides to this debate. Baroness Hallett, as I have said, is a highly respected senior judge and inquiry chair in whom the Government have great confidence. The inquiry has made relevant statements regarding the Government's position on its website, to which I draw the House's attention. The inquiry will no doubt be making further statements. Above all, as I understand it, the inquiry believes that it should be for the inquiry alone to judge the relevance of the material requested. We respect that position and, as I have indicated, the Cabinet Office has provided material about which there might be a dispute.

Where we differ with the inquiry is only in relation to material that is considered to be clearly and unambiguously irrelevant, and that is considered to be so after careful checking. This is a genuine and sincere difference of opinion on which we are seeking the guidance of the courts. I do, however, want to assure the House that the Government have explored with the inquiry ways to bridge the gap between those sincerely held but differing views, and we will continue to do so. We appreciate the patience and goodwill shown by the inquiry as we have sought to identify a mutually acceptable solution.

We have also sought to assure the inquiry on the nature of the redactions of non-relevant material from the information requested in the section 21 notice and how those would operate. The process deployed to ascertain and redact unambiguously irrelevant material from that information is as follows. Witnesses are required to identify any material that may contain potentially irrelevant information to the inquiry, with guidance from the counsel team supporting them. That is then reviewed by the counsel team, who identify any material that is unambiguously irrelevant. The counsel team discusses it with the witness in case there is any context or detail of which they may not be aware. The review by the counsel team includes the assessment of a King's Counsel instructed by the Cabinet Office. No decision to redact material as unambiguously irrelevant has been or will be taken by a witness acting alone.

These redactions will all be kept under review such that if the scope of the chair's inquiry changes, she will be able to receive the material that becomes potentially relevant. I would like to reiterate that this is a matter of legal principle that will have an impact on this Government and all future Governments. This is absolutely not related to one individual's personal information.

In conclusion, I would like to again issue my thanks to the inquiry chair and her team for the important work they are undertaking. The Government have only embarked on this course after serious consideration. It is with regret that we felt the judicial review had to be brought forward. We are very aware that it is sometimes in the nature of government that difficult decisions have to be taken, knowing that in the short term they may of course be criticised or misinterpreted, but which we believe are important for the country in the longer term. Whereas it is entirely right that any material in any way related to covid is available to the inquiry, we believe there is value to challenge and debate inside Government being unclouded by the knowledge that other discussions could be disclosed regardless of their relevance to any future inquiry. As such, we believe this request for guidance is necessary.

Finally, I would like to make it absolutely clear to all those directly affected and bereaved by covid that the Government will do absolutely nothing that we believe impedes the vital work of the inquiry, to give them the answers they deserve and that the country needs to ensure that we learn the lessons of covid. I commend the statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow spokesperson.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank the Minister for an advance copy of his statement. This weekend I walked the length of the covid memorial wall on the banks of the Thames just opposite this building. Every heart on that wall symbolises a life lost to covid. Every heart represents a family who lost a loved one—a mother, father, sibling, friend or colleague—to that terrible disease. That is what the covid inquiry is about: preventing a repeat of that same tragedy, which cost so many lives and still affects so many of us; and answering the questions that so many families still have.

This week, we all watched with embarrassment—I am sure that Government Members on the Benches behind the Minister feel the same privately—as the Cabinet Office, the Department responsible for upholding transparency in government, briefed journalists that taxpayers would be picking up yet another legal bill to pay for the Prime Minister's ploy to obstruct the covid inquiry. We need more information: public inquiries are a core ministerial responsibility in the Cabinet Office; and vital lessons are learned through inquiries, which save lives in the future. By undermining and challenging the inquiry, the Government could undermine not only trust but public safety. Then, there is the cost: hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money on legal fees.

May I ask the Minister a few straightforward questions? How much has his Department projected the judicial review to cost? Does he agree with his Minister's assessment that the review will "probably" fail? Does he think that time would be better spent on complying with the

inquiry, handing over the information and learning lessons to prevent another pandemic, rather than this infighting?

Can the Minister confirm media reports that his Department's lawyers have threatened to pull the plug on the taxpayer-subsidised legal defence fund for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)? Does he agree that Ministers must be held to the highest standards of transparency and openness? In that spirit, what guidance has he given to other Cabinet Ministers about handing over WhatsApp messages to the inquiry? Will we be back here again?

How many inquiry-imposed deadlines for evidence submissions have been missed to date? Can the Minister confirm whether the Prime Minister has already handed over his WhatsApp messages to the inquiry in full? Can he confirm how many devices have been handed over by the former Prime Minister?

The Minister claims that the Government have handed over 55,000 documents to the covid inquiry. I commend civil servants for working through the night to look at them, but his Department previously admitted that well over 20 million documents could be relevant. What criteria have been used to determine whether evidence will be suppressed?

It comes down to trust. We need to be able to trust the process and the determination of what is relevant and what is not. People's trust in this Government is severely weakened, and the judicial review is undermining it further.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady started where I ended, and she is right that the focus of the inquiry must be the people who have been affected and bereaved and the lessons that this country needs to learn. I commend her for her walk over the weekend. It is harrowing to see that memorial and to remember what it represents.

Government is tough. It is easier, in many ways, to be in Opposition. They do it very well on the Opposition Benches, and I am sure that they will get even more practice over a long period of time, but in government we have to take very difficult decisions. It does not take a genius to realise that the decision we felt we had to make regarding a judicial review may be misinterpreted and criticised, but we have to look at the long-term consequences for this and future Governments. There are important—albeit technical—matters of law, and we need guidance to ascertain how this and future inquiries should operate.

The hon. Lady asked a series of questions, one of which was on cost. I cannot give her an exact number, but I am delighted that, from what we have heard from the courts, the judicial review looks to be heard very soon and in a timely fashion, which I would welcome for a number of reasons. I will certainly not get into our view of the case. That would be pertinent; it is before the courts, which must look into that and take their own view.

I will go through all the points the hon. Lady made. There is a long tradition, under all Administrations, that Ministers should be provided with support for their legal fees and for their work to support and help the inquiries that are established—that is the right thing to do.

[Jeremy Quin]

The hon. Lady is right that we have already passed over some 55,000 items. To counsel a note of caution about the hon. Lady's reference to 2 million documents, those undertaking the inquiry have made it clear that they do not want to be flooded with information that is not relevant to the inquiry, and therefore we go through the process of trying to ensure that they get all the information that they require that is covid related. The point of issue is only material that is unambiguously not relevant to the inquiry. We go through a process, which I have set out to the hon. Lady and to the House.

I reiterate that we have a great deal of confidence in the inquiry. We know that those undertaking the inquiry are absolutely assiduous in their work, but we feel that there is a technical point of law on which we need to have guidance from the courts, and that is what we are pursuing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chairman of the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): The problem is that if Government business is conducted by means of WhatsApp, public inquiries will express an interest in reading what was transacted. My right hon. Friend is well aware of what a statutory public inquiry is and how that is established under the Inquiries Act 2005. Indeed, he referenced section 21 of that Act, which makes it clear that it is for the inquiry chair to decide what is required. When he says that the question is about material that might be “unambiguously” irrelevant, surely it is for the chair to determine that. It was spurious nonsense to hear some Ministers witter on about personal information about their children being disclosed—that is not the case. Nor is it my understanding that any of this material will be subject to a freedom of information request. May I ask my right hon. Friend why, sadly, the Government have chosen this course of action?

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend, but in my recollection the Act refers to related material. However, we will not dwell on that as it is a matter for the courts.

I have some sympathy with my hon. Friend regarding WhatsApp messages. Such messages should not be used for taking policy decisions; those decisions should be taken formally and through the proper course. Any WhatsApp information presented will cover all manner of things between individuals and may well include illness, family or other personal issues. That is simply a statement of fact.

I think it is absolutely vital that we have guidance on this technical point. When other inquiries reported, we were perhaps in an era before a whole range of means of communication, including WhatsApp. I would point out to my hon. Friend that while WhatsApp has got the attention, the technical point of law applies to all manner of communications, not simply WhatsApp, about what is unambiguously irrelevant or what is relevant, and the process will determine that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. As has been said, this is a serious and important inquiry for all of us whose lives were impacted by covid, particularly those who lost loved ones.

This matter is one of the most bizarre things that we have dealt with recently—and this has been a wild few years. What is the point in having an inquiry if those carrying it out are not confident that they have all the relevant information? Actually, the inquiry is not being given the information; the information is being given to the Government, and the Cabinet Office is then filtering it and passing it on to the inquiry. If those conducting the inquiry, which the Government set up, are asking for this information, then they should be given it.

May I ask the Minister about the group of people who are looking at the information? Who are the counsel team that are involved in considering the relevance of the information alongside the witnesses? Are any politicians who are, or were formerly, in the Cabinet, other than the witnesses themselves, involved in the decision making about whether the information is relevant? How can we be clear and confident that this inquiry will have all the relevant information if we do not even know who is taking the decisions or how the decisions are being taken? As for the information that we do have, we have had to pull it out of the Government.

We have talked before about the breaches of the ministerial code, and the fact that it was entirely in the gift of the Prime Minister to decide whether or not a person was investigated in relation to the code. Once again, the Cabinet Office is holding something in its own grip and refusing to allow the rest of us any say in, or any look at, what is happening. Who watches the watchers in this regard? Who is considering whether the transparency that is being shown is actually being shown properly?

Any answers that the Minister can provide will be much appreciated.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman is showing off his Latin! But let me respond to the hon. Lady's important question about who is keeping an eye on this and who is running it. I want to give her an absolute assurance—she asked for one, and it was reasonable for her to do so—that there is no political involvement in the process of establishing what is and is not relevant information, and what is unambiguously irrelevant. That is a process undertaken by lawyers, by the counsel team, with a KC involved. It starts with witnesses being required to say, “These are the materials that may be in scope”. They must then go through the process, initially with the counsel team and with an overview from the KC; but no politicians are involved. The hon. Lady described this process as “wild”, but I do not think it is. I think it is quite narrow and technical, but I also think it is important for the future conduct of such inquiries, and for this inquiry, that we know exactly where the law stands.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to the House, bravely, to defend the Government's position. Is it not the case

that the courts will be very reluctant to become involved in second-guessing the decision making of Baroness Hallett, and will have to decide that she has got things very wrong indeed before they wish to intervene? This prompts, does it not, the question in the old wartime adage: “Is your journey really necessary?” In that spirit, I must press my right hon. Friend and ask him whether he is ensuring that all manner of expedition is taking place. Will there be a very early hearing in the divisional court? Those concerned—and we have all heard their heart-rending stories—cannot wait a moment longer for the resolution of these important matters.

Jeremy Quin: As my right hon. and learned Friend says, the chair of the inquiry is both experienced in inquiries and an eminent former Court of Appeal judge. I have alluded to arguments that have been presented, and Members may well wish to look them up.

This is a matter for the courts to determine, but I entirely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend that it is something we want to advance at the swiftest possible pace—and, incidentally, while doing so we will continue to supply documents to the inquiry. That process continues, and I hope the inquiry will feel able to continue its vital work, but it is important for the matter to be resolved in the courts as soon as possible. I am pleased to inform my right hon. and learned Friend that, according to my understanding, the courts have indicated that we can use an expedited process and have a divisional court hearing, which is expected to be held on or shortly after 30 June. I am very grateful to them for doing that so swiftly.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The Minister has not answered the question about why he thinks the Government should decide what is and is not relevant, rather than the chair of the inquiry. He has said how well qualified she is; will he please now answer that question?

Jeremy Quin: It has always been the case in respect of inquiries set up by the Government, when it comes to Ministers and former Ministers, that the Government have undertaken that role, although it was not a process governed by the Inquiries Act 2005. That was, I believe, the case with the Chilcot inquiry, and that is what the Government do: they help to put the information together and to ensure that all relevant information is presented. I do not believe there is a precedent for an invitation to provide information on quite such a wide basis—all information over a two-year period, involving a certain means of communication—so this is a new situation, but what the Government are doing is consistent with what Governments have, I believe, always done in these circumstances.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Can I urge the Minister to build not on the legal aspects of this statement but on the discussions with the inquiry? How can the Government build trust with the inquiry—it has a strong position; the Government have a different view—whether through mediation, legal teams meeting or reading rooms? What are the ways through to move this topic on?

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. Friend asks an excellent question, but I hope he will forgive me if I do not get into potential ways through. That would be a matter for

the Government to discuss directly with the inquiry, but I very much hope that a way can be found that avoids the court’s time on 30 June. If there is a way through, that would be warmly welcomed.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I urge the Government to think about the fact that so many people on all sides of the House are asking the same question: how can it be right for the Government to mark their own homework? How can it be right for the Government to decide what is relevant to the inquiry? Surely that is the job of the inquiry. Could the Minister please answer that question? We are all concerned that the Government are going to have the final say, and surely that is not correct.

Jeremy Quin: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that this is not an issue on which the Government are marking their own homework—absolutely not. Some 55,000 documents have been delivered to date, with everything that is covid-related being surrendered and provided to the inquiry on its request. The only issue of contention is information that we believe to be unambiguously irrelevant. I genuinely believe that all the information will be provided to the inquiry that it needs to ensure that the handling of covid in this country is fully and properly understood, and that it will be marking the Government’s homework.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A vast study published today by Johns Hopkins University and widely reported in the press has found that the draconian methods used in lockdowns by various countries including our own had negligible effects on mortality and might have saved only 1,700 lives. This inquiry is therefore probably the most important public inquiry that we have had in recent years. It is absolutely essential for our credibility that everything is given to the inquiry, and there can be no perception that anything is being hidden. The Minister talks about personal behaviour as being irrelevant, but the then Prime Minister lost his job not because of the decisions he took on lockdowns but because of his alleged personal behaviour. My strong advice to the Government, for whatever it is worth, is: let everything hang out and just co-operate with the inquiry; let it have what it wants and let us get to the truth.

Jeremy Quin: I hear what my right hon. Friend says. I would not want there to be any perception that we are not ensuring that the inquiry has all the information that it requires. We believe that that does not need to include information that is clearly and unambiguously irrelevant, although I know what he is saying.

Sir Chris Bryant: To be honest, this just feels like a terrible fool’s errand. As the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), said earlier, section 21 of the Inquiries Act 2005 is absolutely unambiguous. Let me introduce that word into the conversation: unambiguous. It states that the chairman may require a person

“to produce any other thing in his custody or under his control”.

It also states:

“A claim by a person that...it is not reasonable in all the circumstances to require him to comply...is to be determined by the chairman”.

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

It is absolutely unambiguous. The chairman is only required to

“consider the public interest in the information”

being provided. So I cannot see where this is going to lead, unambiguously, other than to a dead end. Can the Minister confirm that the chairman has been very specific in asking only for covid-related WhatsApp groups, not all the WhatsApp messages on anyone’s phone? Has the chairman asked for the present Prime Minister’s, as well as the previous Prime Minister’s, WhatsApp messages in those groups? And has the former Prime Minister’s former telephone, with its former WhatsApp messages, also been provided to the Government? If not, when will it be provided?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate why I will not go into parsing the 2005 Act, which is a matter for the courts. There are two views, and the courts need to determine their interpretation of the Act and what it means. I can tell him that the request from the chair goes beyond the covid WhatsApp groups, so it is a broader swathe of information that will inevitably touch on information shared between individuals that may be personal in nature and may certainly relate to non-covid issues. Anything covid related goes to the inquiry.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Clearly the inquiry needs everything that is relevant, and clearly it does not need anything that is personal or unrelated, which should remain private. It is clearly very important that the public are able to trust the result of the inquiry, and it is clearly very important that the inquiry is done quickly so that we learn the lessons fast and so that people who have lost loved ones, or who have had ill health as a result of long covid, find out what happened, but this is not the first public inquiry to include sensitive information. Presumably the Government have an almost infinite amount of information that they could provide, so they have to select that which is relevant. This has happened before, and no doubt it will happen again. How does it happen normally, and why is this particular case so different?

Jeremy Quin: The circumstances are different, and my understanding is that a wider amount of information has been required. I totally understand and respect where the chair is coming from in going for a wider request involving messages from two particular individuals over a two-year period, as well as other information. That is of a different nature from some historical inquiries, which is why there is a novel point of law on which the Government seek clarification of that technical issue.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Ever since the Supreme Court ruled that the Prorogation of Parliament by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was unlawful, successive Tory Governments have been very keen to restrict the right to judicial review for ordinary members of the public who want to challenge Government actions. Does this litigation indicate a new-found enthusiasm for judicial review? Will the Government consider repealing the Judicial Review and Courts Act 2022, or is judicial review just for those such as them?

Jeremy Quin: There is obviously a role for judicial review, and there has to be a role for judicial review. I have great respect for the learned judges who are required to opine on these technical points of law. It is not something the Government do lightly, as the hon. and learned Lady will appreciate. The Government established this inquiry, but we feel that, given the implications for this and future Governments, we need clarification from the courts on this point of law. I am glad they are there and are able to provide that clarification.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is obviously vital that lessons are learned, but they must be learned in a timely fashion. There was a great deal of press comment over the weekend about how, say, Sweden completed its inquiry in February 2022. On that note, I commend to the Minister and the House the joint report by the Health and Social Care Committee and the Science and Technology Committee on the lessons learned from covid, to which the Government have already responded, covering an awful lot of the same material, although Baroness Hallett will obviously consider further material.

Turning to the matter at hand, I understand that the Government want to defend and, indeed, test the legal principle, but I reiterate the urging of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) in asking the Minister to do everything he can to find a middle way through so we can avoid this JR proceeding.

Jeremy Quin: If we can find a way through without this, that would be helpful to all concerned. Everybody wants to get on with this inquiry, and, as I say, we will continue to deliver documents. I hope that we do not delay, in any way, the work of the inquiry while the courts determine on this technical point. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to his Committee’s inquiries, but there is a huge amount that needs to be covered. I recognise that the chair’s remit is very broad and that there is a lot of work that the chair and the inquiry will wish to do, but the quicker we can get answers to this, the better.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As I understand it, this inquiry was negotiated and consulted on, with its terms of reference agreed, before it got going. Yet, astonishingly, it is only once it starts doing its job—only when it starts asking for evidence—that this vital point of principle surfaces. I do not blame the Minister for sticking to his brief, but does he honestly think anyone in the public is going to buy this?

Jeremy Quin: This process started with the delivery of that section 21 notice; the earlier rule 9 notices were different in their construction. This is a wide request from the chair, which is perfectly legitimate, provided it is not including unambiguously irrelevant information—that is what we are focused on, only that. I must, once again, assert that every bit of information that is covid-related is not under any question at all—this is only about stuff that is unambiguously irrelevant.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I listened carefully to the Minister’s statement and I have never heard so much insulting verbiage. He says that “it should be for the inquiry alone to judge the relevance of the material”,

but then directly contradicts himself by saying that the Government are going to do it. He says he respects Baroness Hallett's position and then actively disrespects it by taking her inquiry to court. He then says that doing so

"does not touch the Government's confidence in the inquiry."

Has it occurred to him that it might just touch the public's confidence, both in this Government and in the inquiry itself, and that in so doing it is adding insult to injury to bereaved people? It is also undermining public safety in the future, because if we do not know that an inquiry such as this is going to get to the heart of the matter, what confidence can we ever have that the Government will learn the lessons when we face the next pandemic, as we surely will?

Jeremy Quin: The last thing this Government or I would wish to do, in any way, is undermine confidence in this inquiry. I was fulsome in my respect for the inquiry and its chair for good reason: Baroness Hallett is an eminent former Court of Appeal judge and has had experience of other inquiries. As I say, 55,000 documents have been delivered already and everything in relation to covid for which the inquiry asks will be delivered. The only issue is on this narrow point about information that is unambiguously irrelevant. That is the point on which we are seeking the insight of the courts.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Almost 227,000 people lost their lives to covid and in my borough 540 people died. Many of us personally lost loved ones. We have faced the trauma of loss and of reliving the horrors of covid when the partygate revelations involving the former Prime Minister but one came out into the public domain throughout the past year. We now face the obscene spectre of legal battles and delaying tactics employed by this Government, which serve to undermine the covid inquiry and delay justice for bereaved families. What does the Minister have to say to the bereaved families, who are horrified by and are in disbelief at the fact that public money is being used by the Government to obstruct the covid inquiry? Instead of delay, obstruction and cover-ups, is it not time that the Minister apologised and made sure that this inquiry took place immediately?

Jeremy Quin: Let me reassure the hon. Lady that the inquiry is ongoing and is doing its work. I have no doubt that it will be doing it assiduously and thoroughly. As I say, 55,000 documents have already been delivered to the inquiry and we are continuing to deliver information to it that it requests. Anything that is covid-related is passed to the inquiry. This is a narrow point of legal definition that we are seeking to get resolved. I hope that she was reassured by my response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland); we are hoping to get this in front of the courts very swiftly, and I hope there will be no requirement for delay. I sincerely hope that the inquiry can continue its work in the meantime. If there is a means of resolving this without going to the courts, that would, obviously, be welcomed.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Swedish inquiry reported 15 months ago. Our inquiry is only starting to take evidence now, and is expected to take three years. We now have further delay with this legal

wrangling over what information can and cannot be given. The revelations in the WhatsApp messages from the former Secretary of State for Health revealed the often offhanded way in which decisions were made that affected millions of people and cost billions of pounds. Does the Minister not understand that this further delay only raises the fear in the public's mind that the drawn-out process and the legal wrangling over it are designed to bury the evidence, to cover for mistakes and to cover for those who made them?

Jeremy Quin: It does not matter how inappropriate or unfortunate the language is in these WhatsApp messages; if they relate to covid, they must be delivered to the inquiry and rightly so. Anything in relation to covid must go to the inquiry if it is asked for—of that there is no doubt. It is purely if the information is unambiguously irrelevant that there is this discussion on the point of law. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we want to get a response as swiftly as possible. I hear what he says about the Swedish inquiry. Our inquiry has wide terms of reference. There is a lot for the team to cover—it is doing it in modules—but I do hope that it will be able to make progress. I sincerely hope that an early resolution of this narrow point of law will ensure that there is no delay to the work of the inquiry.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): During the covid pandemic, I lost my lovely grandmother, my uncle and my brother-in-law's father, not to mention other family friends. I now find it utterly shameful and deplorable that this Government are taking the covid inquiry to court. The likes of me are looking to the covid inquiry to provide answers so that we can begin to make sense of our immense losses. We know that many other nations have already concluded their inquiries and learned the lessons. What does the Minister have to say to those bereaved families who are looking on in utter disbelief at their Government's disgraceful use of public funds, not to mention the efforts to further frustrate the process?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great passion, as well he might. I am very sorry for his loss, and I know the whole House would think the same. He speaks for so many in this country who suffered bereavement and were afflicted by covid and its dreadful consequences. We need to get to the bottom of this, and we must do that in a timely and effective way. As I said earlier in my remarks, there are decisions that are made in government that we know will be criticised, and understandably so, because people are desperate to see the result of this. None the less, there are points of principle and points of law that will have a bearing not only on this inquiry, but on all those in the future, so we find it necessary to take the step of a judicial review. I sincerely hope that it does not impinge on the ongoing work of the inquiry. As I have reassured the House, we will continue to deliver documents to add to the 55,000 already delivered. I hope the work of the inquiry is not impeded while we get, hopefully, an early hearing on this issue and it is resolved in the courts.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Many, many people will be interested in the covid inquiry, not least, of course, the bereaved themselves. It is not credible for any Government to establish an

[Patricia Gibson]

inquiry into any matter and then take the decision as to what is or is not relevant to that inquiry. Despite the Minister's protestations, it seems that the suggestion is that the chair of the inquiry is confused as to what is or is not relevant, and has to be corrected by the Government.

By way of contrast, the former first Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon MSP, and the former Scottish Health Secretary, Jeane Freeman, have both said they will co-operate absolutely and fully with the Scottish inquiry into covid-19. Why will this Government not give the same level of co-operation? Does the Minister not realise that their slipperiness and lack of transparency only make it look as though they are hiding something? What does he think the Government have to hide?

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing to bear her experience of the Scottish inquiry under Lady Poole, which I believe is also being held under the 2005 Act. We all have an obligation to support the inquiry in its work. This is a matter, given the nature of the UK inquiry and the question it has posed, about whether it should include within scope information that is unambiguously irrelevant. I do not know whether any requests for emails have been made to Nicola Sturgeon, whether those are purely covid-related or on all manner of issues over a period of time, or with whom. I do not know whether she made those remarks having received, or prior to receiving, an invitation to provide information. I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that people should wish to support the inquiry and ensure that it does its work, but there is a point of law on whether material that is unambiguously irrelevant stands, and that is something we need to get sorted.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government seeking a judicial review on their own inquiry that they set up under the relevant legislation is not a good look. Did they give consideration to what would arise if the judicial review was successful and hobbled the ability of the chair of the inquiry to access all the information that she considers relevant? Would her position be untenable?

Jeremy Quin: I have been absolutely clear about the respect in which we hold the chair of the inquiry, who is an eminent former Court of Appeal judge and has a lot of experience in inquiries. The Government sincerely believe that we are able to provide every bit of evidence that is covid-related to the inquiry and, where there is a matter of doubt about that, we should share it with the inquiry in any event. It is only on information that is unambiguously irrelevant that we believe there is any question of law, and I think we all respect the decision of the courts on these issues.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Going to court over which Government WhatsApp messages matter and which do not is an unifying distraction. The TUC has shown that poverty and high vulnerability to covid went together, and before the pandemic Wales had the highest rate of poverty and disability of all UK nations. Does the Minister therefore agree that politically procrastinating over this evidence only serves to postpone the key lesson to be learned: that the austerity agenda left poor communities in Wales defenceless during the pandemic, and that they are no better prepared for the next?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Lady will recall that there were a series of UK Government schemes right across the United Kingdom to support people through a very difficult time. I believe that there is a covid inquiry ongoing in the Welsh Government as well, and we will all have lessons to learn. I take her point that she wants this done in a timely and swift manner. So do the Government, which is why I am delighted that the judicial review will, it appears, be heard soon. As I have said, I hope and believe that it should not stymie the work of the inquiry over the next few weeks, as we will continue to deliver documents to ensure that the work can continue.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister has dressed this up in a lot of legal language, but in essence it is a nakedly political decision to operate in this way. I wonder why, when the principle of the inquiry deciding what is relevant is well established and Baroness Hallett was appointed to the inquiry 18 months ago, this issue has arisen only now? The Minister will be aware that it raises huge concerns about what is going on here. If he has total confidence in Baroness Hallett, as he appears to do, he should be confident that when he hands over documents that he considers completely irrelevant, she will come to the same conclusion, no one will ever see them and there will be no embarrassment to the Government. What is the problem with that approach?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Do I trust inquiries to keep information confidential? We have to do that; they are serious people undertaking serious work—I assume there are 70, 80 or even more of them, and I am sure they will take their responsibilities extremely seriously. However, he must consider what the impact might be on communications and on people discussing issues if they have that cloud hanging over them that any material related or unrelated to a particular inquiry could be required by it. That might even cloud the consideration of Governments in the future about the use of inquiries under the 2005 Act—I do not know. There are genuine long-term ramifications that need to be considered. It is quite a narrow point of law, but it might have wider considerations. Therefore, it is wise to get that narrow point of law satisfied by the courts, and we respect the courts' judgments.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister was not intending to suggest that the Government would not support public inquiries if they do not win this case. He has heard the concerns in this House about how the Government's decision could look. He seems to be saying that the Government are seeking clarification on what they see as mission creep and on what unambiguously irrelevant documents and questions might be, and that there is an element to do with modern technology and the use of WhatsApp. He said the Government were looking for guidance. If he wants to restore faith on all sides of this House, and if all the Government are trying to do is to get guidance on a narrow point of law, will he commit here and now that, whatever the outcome of the judicial review, the Government will not appeal it?

Jeremy Quin: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Lady, not for her second point, but for her first. If I misspoke in any way and gave the impression that this Government

would shy away from future public inquiries, I apologise to the House, because that was not my intention. Public inquiries have an incredibly important role to undertake and it is important that they are supported. On the second point, she will understand that we are in a legal process and it will be seen through. We of course respect the views of the courts, but it would be rather rash to come to a conclusion before hearing what the divisional court says on the issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister always gets the hard stand, and he always perseveres to give answers as best he can; we thank him for that.

Some 3,445 people died in Northern Ireland because of covid-19. Some of them were good friends. Other hon. Members have also referred to losing loved ones, and I think of Billy Allen, Norma McBride and my own mother-in-law, Jemima George. They all died alone and they all followed the rules, every one of them. My constituents who lost loved ones have a simple request: they want their questions asked and they want the answers. It is clear to them that many in certain places of power blatantly disregarded the rules while others followed them implicitly, as my family did. Everyone who lost loved ones wants the questions and the answers. Can the Minister confirm that will be the case throughout the inquiry, and also that the scope will include decisions taken to close schools and surgeries to the public, which were critical issues for my family and my constituents?

Jeremy Quin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I felt it was appropriate, even though we have had to have a careful discussion in the House, that hon. Members were able to raise questions regarding the decision to take this matter to JR. It is an unusual decision, but we thought it was important on this point of law. As so often, he brings us back to the key point we must all consider in relation to the covid inquiry: the impact on the bereaved and those afflicted, and the necessity to learn lessons. From my reading of the terms of reference, they cover the points he raises. Those are valid points of concern and interest. We must learn lessons to ensure that we get it right if the country ever faces such dreadful circumstances again.

Point of Order

5.59 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 25 May, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made an oral statement to the House to announce revisions to the new hospital programme, including the removal of Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust hospitals from the programme due to complete by 2030. Two of the hospitals, Charing Cross and Hammersmith, are in my constituency and the third, St Mary's, serves the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

In response to questions from my hon. Friend and me, the Secretary of State made a series of statements that may have unintentionally misled the House. He said:

“there is the work at Charing Cross in Hammersmith, where we are building the temporary ward to unblock the refurbishment”.

He also said:

“that is why we are starting to build the temporary ward capacity at Charing Cross and the first phase of work is under way on the cardiac elective recovery hub, to bring cardiac work on to the Hammersmith site.”—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 485.]

However, Imperial, responding to questions from the BBC, said:

“We do not yet know when we will be able to start work.”

Indeed, no building work is currently under way.

Earlier this afternoon, I was made aware by Mr Speaker's office that a ministerial correction would be made in due course to the Minister's statement. However, *Hansard* was unable to share that with me and the Minister chose not to do so, beyond informing me an hour ago that he had requested a ministerial correction without giving details thereof. This is extremely vexing for my constituents, who rely absolutely on those hospitals, which have the biggest backlog of repairs of any in England. The failure to address that would, in the words of the chief executive of Imperial, be:

“hugely damaging for the health and healthcare of hundreds of thousands of people.”

Rather than be so coy, would it not be better for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to come to the Dispatch Box and explain matters fully, including when the works will now be completed and where the estimated £4 billion cost can now be found? I seek your assistance, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his plea for assistance. I recall his consternation during the statement to which he refers and I have the impression that he is not happy with the Government's decision. I can help him not in that respect—not at all. The only way in which I can help him is to say that, if there has been an inadvertent mistake or error in the information given to the House by the Minister, there are avenues open to the Minister and his team to correct that mistake and give the correct information to the House. Obviously, it is important that every Minister—indeed, every Member—gives the correct information to the House.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that there are various ways in which he can take this matter forward. I expect that he will do so, because I have the distinct impression that he is not happy.

Backbench Business

Reaching Net Zero: Local Government Role

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2021-22, Local government and the path to net zero, HC 34, and the Government response, CP 589; Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General on Local government and net zero in England, HC 304, Session 2021-22; Written evidence received by the Environmental Audit Committee in relation to local government and net zero in England, HC 497, Session 2021-22; Oral evidence taken by the Environmental Audit Committee on 8 September, 22 September and 21 October 2021 on Mapping the path to net zero, HC 497, Session 2021-22.]

6.3 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of local government in reaching Net Zero.

I thank the Members across the House who supported the application, as well as the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate today, World Environment Day.

The Government ignore at their peril the vital role of local authorities in delivering net zero. The Committee on Climate Change, the National Audit Office and the independent review of net zero all agree that the UK cannot meet its net zero targets without local authorities. The CCC shows that local authorities have influence over a third of UK emissions. The net zero strategy puts the figure at 82%.

Local authorities determine what is built in our communities, how we get from place to place, how we reduce our waste, and much more. They are best placed to understand their communities and deliver policies that fit their place. Those communities are let down by a Westminster Government who prevent local authorities from decarbonising their areas according to their need. Forty per cent of people most trust their local authority to act on climate change. That is much higher than the faith they place in central Government or in business. It is time that the Government treated local authorities as equal partners and gave them the funding and powers that they need to reach net zero.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. On funding, does she agree that, as well as reversing the 13 years of serious cuts that are preventing local authorities from greening elements of their areas, we need to move away from piecemeal competitive funding for specific projects? Such funding means that local authorities cannot plan for the long term and waste a huge amount of time bidding against each other, rather than getting the funding they need to roll out now.

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. The hon. Lady pre-empts what I will say later in my speech. The competitive process wastes so much time and local resources that could be spent on delivering projects.

More than 300 local authorities have set a net zero target and declared a climate emergency, and 132 councils have net zero targets of 2030 or sooner. Liberal Democrat-run councils have had remarkable successes in implementing sustainable, green policies against a backdrop of substantial barriers; they could do so much more. My Bath and North East Somerset Council has become the first in England to adopt an energy-based net zero housing policy. That ensures that any new housing development is energy self-sufficient and puts a limit on building emissions. My council is also the first in the west of England to adopt a biodiversity net gain policy. But such brave initiatives cannot survive unless central Government are truly behind such progressive policies and support rather than undermine local authorities, particularly when it comes to planning applications that go to appeal where developers get their way and do not build the green buildings that we need.

Beyond Bath, the Liberal Democrat-run Cheltenham Borough Council has implemented a green deal that has helped local businesses to invest in solar panels and heat pumps, led by the Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate, who, I hope, will tell us all about it once we have had a general election. In Richmond, the Liberal Democrat council has been independently recognised by CDP—a global not-for-profit charity that runs disclosure systems and is regarded as the gold standard for environmental reporting—as one of 123 cities and boroughs across the globe taking bold environmental action.

In Stockport, Liberal Democrats successfully implemented the Stockport schools climate assembly. That involved young people from several schools coming together to learn about, propose, debate and vote on climate action ideas. Their first ask was to make sustainable and biodegradable period products more available in schools. The council responded by creating a programme that delivered funding and training to implement that. Stockport Council has called on the Manchester Mayor to roll out such school climate assemblies across the region. I will go further: we should have them across the UK.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. Manchester City Council has prioritised reducing its impact on the climate with the ambitious target of zero carbon by 2038. Even though that great work is happening, local authorities require more support. Does she agree that, for effective and efficient net zero plans to be met, the Government must make funding more certain and long term?

Wera Hobhouse: I absolutely agree. We need councils to spread their wings and deliver, but they cannot if they do not have the funding, which must ultimately come from central Government. Local authorities in Manchester, Bath and Brighton—wherever we are—should have the freedom and the money to make their own decisions for their local communities.

We Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of community buy-in: we need to win hearts and minds to persuade people that net zero projects are good for their communities. Only with consent from our communities can we deliver the path to net zero. That is why empowering local authorities as much as possible is so vital. More and more power and decision making has been eroded away from local government during the last decade—that must stop and be reversed.

Local authority spending power has fallen dramatically since 2015, largely because of central Government grants being cut by more than 40% over that period. Spending per person decreased in real terms for 79% of local authorities between 2015 and 2022. The less money local authorities have to spend, the less climate action they can take. Although I welcome the Government's recent increase in local authority funding, it is far too late. UK100 has pointed out that the funding process from central Government for net zero projects is "opaque, sparse, and competitive". Even the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has admitted that it does not know how many grants there are. The competitive tendering process whereby every local council rushes for a small amount of money is completely inadequate when it comes to the enormous task to deliver net zero.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. In my area, St Albans City and District Council has just won a staggering £8.5 million from a Government fund to make homes energy efficient and to reduce bills. That is the largest sum of money won by any council of our particular size, but even that will only go towards making 900 properties—about a fifth of the council's total housing—energy efficient. Does she agree that, if councils were no longer forced to compete against each other time and again, councils such as St Albans could go further faster, because we know that our communities are champing at the bit to get this stuff done?

Wera Hobhouse: I congratulate my hon. Friend's local authority on getting that amount of money, which is obviously welcome but is not enough. I think the Minister will hear from across the House that the competitive process is a real problem, because it wastes time and money—money that could be spent directly on the projects themselves.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The reality is that we also have to talk about scale. York wants 73,000 heat pumps and 22,000 new connections to sustainable district heat systems, and we have 44,100 homes that need retrofitting and 24,000 that need microgeneration through solar energy—all by 2040. If we do not scale up the funding, we will never reach those targets.

Wera Hobhouse: We all need to grasp the enormity and scale of what needs to be done. The ambition of central Government is just not big enough, whereas I find that the ambition in local authorities is very high and the will to deliver on that high ambition is much bigger in local authorities than we currently see in central Government.

In the updated net zero strategy, the Government agreed to simplify the funding process. Local authorities have spent £130 million since 2019 simply on applying for competitive funding pots—£130 million that could have gone into the projects.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Large-scale funding is required to address the scale of the challenge facing local areas when it comes to housing and bringing homes up to decent standards, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right about ensuring that that is provided equitably across the country. If we are serious

about net zero, the Government need to provide the appropriate funds to retrofit 19 million homes across the country, so that they can be up to the necessary energy performance certificate standard and provide the benefit of reduced energy costs to millions of households. That is the kind of ambition we need, but it is lacking from this Government. Does she agree that that is what the Government need urgently to do?

Wera Hobhouse: I agree; I could not have put it better myself.

Let me return to the grants, which are currently rigid and tied to certain areas, meaning that councils can end up with money for projects that are not right for their communities. Not only have we not got enough money; when we do have it, it is often not the right sort of money, nor what our communities need. For example, a council could receive money for additional bus lanes when increased bus services would be preferred, or they might receive money designated for e-bikes when such provision is not really right for the needs of the community. Net zero grants must be made more flexible to help local authorities to spend the money on projects that work in their area.

The Government have spent more time blocking local authorities than they have empowering them. Many councils I have spoken to said the biggest barrier they face in implementing net zero policies is central Government. Onshore wind is an example. Some 77% of people would support a new onshore wind farm in their area—people know that renewables are the solution to our energy crisis—but the Government's effective ban on onshore wind has denied communities this investment. Housing is another example that has already been mentioned. The UK has some of the leakiest homes in Europe. Net zero will remain a pipe dream in the absence of a huge and comprehensive retrofit programme; we need to understand the scale and we need the money to retrofit.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful that the hon. Lady is recognising the problems around funding, but also around regulatory frameworks. She will know that a report by UK100 has said that local authorities face what they call "Kafkaesque" barriers to pursuing net zero, one of which is in the area of transport. As she knows, the all-party parliamentary group on the green new deal undertook an inquiry on transport, concluding that we need local authorities to have the powers and the funding to modernise their own local public transport networks. Does she agree?

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. Again, the hon. Lady pre-empted me; I will come to that point in a minute. Local authorities need much more control over what is happening in their local transport provision. The situation is wholly inadequate. If we really want to provide an alternative to motorised travel, we need good local transport and bus services, but we do not have them. Local communities are crying out for us to design and implement such services, but local authorities must be key partners as only they have the structure and relationships to deliver the programmes we have discussed.

Let me return to housing. We Liberal Democrats have campaigned relentlessly to get the Government to introduce higher efficiency standards for new builds

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

and not wait until 2025. It is irresponsible to delay further and to hamstring local authorities' ability to raise standards, and it is ridiculous that we are building homes now that will need to be retrofitted in five or 10 years' time. That is such a waste of time. Why not regulate now to build the houses for the future? The chair of the national Climate Change Committee has called this a "stunning failure" by the Government to decarbonise homes, and I fully agree.

Planning and listed building laws also contribute to our leaky buildings. We Liberal Democrats run councils with some of the most precious historic buildings and streetscapes in the country, such as in my city of Bath. This is a blessing and a curse. We represent some of the most beautiful areas in the world, but we are often unable to retrofit and reduce the emissions of historic houses and buildings. Currently, national planning policy puts heritage concerns above climate concerns. That is counterproductive. If councils are unable to retrofit these properties and make them more energy efficient, many will become uninhabitable.

Rachael Maskell: Another issue that needs to be addressed is that of skills. We simply do not have the skills supply needed to retrofit—whether historic buildings or new builds—at the scale we need. It will therefore be crucial to start injecting that focus on skills, but we need to do that now to deliver in time.

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. We need a Government who understand how this all fits together. We cannot retrofit homes if we do not have the supply chains or the skills, and we need to be talking to further education providers and universities so that we get the skills for the future. This all needs to come together, but there is currently a deplorable lack of plan and vision. Again, local authorities have understood that and are starting to have those conversations. Central Government should really look to local authorities and see them as equal partners.

In designing future planning policy, we need central Government to give more weight to climate concerns so that local authorities can make our beautiful buildings habitable and fit for purpose. Planning legislation must also be bound to our climate change legislation, so that climate change can take greater weight in planning decisions. The Royal Town Planning Institute argues that nothing should be planned without the idea first having been demonstrated to be fit for a net zero future. This would solve some other issues. For example, a major reason that renewable projects can wait up to 15 years to connect to the grid is that the planning approval process is not adequately focused on the urgency to deliver net zero.

Local authorities are also constrained when it comes to managing transport. Surface transport is the largest emitting sector in the UK. The benefits of supporting active travel far outweigh the cost. People walking, wheeling and cycling in 2021 took 14.6 million cars off the road, saving 2.5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions and avoiding more than 29,000 early deaths. Independent modelling suggests that even if 50% of vehicle sales were electric by 2030, car mileage would still have to decrease by more than half if we are to limit global warming to 1.5°. Investment in active and sustainable travel is therefore essential.

Unfortunately, the decision to deregulate buses means that bus operators run routes primarily based on profitability, which has led to thousands of bus routes being closed. Between 2021 and 2022 alone, 1,100 bus services were cut, including 51 in the south-west region. The Government must empower local authorities to franchise bus services and simplify the franchise application system, and they must also reverse the ban on local authorities setting up their own bus companies. Only then can our bus routes be determined by the needs of local communities, rather than the need to make a profit.

Active travel is not prioritised when the Government decide what infrastructure projects to fund. Instead, the Department for Transport's web-based transport analysis guidance model provides funding for travel schemes that have a perceived economic benefit, which means schemes that lead to higher volumes of faster traffic. Councils have been told that money for an access road to the city centre would not be awarded if traffic levels decreased due to the reduction in economic activity. They have also been told that a pedestrian crossing could not be implemented due to the cost of delays to traffic. Those decisions fly in the face of the need to really tackle the climate emergency. Active travel schemes are usually built where they do not require such appraisals by the Department for Transport, and local authorities need to have the powers and financial control to build them. Local authorities should have the power to access transport funding using alternative justifications to those of WebTAG, and WebTAG itself must be revised to increase the value assigned to active travel projects.

Looking at all the examples, it is no surprise that we are on course to overshoot our target level of greenhouse gas emissions by twofold. We need local and national Government to work together to give us the best chance of hitting net zero. We Liberal Democrats propose that the Government establish a net zero delivery authority. That body would oversee the delivery of net zero, co-ordinate cross-departmental working, and facilitate the devolution of powers and resources to local authorities. It would co-ordinate national and local strategies and provide information to central Government about how projects can be delivered on the ground.

A net zero delivery authority would work with local authorities and communities to engage with them about delivering net zero. That work would primarily be carried out by local actors, with the delivery authority providing leadership and trustworthy information about the national decarbonisation effort. A similar body was proposed in the Government-commissioned independent review of net zero, but unfortunately the Government have not responded positively to say that that is actually a very good idea. I hope that the Government will look at it again—maybe the Minister can give us a different answer from the one we heard a few months ago.

Local authorities also need a sense of direction. To start with, they need a statutory duty to deliver on climate change; unless and until that happens, the issue will remain at the mercy of local politicians. Climate change is massively underfunded within local government because it is not part of local authorities' core duties. Giving them that statutory duty would be a game changer.

National Government and local authorities do not yet have an integrated or systematic way to discuss, support and facilitate local net zero delivery in the short or longer term. That must change, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Although I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, I hope that she will soon be concluding, because the guidance is that she has 15 minutes for a speech such as this, and she has so far taken 20.

Wera Hobhouse: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I took many interventions, but I understand that you want me to come to a conclusion, and I will be finishing soon.

There needs to be a regular forum for feedback on the problems that local authorities are facing. A net zero delivery authority can help facilitate that. Local authorities up and down the country stand ready to do more to tackle the climate emergency, but often find themselves constrained by an over-centralised Government. To make the net zero transition as efficient and sustainable as possible, we must all pull in the same direction. The latest research demonstrates that, when compared with a nationally implemented programme, devolved climate action would result in £160 billion of savings and wider returns of over £400 billion.

It is time that this Government acknowledged the huge potential there is for local authorities up and down the country to deliver net zero. The Government must see local councils as true partners, and provide them with the proper resources and powers they need in our path to net zero.

6.24 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Councils are indeed well placed to help communities get to net zero, and they need to lead from the front with political leadership and genuine, tangible change. While we recognise that councils face real funding challenges at this time, the pandemic has taught us the importance of collaboration between local and national Government. Far too often, climate plans in response to councils' declared climate emergencies are just that: a plan. I wrote about councils' declarations of climate emergencies back in August 2021, and not much has changed in far too many councils' responses since that time. The "Cambridge Dictionary" defines an emergency as

"something dangerous or serious, such as an accident, that happens suddenly or unexpectedly and needs fast action in order to avoid harmful results".

By their very names, emergencies and crises invoke something of a helplessness in many, as they seem to be someone else's problem. If we are to address climate change and achieve net zero, there is a need for everyone to feel that they can take action now, not wait for another long-winded plan.

Furthermore, our flag-waving Lib Dems who have run North Devon district council since May 2019 took a full three years even to produce a plan, and they continue to fail to reduce their own carbon emissions and energy consumption or to incentivise electric cars. To date, they have switched just one vehicle to electric, as was announced with much fanfare in their press release earlier this year, which stated:

"On Tuesday 18 April, North Devon Council took delivery of their first fully electric asset, making a significant step forward in their commitment to sustainability and reducing their carbon footprint.

The new electric asset, Eco City Sweeper 2, will be used to keep the streets of North Devon clean and tidy. It is equipped with the latest electric technology and has a working time of six hours on a single charge."

Although I am delighted that it has arrived, I am not sure that it is going to make the largest reduction in emissions, given that it is replacing a man who did not create many. I appreciate that our hard-working council officers have been very busy with the pandemic and the projects that have fallen out since, and the staff at the council do a fantastic job, but one would hope that the lead councillor responsible for the environment could have found a way to at least install some solar panels on the new council building, or secure an electric bin lorry or two.

Time is of the essence, and we need not reinvent the wheel; we should look where solutions currently exist and work to implement them. UK100, which was referenced by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—I thank her for securing today's excellent debate—brings together local authorities across the country to devise and, crucially, implement plans for the transition to clean energy that are ambitious and cost-effective and that garner support. I have spoken at UK100's events and seen how effective its solutions would be. I am a big supporter and urge others to join. Its knowledge hub offers excellent ideas for how local leaders can work to hit net zero.

Declaring a climate emergency suggests that it is someone else's problem. We need climate action, and we must work together in driving that action, rather than producing endless plans. If councils need funding to deliver those plans, they need to speak with their MPs and Government in order to detail how action will be taken. I live in a village that is full of tourists at this time of year, yet it is still many, many miles to the nearest public electric charging point. The pace of change in Devon may be marginally quicker at a county council level, but we do not have many buses, so surely we are overdue at least a single electric or hydrogen-powered one.

Wera Hobhouse: I hope that the hon. Lady will soon talk to the leader of her district council and get some answers, but the problem of electric charging is, of course, a central Government problem. It is a centralised grid, and grid connections are so incredibly difficult to achieve—that is the same for a local authority that wants to put in more electric charging points as it is for community energy projects. We share the concerns about those projects. Does she not agree that the problem is with the grid?

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. While I fully acknowledge some of the concerns about the grid, living where I do, I would suggest that that is not the reason why those charging points are not going in. I have parish councils that do not believe in electric vehicles and, to be completely frank, that is holding back some of the roll-out. There is a lot more we could be doing to drive through some of this change.

Having previously led debates in this place on decarbonising rural transport and levelling up rural Britain, I fully recognise how much harder some of these challenges are in a rural environment, but some councils are leading from the front, as UK100 is testament to. I just wish that any of the rural councils in Devon were on that list. Indeed, I support UK100's "Powers in Place" report. I very much hope that the Minister will have had a chance to look at some of its recommendations, particularly on more strategic, needs-based long-term funding in a rural environment.

[Selaine Saxby]

The Conservative Government are a world leader in fighting climate change, and we have introduced the legislative tools to enable and encourage individual leaders and businesses to take action. We as individuals, business leaders and councillors need to get on and do what we can to make change, rather than producing endless plans and PowerPoint presentations that do not in themselves solve the problem. My door is open to any of my councils who want my assistance in driving North Devon towards net zero.

6.30 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate and on the email that she sent me, inviting me to participate in it. She may well regret that invitation, because I want to raise a few issues that need to be considered in relation to this subject.

In Northern Ireland, the local government elections have recently finished. For the past four or five weeks, I have been knocking on people's doors and speaking to them about local government issues. Only one person mentioned net zero to me, and she objected to the stance I took against some of the lunatic decisions made by my local council in putting wind farms on some of the most beautiful upland areas of East Antrim, where they are visible from all around. One of the most iconic landmarks in the area, Slemish mountain—it is where St Patrick is supposed to have sat, surveying that part of North Antrim and then going out to evangelise—is now blighted by what can only be described as mechanical triffids, which have blotted the landscape. They are not good for the environment: at one wind farm, 3 metres of peat was taken off the mountain to put into roads and the foundations, disturbing the wildlife and habitat, providing mincing machines for birds in the future, and destroying the environment, probably releasing tonnes of carbon in the process.

That was the only person who mentioned net zero: most people were concerned about zero rate increases, zero tolerance of antisocial behaviour and zero tolerance of people being allowed to dump rubbish across the area.

Daisy Cooper: I knock on a lot of doors all the time—not just at local elections—and although not many people mention net zero in that language, they do mention their energy bills. I wager that the right hon. Gentleman did hear from people who talked about their energy bills. Does he agree that urgent climate action is a good thing not only to protect the planet, but to make people's homes warmer and to reduce their energy bills?

Sammy Wilson: Ironically, the huge windmills that we see generating renewable electricity, because of the method by which they are pegged, get the most costly rate. For example, if the last unit of electricity has been produced by gas bought at premium prices on the spot market, that is the price that the wind energy companies get for the electricity that they produce. Wind energy does not reduce people's energy bills, because that method inflates the profits of the companies that do not have to pay for the expensive fuel but can charge as if they were using it.

In answer to the hon. Lady's point, of course there are other ways and actions. One does not have to believe that net zero should be a target by 2050, or whatever the year happens to be, to see that it makes sense not to waste energy in people's houses. It makes sense to build houses that are energy-efficient. No one is disputing that. The issue I am raising is that local authorities are pressed for money. I listen to all the issues raised about local authorities in debates in the House, and time and again I hear about social care provision and its inadequacy, education provision, policing, and special needs education. Given the range of concerns in the House, the question is whether local government's priority should be seeking more grants to achieve net zero—to provide more facilities and projects that aim towards that—or the more pressing and immediate needs that people experience day to day.

Daisy Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman will know that we tend to have a crisis every winter, but increasingly we have a summer crisis in our NHS and care sector, because of the health impact of heatwaves, particularly on older people. Does he not accept that rather than there being a trade-off between investing in the environment and taking climate action and somehow investing in people's social wellbeing, the good initiatives are those that seek to address both, which is precisely what we can do if we take the right actions?

Sammy Wilson: I do not want to get into the argument, because I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, would probably ask me to stop, but I do not agree with the association that the hon. Lady makes. I do not believe that we have any more extreme weather today than we had in the past. Of course we have had heatwaves and cold spells before, and that tends to have an impact on some people's health, but there is no evidence that spending money on local authority projects that blight the environment will save massive amounts in healthcare.

Secondly, on the impact on individuals, let us just look at some recent Government initiatives. For example, to help local authorities that say they cannot meet their recycling targets, we now have a levy on companies and food producers that will cost £4 billion, according to the British Retail Consortium. It will add £148 a year to people's food bills to give money to local authorities—it is really a tax on the consumer—to help them achieve their recycling targets. Is that likely to have an impact on people's health? When we have a cost of living crisis, is that likely to be a reasonable use of resources? That is the kind of expenditure that we are getting to facilitate some of the green policies.

Wera Hobhouse: I do not regret sending the right hon. Gentleman an invitation to participate in the debate, because only through debate can we have these issues out. May I come back to something that he said about our having had wildfires and floods previously? Does he not look at the facts and statistics about increased wildfires, floods and weather extremes across the globe? Scientists are putting those facts down, clear for all of us to see. Does he not accept that?

Sammy Wilson: No, I do not, and nor does the evidence, which shows that the number of people who have died in extreme climate events has declined; it has fallen quite significantly during the past century.

Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change does not claim that the suggestion made by the hon. Lady is correct.

On the effects that local authority policies have had on people, in London one cannot lift the *Evening Standard* without reading about the impact that the ultra low emission zone is having. That impact is not on the people who make such decisions, who are usually fairly well-off. When we make decisions in the House, many of the costs of those decisions do not impact on us, but they do impact on low-income families, such as the people who cannot afford the latest car and the people who cannot afford to pay the £12.50 per day to come into the ultra low emission zone in London. Again, we have to ask ourselves about pursuing this policy in local authorities. Nobody could argue against some of the things suggested today, but for many of the others there are issues of expenditure. It is significant how many times in this debate funding has been mentioned—funding that could be used on other priorities—and it really is a question about where our priorities lie. Who do we target the money for such services at, and what impact does it have on people?

Although many Members say they want this—indeed, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) used to talk about how he wanted Britain to be the leading country in the world in reducing carbon emissions and for it to become the Saudi Arabia of renewable energy—the rest of the world, sadly, is not following. That is significant, and this perhaps puts it into context: in the first quarter of this year, China's increase in carbon emissions—not its total, but its increase in the first quarter of this year—is equal to the total yearly carbon emissions produced by the United Kingdom. When we put the fight against climate change and reaching net zero in that context, we have to ask ourselves, and I think many of our constituents will ask: why impose additional costs on us? Why interfere in the decisions that we make about how we travel, where we travel and the cost of that travel, as well as about the cost of our energy and everything else, when quite clearly those in the rest of the world, and for very good reasons, do not?

When we consider that the average wage in Africa is \$1,600 per year while the average wage in the United Kingdom is £27,000 per year, can we honestly say that the African countries now burning record levels of coal—to produce electricity to obtain economic growth and provide employment for the people who every year we see coming to our shores because they are fleeing unemployment—are wrong in making those decisions? If they are not wrong, are we, by pursuing a policy obsession at every level of government of reducing CO₂—regardless of the cost for individuals, especially for the less well-off—distorting decisions?

6.44 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I say that because, in the context of this debate, he is very anti and I am very for, so I hope I will level things up in some way. First, to respond to some his comments, I want to say that I support every method that moves us towards net zero. In my speech, I will talk about some of the health implications and about how citizens need clean air; otherwise, we will

suffer the consequences of not having clean air. As well as speaking about that, I will present some statistics, so I do hope that the right hon. Member will be paying attention.

I am proud that it was a Labour Government under Gordon Brown who passed the Climate Change Act 2008. It set a legally binding target for the UK to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050, compared with 1990 levels; that was increased to 100% in 2019. Unfortunately, 13 years of Conservative Government have slowed progress. Since 2010, local authority funds have been stripped away, and that has severely delayed and hindered what local authorities can do. However, as we have heard, local authorities are ambitious for change and for their communities. I will focus on how this Conservative Government and Conservative councils can probably learn a lot from the London Mayor and from Lewisham Council in my area—if I can be so bold as to say so, which I believe I can.

In 2019, Lewisham Council led by example and became one of the first local authorities in London to declare a climate emergency. Its many achievements in delivering net zero include its climate emergency action plan, which obviously covered schools, housing, cycling, green spaces and so on, being rated as one of the best in the country. Lewisham planted 25,000 trees between 2018 and 2023, and it has increased food waste recycling rates by 250%. Lewisham Council is therefore stepping up and providing leadership where the Government sadly are not. Lewisham's climate action plan is estimated to reach net zero for our borough by 2030, and it will cost a minimum of £1.6 billion. Against the backdrop of the cost of living crisis and the hardship that people are experiencing, the Government must resource local councils so that they can deliver on the net zero plans.

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has also set a target for London to be net zero by 2030. To do this, he is working to achieve a target of over 2 million homes and a quarter of a million non-domestic buildings being properly insulated. I also support his action to extend the ULEZ. Right now, toxic air is thought to contribute to the premature deaths of 4,000 Londoners each year—that is 11 deaths a day. Those are 4,000 deaths that could probably have been prevented. I remember hearing a paediatrician at an event speak about particles in a new-born baby's lungs. It was astonishing, shocking and awful to hear that CO₂ emissions in the air have done this injury to a baby at such an early stage in their life.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member is making a powerful case, and I very much agree with the point she is making about air pollution. I am sure she will agree that things like air pollution hit the poorest hardest—they are less likely to be able to move away from busy roads, for example. Whether it is air pollution, fuel poverty or a lack of affordable public transport, all of these things hit the poorest hardest, so in suggesting that there is somehow a division between environmental justice and social justice, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) is just plain wrong.

Janet Daby: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I remember my child saying to me, “Mummy, it's really quite smelly here.” I said, “No, it's not,” but then I thought that I am not the same height as my child, so I bent down and I could smell all the fumes coming

[Janet Daby]

from all of the cars. It is awful, but this has an impact on children's health and wellbeing, and it has an impact on the quality of air. We all have the right to breathe clean air, but we need to make that possible, and it is the Government's responsibility to do so. These deaths are preventable, and that is why we must act now.

I was pleased that last week, Sadiq Khan announced a major expansion of the ULEZ scrappage scheme. It will cover more small businesses in London, as well as London families receiving child benefit. There is also more support for charities. To return to the point raised by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), poorer communities are suffering more from polluted and dense areas, but families and communities from diverse backgrounds are also experiencing more pollution because of poverty. The Mayor of London has consistently called on the Government to support the switch to cleaner vehicles by funding a targeted national scrappage scheme, or by providing additional funding to London, as has been done for other cities across the country. The Government must also do that for London; if they do not, they must say why. I hope they are not failing to do so for political reasons.

It is clear that the Mayor of London and Lewisham Council are miles ahead of the Government in delivering net zero, but I would love to see the Government trying to outdo them and to hear from them how they are trying to make that difference, rather than making things harder. I urge the Government to rethink their approach, and I look forward to their serious response on this serious matter.

6.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing it. Although her speech took 20 minutes, every part of it was worth listening to, and I agree with what she said and with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)—I am going to set a trend in this House of us almost all agreeing on these things.

This issue is important to me, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I am sure she has grasped the importance of this issue to many of us in the Chamber and to my constituents. On the doorstep during the council elections, this was an issue for me. People told me that they are concerned that ice levels in the Arctic and Antarctic are decreasing, about flood levels across the world, and that the oceans are rising. They are aware of climate change. Some people might not agree with that, but that is certainly my opinion and that of many of my constituents.

I am pleased to speak in this debate. I have spoken in such debates before and I stood alongside the hon. Member for Bath when she was making those comments, and I was pleased to do so. I agree that the contributions that local councils and communities can make does not, and will not, go unnoticed. Why is that important? Someone might think that what the council does is small and minuscule—and yes, it might be—but all those small bits come together to make the big picture change, and that is what I see as the role of the council. In particular, I commend Ards and North Down Borough Council in my constituency, as well as Lisburn and

Castlereagh City Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. There is such an important role for local councils and governments to play, and that must be paralleled throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that the devolved nations are not left behind. It is important that we in Northern Ireland play the same integral role as that referred to by the hon. Members for Bath and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby).

I also take an interest in what we can do as a country to support our rural villages and towns to transform to net zero. Local government has a huge role to play in that, which cannot be ignored. My constituency of Strangford is heading in the right direction in our contribution to net zero. Our council—my council—is doing that already, and it is important to recognise that we all have a role to play. I have been contacted by a number of constituents from the village of Moneyreagh in my constituency. An old, outdated bus shelter was in desperate need of replacement. Translink, the bus company in Northern Ireland, was great and was able to replace it with its new Insignia-plus bus shelter. In addition, it is trialling solar power at that location, in line with its new net zero carbon target. Someone might say, "That's a small part to play", and perhaps it is, but it is a big part when all the small parts are brought together collectively.

I read recently that Worcestershire County Council—I am not responsible for it—is installing new sustainable bus shelters in Bromsgrove. They are powered using a combination of wind turbines and solar panels, and they were the first shelters in the UK to be 100% off grid. It is estimated that each shelter will save us all—all the people in the world; all the people in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—3.6 metric tonnes of carbon over 10 years.

Last Friday, I attended an event in North Down that was looking at the provision of offshore wind farms just off the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I attended because I have a deep interest in fishing issues, and I wanted to ensure that what was being put forward would not impact on the fishing sector and the critical fishing grounds out there in the Irish channel between Northern Ireland and Scotland. I contacted the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation, the Irish Fish Producers Organisation and other local fishermen to ascertain their opinion about that project. I will be nudged and pointed in the direction that the fishing sectors want me to go in, because I understand how important the pelagic fishing and lobster grounds are to them, as well as to some of the smaller crabmen. The fishing grounds need to be preserved, so we must ensure that all those things are in place.

As someone who represents a rural constituency, I have stated that it is imperative that there is sustainable and economical transport for our constituents who live in the countryside. We need ideas for decarbonising public transport in more rural areas where the population is more dispersed—we cannot ignore these things; these things are real and happen all the time. As others have said, we do not have the continuity or regularity of buses that we should have in rural communities to incentivise people to leave their cars and use buses. The Glider public transport scheme goes all the way to Belfast, and the idea is to park and ride, using the Glider bus. Those things are progressive and helpful, and we cannot ignore them.

We have seen the expansion of green transport to protect and preserve our atmosphere and environment. In Ballymena, Wrightbus runs electric buses and is investigating the potential of hydrogen. We must look at such things, because they are the future. As someone of a certain vintage, I want to leave something for my children and grandchildren, and ensure that they have a world in which they can enjoy some of the things that I have enjoyed for a great many years. We must continue to do this as time goes by. In Newtownards, for example, people can charge their electric cars at the shopping centre, but if they want to go elsewhere in town, they cannot charge their cars. I know the Minister is not responsible for Northern Ireland in its entirety, but I have seen figures for the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I have noticed that although more people are buying electric cars, electric charging points are not keeping up. If we are to incentivise and encourage people to buy electric or hybrid cars, we must ensure that the number of charging points increases at the same level.

Councils can play a role in that. My council has responsibility for that issue in my area, and I have asked it to push it forward. Councils have a key role in prioritising charging points, and we should not be reliant on private companies, which may put charging points only in places that are of advantage to them. I am not saying that companies should not do that, but why do they want charging points in shopping centres? It is because they want people to shop there. Why is the council not putting charging points in the centre of town, and other places where they could be accessible?

We have to incentivise and encourage things to make them happen and to take the vision of a net zero transport network one step closer to reality. I believe that it is, and this is a way of doing it. Double-decker battery electric buses are 44% more efficient than wheel, saving energy costs and carbon. That is another example of how we are moving forward, together with our councils, to make it happen. There is such an onus on net zero and on meeting deadlines that incentives must be given to encourage people to adapt. For example, Belfast, the biggest council in Northern Ireland, has recently launched its first climate plan, which describes the importance of the power of genuine collaboration between local councils and Governments regionally. Belfast City Council recognises that, along with Ards and North Down Borough Council, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. Indeed, all the councils in Northern Ireland recognise it. The consultation is so impactful because it lays out clearly and coherently that, even though Belfast has only nine years of carbon available before it breaches the Paris climate agreement, the economic gain from decarbonisation will be immense, so we are certainly on the right path for the future. As this debate is making clear, local government can work towards net zero.

In conclusion, we cannot achieve perfection—I am imperfect—and it is hard to achieve 100% in anything. It will also be difficult to reach net zero, but we are on our way there. The devolved nations have an important role to play in that. I encourage the Minister—I am confident about the response that we will get tonight—to have another look at the funding allocated to the devolved nations, so that they have the funds to level up and meet our net zero targets. That can only happen if we work

together. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am a great believer in the idea that, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we are always better together. Let us help each other, in all the regions, and make life better—for my children, my grandchildren, and all my constituents.

7 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's report on this topic in October 2021 made it clear that the UK will struggle to meet its aim of reaching net zero by 2050 unless central and local government work together. As a former councillor, I know how important councils and combined authorities are to delivering net zero. The Climate Change Committee said:

“Local authorities have powers or influence over roughly a third of emissions in their local areas”.

I have to say it felt a little as though the Government were passing the buck when they estimated that 82% of emissions were under council influence. They have never explained how they came up with that figure. Despite their rhetoric, they have not implemented any statutory targets for councils on this issue.

It is true that most councils have approved some net zero commitments, or, like Wakefield Council, have declared a climate emergency. In Wakefield, the Labour council has made climate change a core function of its operations, and has a dedicated team working on projects relating to it. It has invested millions in replacing much of its fleet with electric cars and vans, and work is well under way to replace nearly 45,000 streetlights with LEDs, in order to reduce its energy consumption by 80%. Some 100,000 trees have been planted through a partnership with the White Rose forest. The council is also looking at building solar parks, which could provide renewable energy, enhance biodiversity, give rise to training opportunities and provide new, green jobs. The list of positive actions goes on. All that is being done to drive the change necessary to become a carbon-neutral council by 2030, and to help the entire district to be carbon-neutral by 2038.

Not every authority is like Wakefield. Some councils have not adopted proper plans, and that is holding us all back. I ask the Minister: what are the Government doing to encourage more climate change action plans? Labour recognises the important role that local government has in this fight, and that is why empowering our towns, cities and regions is at the heart of our plans. We will consult on Gordon Brown's commission on giving local leaders more financial autonomy and longer-term funding settlements—powers that the Local Government Association has been asking for—to help deliver net zero. We will also transfer more powers over skills, transport and planning to local leaders, which would be a game changer. Councils will be at the forefront of delivering Labour's warm home plan; they will help to roll out our street-by-street retrofit programme, which will not only slash energy bills but help in our fight for net zero.

I am pleased that Wakefield Council is showing such leadership in this area, having brought forward its climate change action plan and backed it up with clear actions and investment. Now we need a Labour Government who will not only talk the talk but deliver the real change that we need, and give local government the powers and support that it needs to accelerate net zero.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Kerry McCarthy to respond for the Opposition.

7.4 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We know that the Government's plan to reach net zero is totally inadequate; that is the context for today's debate. Thirteen years of failure has left us exposed to higher bills, energy insecurity, lost jobs and climate delay. As the Chair of the Climate Change Committee—a former Conservative Cabinet Minister—has said,

“This has been a lost decade in preparing for and adapting to the known risks that we face from climate change.”

The right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore)—another Conservative—found in his net zero review that the Conservatives had failed on nearly every aspect of net zero policy. How are the Government responding? They have doubled down on fossil fuels, with billions in taxpayer cash being handed out to oil and gas giants. They are blocking the cheap renewable power that Britain needs; there is a de facto onshore wind ban, and war-torn Ukraine has built more onshore turbines in the past year than the UK. There is still no response to Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act. There is dither and delay. There is no ambition and no urgency.

Thankfully, as we have heard today, local councils across the country are doing their best, albeit with scarce resources. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the need for greater certainty and continuity of funding, and an end to the piecemeal, competitive approach that sets one council against another, and that can be unduly restrictive when it comes to how money can be spent. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave a wide-ranging speech, as usual, which covered everything from electric vehicle charging points to lobsters. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) talked in very strong terms about the need to tackle air pollution, and set out what the Mayor of London is doing on that front.

I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate. I share her pain when it comes to the cuts to bus services in our region. I would imagine that she is having the same conversations with the Mayor for the West of England as I am, about how we can subsidise non-commercial routes. It is interesting that she mentioned only Liberal Democrat councils when talking about the positive contribution that local authorities can make. I will make up for that by talking a bit about what Labour councils are doing. I do not need to say more about Wakefield, because my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) did a sterling job in speaking about it.

Wera Hobhouse: I celebrate all local councils' work to reach net zero. I appreciate that the hon. Lady is going to make up for my not mentioning Labour councils. I am sure that there are many good councils across the political divide that are making good progress on net zero.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the hon. Lady for that, although she has eaten into about 30 seconds-worth of my saying nice things about Labour councils. In Bristol,

the Labour council set up a 20-year city leap project in partnership with Ameresco—a £424 million public-private investment in green infrastructure. It is groundbreaking. It is helping Bristol to go carbon neutral by 2030—the same ambition as Wakefield. Bristol will retrofit all our housing stock by 2030, reduce our CO₂ output by 140,000 tonnes, and create over 1,000 green jobs in the process. England's biggest wind turbine will open shortly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). It is community-owned, will provide low-carbon electricity to 3,500 homes, and save nearly 2,000 tonnes of CO₂ per year. It will mean that energy can be sold back to the grid, and the money can be reinvested in local communities.

I turn to Hull. There was a recent event in Parliament with the aptly named “Oh Yes! Net Zero” campaign. It is a really good example of collaborative local working; it involves 150 local organisations that support the city's efforts to reach net zero. In Oxford, the Labour-led authority has been leading the way with innovative solutions, particularly on battery technology. Redbridge is home to Europe's most powerful electric vehicle charging hub, and a project called Energy Superhub Oxford launched in July last year with the wider aim of decarbonising the city, uses the latest in battery technology, and, for the first time in the UK, infrastructure that links directly to the national grid's high-voltage network. I echo what was said about the need to ensure that the grid has capacity to support local innovative projects. To give one last example, in Liverpool, there is a groundbreaking project: an agreement between the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and the Korea Water Resources Corporation to create what could be the world's largest tidal power scheme in the Mersey.

Taking a place-based approach to net zero is vital in ensuring that the opportunities from the transition start to finally level up the towns and cities of the UK, as opposed to letting them down as this Government have done. Around 95% of Britain's population lives in areas where the local authorities have declared a climate emergency but, as has been said, councils and combined authorities must be given the resources and powers they need to act. As one contributor to the right hon. Member for Kingswood's net zero review put it:

“Net Zero achievements at local government level are in spite of government, not because of it”.

That would change under a Labour Government, which would recognise and value the role local authorities can play and the immense difference local action can make. We would work in tandem with local authorities to deliver our green prosperity plan of capital investment. That would support the creation of hundreds of thousands of jobs in every corner of the UK, doubling our onshore wind capacity, tripling solar capacity and quadrupling offshore wind capacity. It would be financed by Labour's national wealth fund, ensuring that, when investment flows into new industries, in partnership with business, the British people will own a share of that wealth, as happens in other countries.

Surprisingly, we did not talk much in the debate about retrofitting homes. We have the least energy-efficient housing in Europe. Millions of homes are going cold and premium-priced heat is escaping through roofs, windows and walls. Labour's warm homes plan would upgrade the 19 million homes that need it, cutting bills

and creating thousands of good jobs for electricians, engineers and construction workers across the country. It is important to stress that this is about economic growth. It is about a future industrial strategy. It is about jobs for the future. It is about the prosperity of our local communities. And it is about saving the planet at the same time. Local government has a key role to play in that. I just hope the Government step up and help it.

7.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I welcome the opportunity to debate this incredibly important issue. I thank all hon. Members from across the House for their contributions, which have informed a very interesting and, at times, lively discussion. I also thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for bringing this important topic to the House.

The UK's 2050 net zero target is a Government priority. The transition provides huge opportunities for jobs, investment, innovation and exports. The UK is already leading the world in tackling climate change. Between 1990 and 2021, we cut emissions by 48% while growing our economy by 65%, decarbonising faster than any other G7 country.

Our local areas will play a crucial role in delivering net zero. We agree that local authorities have great scope to influence carbon emission reduction and many have strong ambitions in that area. We can consider the transition a success only if its benefits are felt across the UK. We know that we need local authorities to drive action across a range of areas such as planning, energy, housing and transport.

Caroline Lucas: On the issue of planning, as an example, does the Minister accept that the Government need to give powers to local authorities as well? There are examples of local authorities trying to implement green planning policies, but they find that their policies are being thrown out by local planning inspectors because there is not a net zero obligation at the heart of our planning process. Does she agree that that is something the Government could do to facilitate the action of many councils around the country?

Amanda Solloway: I will come on to talk in a bit more detail about all the Government's plans, but we are confident that we are doing all we can to achieve our net zero goals.

Local authorities are well placed to align net zero work with local opportunities. There can be significant economic advantages for local areas, attracting private sector net zero investment and building local supply chains. They currently have a lot of flexibility when they take action on net zero. My Government are keen to ensure local authorities preserve that flexibility because, as has been noted, each region and community may require tailored approaches to reach net zero. So we do not believe that a new general statutory requirement on local authorities to meet net zero is needed. There is already a high level of local commitment in the sector and our local government colleagues have told us that a new statutory duty is not something they want.

The Government are already working closely with local government to help deliver net zero. In the 2021 net zero strategy and net zero growth plan from this

year, we set out how local areas can take action on a wide range of policies, including planning, transport and energy, as part of our overall strategy to reach the UK's 2050 net zero target. More detail on how we will meet net zero by working with local partners is set out in the relevant sectoral strategies, such as the transport decarbonisation plan from 2021. That covers, for example, how emissions from different forms of public transport will be reduced. The creation of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero helps to drive the overall delivery of net zero across Government. The Department's officials work with counterparts across Government to co-ordinate action, working particularly closely with the Cabinet Office and His Majesty's Treasury. That ensures net zero is prioritised in Government.

On working closely with local government on net zero, my colleague Lord Callanan, the Minister for energy efficiency, co-chairs, with the Local Government Association, the ministerial local net zero forum. It met in February for the first time. Alongside that, there is an officials' local net zero forum, which has met four times to date. Both forums bring together national Government and local government to discuss key policy and delivery options on net zero. The Department funds five regional local net zero hubs to help local authorities develop net zero projects, focusing on attracting commercial investment. The hubs have helped to develop innovative tools and resources for local authorities, including Net Zero Go, an online platform supporting clean energy projects, and SCATTER—setting city area targets and trajectories for emissions reduction—which is a tool to help local authorities standardise their greenhouse gas reporting. Tools of this kind are supported by a wide range of guidance from Government Departments and other sources. I recognise the importance of co-ordinated action across Departments, but given the range of actions recently undertaken in this area, the Government do not think a net zero delivery authority is necessary.

The Government have provided a great deal of funding for local government to reach net zero. Through core settlement growth funding, such as the shared prosperity fund and grant funding from my Department and others, local authorities can meet net zero goals flexibly, in a way that best meets their needs. We have committed to explore simplifying local net zero funding, where that provides the best results for net zero. We will continue that work. One approach we are testing is using devolution deals in England to pilot new approaches. We have announced wide-ranging devolution deals with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority. They include first-of-their-kind pilots to simplify retrofit funding from 2025. We also established the UK Infrastructure Bank, which has a lending facility of £4 billion for local authorities at preferential rates and a technical advisory service.

Communities also play a strong part in supporting our transition to net zero. I am aware that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath, the Bath and West Community Energy Group works with local authorities in the area to support households to access funding for energy efficiency measures in their homes. Many communities work closely with local authorities to access the funding and support they need, and the local net zero hubs can help local authorities and community groups to work together.

[Amanda Solloway]

We already work in partnership with local areas towards our net zero goals, with examples of local innovation across the United Kingdom. By working together, I am confident that we can drive green growth across the country and deliver our ambitious net zero targets.

7.18 pm

Wera Hobhouse: I thank all Members across the Chamber for their contributions. Bar one, we are all agreed that the climate emergency is real, and that local councils must become a real partner to the Westminster Government.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I am slightly disappointed by her response. I hope that she takes to heart what has been said this evening and persuades her Government that local authorities need more power and resources. We need a statutory duty for councils to deliver net zero. I hope that the Government will look again at our Liberal Democrat proposals to establish a net zero delivery authority.

New Housing Supply

7.19 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of delivering new housing supply.

One of the critical issues facing our constituents today is housing. Whether it is young people struggling to get on the property ladder, tenants having to put up with high rents and substandard housing, or families who cannot afford an adequately sized home, across the political divide we are all acutely aware of the growing crisis we face. Seven out of 10 voters think that there is a national housing crisis. Housing is a top issue for millennials. After the first and second world wars, there were campaigns for homes “fit for heroes.” What we need now is a campaign for homes fit for a new generation.

It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on why home ownership is so important. I think we all believe in the ideal of a property-owning democracy. MPs in every party will understand that buying your first home is a huge milestone in life. We all understand that having your own space and somewhere to call home is incredibly valuable. It gives people a stake in society and a sense that they control their own life. Ownership also provides much greater security than the rental market, which is especially difficult at the moment. It is not right that huge numbers of people, including families with young children, have to keep moving or are insecure and unable to properly put down roots anywhere. That is bad for all of us and undermines our collective sense of community.

House prices have reached unaffordable levels because, as is fairly evident, we have a housing shortage. The average home costs about £285,000. In London, where the picture is even more stark, the average cost is an enormous £523,000. Over the last 25 years, housing affordability has worsened in every single local authority across England, and younger people most acutely feel the impact of the crisis.

In my lifetime, the number of young families trying to buy a house has virtually halved. When I first bought a house, the average house cost three times the average income. Now it is between eight and nine times the average wage. In the last decade, over half of first-time buyers have had to rely on some kind of help from their parents. The increasing need to rely on the bank of mum and dad is widening the inequality gap and further eroding social mobility in the UK. The crisis is forcing those who cannot rely on well-off parents to fork out thousands of pounds more in rent, to stay at their family home for longer and to delay their plans to start a family.

Even those who can afford a home are getting less for their money. Since 1970, the average size of a living room in a new build property has declined by a total of 27%. The average floor space of homes has declined by almost 20% in that time. We need not only to build more houses but to build them better. Our constituents deserve and, rightly, expect both quantity and quality.

Obviously, housing is a matter of supply and demand. Let us deal with demand first. Since the mid-90s, the nation’s population has grown by between 9 million and 10 million, principally because of immigration.

Governments of all persuasions—I am making this deliberately a non-party matter—have failed to build the homes required to meet that increased demand. The result has been a huge backlog in housing need—probably of 3 million or 4 million, although I have seen all sorts of estimates. Clearing that backlog and meeting new annual demand would require us to create several hundreds of thousands of homes every year for decades to come, which, again, all Governments have failed to do.

On the face of it, the answer is simple: build more houses. But with our planning system, that is far easier said than done. The real question is not whether to build, but where to build, and not just because demand is higher in some places than in others. All of us have run into vested interest groups who oppose new build estates. Often those groups can have legitimately held and valid concerns about overdevelopment, the impact on local amenities and infrastructure, or the concreting over of local countryside.

If we want to attack this problem properly, we should not see nimbys as irrational or selfish. Indeed, their feelings are entirely understandable. A home is probably the most significant investment that a family will ever make. So-called nimbys quite rightly want their children to grow up in a decent home in a good-quality neighbourhood. If someone has moved to a rural or semi-rural area, already facing stretched public services or congested roads, they will not wish to see their idyllic new home engulfed by rapid and substantial urban sprawl, or local infrastructure placed under unnecessary or additional stress.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case and is absolutely right in the way he is laying out the problem and how people see it. Is he aware not just of nimbyism but of yimbyism—the “yes, in my backyard” movement? It says that many people are willing to accept densification, particularly in British towns, to see more investment in town centres and to breathe life back into those towns, both socially and economically. That goes with the grain of what people want and also cuts housing costs, both to rent and to buy.

Mr Davis: I agree entirely. It is slightly separate from the main thrust of my argument, but my hon. Friend is exactly right. One of the issues is quality of community, which is addressed directly by what he just said.

How do we get around the nimby problem in its conventional sense? I believe that a large part of the answer is garden towns and villages. It is not a new proposal but a tried and tested policy, albeit with some tweaks to deliver it in the 21st century. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) has spoken about it before, as have I, and there have been Policy Exchange think-tank papers on it. It is not that new, but it is worth resurrecting. In the 20th century, the garden city movement resulted in the creation of towns such as Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, now populated by around 30,000 and 40,000 people in each case. Those new garden towns and cities were great successes. What is the measure of that? Nearly 3 million people live in the 32 towns created under the New Towns Acts 1946. Reviving these ideas will hold the key to solving much of the housing crisis.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for a really fascinating speech and hope that the debate will be of equal quality. There is an issue with density. Garden cities are a fantastic idea, whether Hampstead garden suburb, Welwyn Garden City or the others, but we have some of the lowest density cities in the world. We are a small country with a high-density per-kilometre population compared with elsewhere in the world. How does he square that circle with the high-quality environment that he wants to see?

Mr Davis: Part of that fits in with what my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) said, but I will deal with the point about the high density of the population in a moment.

Let us talk about the politics of nimbyism. Today, in a village in my constituency, a small development of 100 homes would generate thousands of objections. That is inevitably what happens. A garden town could deliver tens of thousands of homes and, if put in the right place, would probably generate a few hundred objections. I will talk about how to minimise that, too. Such a scheme would be fruitless unless we can ensure that new developments generate the funding they need to become places where people actually want to live. That is key.

Part of the problem with the existing process is that a mass of potential funding for infrastructure can quickly disappear, captured not by the local community but by landowners and developers. As soon as a hectare of farming land gets planning permission, its value will shoot up roughly a hundredfold. That is the order of magnitude. It goes from £21,000 for the average hectare of agricultural land to an enormous average residential land value of £2.1 million per hectare—that is outside of London. However, the vast majority of that will go to the landowner and the developer. About 27% will be captured by the state, mostly by the Treasury—that is over and above the money brought in by section 106 agreements.

There is no guarantee that money will be spent locally. Indeed, there is almost a guarantee that it will not be spent locally—I am looking at my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), a former Treasury Minister, as I say that. This system starves local communities of funding that could pay for necessary infrastructure within the development, such as schools, roads, train stations, GPs and hospitals, fibre optics or cycle lanes—you name it—or even funding that could pay for larger and cheaper homes, which comes to the point about density. The result is piecemeal development around existing settlements that lacks the proper amenities to cope.

The solution lies with the example I have referred to already, set during the 20th century. The construction of new towns was centred around radical but effective legislation that allowed new town development corporations to buy large tracts of land at their existing use value. That meant that when buying up farmland for garden towns, the corporations paid the agricultural use price rather than the hope value, or hypothetical market price. I want to propose a slightly more sophisticated approach, because I do not really like expropriation—I am a Conservative, remember. We will have to have some sort of compulsory purchase, but there should be a proper compensation for that.

[Mr David Davis]

Consider an example of a 1,000 hectare garden town, a little smaller than Welwyn Garden City. Purchasing 1,000 hectares of land at agricultural value would cost £21 million, but as soon as it has planning permission the value would rise to £2.1 billion—remember that number. There is no change to the underlying land usefulness and no work undertaken—that is just a change of planning permission. But a Government-created garden town development corporation might pay the existing owners, let's say, 10% of the development value. That is still £210 million, so we are now talking about a pretty rich farmer. That is ten times the existing use value and a profit for him of £190 million, but it still leaves £1.9 billion of uncaptured asset value. That £1.9 billion surplus can be used to invest in the town's infrastructure, schools, medical centres, parks, pedestrian walkways, high-speed optical links, and road and rail connections.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate; he is making some very important points. Does he agree that part of the success of the new towns was around the provision of social housing and that there needs to be a substantial programme of that within the programme that he is setting out to the House this evening?

Mr Davis: Frankly, I see nothing difficult about that, because I am talking about creating communities that have been designed. When communities are designed, all sorts of social structures are created. I will come back to the detail in a minute, but I do not have a problem with anything that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

As I say, the design is done as a single entity. Unlike the chaotic marginal extensions and infills of current development, we can ensure the developments are well designed. We know how to build successful communities—we have plenty of evidence. We know how to design out crime. We know how to separate traffic from pedestrian ways and cycle-to-school routes. If we select locations properly, we can ensure links that facilitate getting to work, shopping and entertainment.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I admire my right hon. Friend's ambition in looking to achieve such large new towns. In my remarks, I will argue that we are probably better off looking at sustainable extensions to existing communities, although I admire his ambition. Does he not recognise that we have tried this with eco-towns, no more than 20 years ago? Not a single one succeeded. There was so much opposition that I fear his laudable aims will not be realised.

Mr Davis: Well, that is the rest of the argument. My aim is to create a well-designed town, which is attractive to live in. I looked around my own part of the world and I thought, "I can see where they would go." I am not going to say it publicly as I do not want to change the land values, but I could certainly see that.

These developments would be built in areas of comparatively low population. They will not be on top of an existing town, as my hon. Friend describes, so they can, to a large extent, sidestep the nimby problem.

Even in cases where there is a hamlet near to a proposed site, considering the size of the surplus, it could be used to buy out those who are objecting, with a small premium on the existing market price, a little bit of help with moving and the payment being tax free. That would minimise the nimby problem.

It is not as though we are short of space for these new developments. As my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) said, we often hear that the UK is full or that further development risks damaging our beautiful countryside. I am afraid I do not agree with such arguments. My hon. Friend has been in a helicopter more times than I have, so he will know that if he flies from London to York or Hereford to York, or wherever he likes, if he looks out of the window he will see that unless passing over a major conurbation, it is like looking at a golf course. Only 8.7% of England is developed; in Scotland, it would be a tiny fraction.

Bob Seely: My right hon. Friend may find that that figure is disputed. When we look at motorway service stations and urban lighting, we see that urban sprawl means the number is significantly greater than 8.7%. That number represents a very narrow definition and there are people who would at least double it.

Mr Davis: Like all mathematicians, as I am, I always treat numbers carefully. My hon. Friend might note that I said, "Look out of the window of a helicopter." If he does that, he will see what I am talking about—large amounts of free tracts of land. I am talking about not just any old land, but land near motorways, railway hubs or the old Beeching railway lines, if we wanted to rebuild some of those. There are a whole series of places where we could put people.

It is not just a numbers game either. As the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and others have said, new communities need to have character. They need to be attractive to all sorts of members of society. Garden villages and towns make that possible. I am not necessarily trying to introduce another policy aim, but instead of shoehorning new houses into any nook and cranny we can find in existing settlements, we can build good-quality, spacious homes in new developments.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): On that point, will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: I have to stop there as I have nearly finished. We can build good-quality, spacious homes in new developments—well-designed homes in well-designed communities. Learning from previous development of garden villages and new towns, we can avoid past mistakes and build attractive, pleasant places that people will genuinely want to call home. In many ways, this is a matter of property rights. What we are aiming for is the best balance of affordability, ambition and respect for local residents of any mass house building proposal currently on the table. They are based on a proven model of success. Let's get building.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As colleagues will see, this is a very well subscribed debate. If we are to get everybody in, that requires speeches of seven minutes.

7.37 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing this important debate and on setting out many of the arguments that I hope to advance in my contribution.

The statistics speak for themselves: more people living with parents for longer; more people private renting, unable to get on the housing ladder; lower rates of home ownership; and adults aged between 35 and 45 now three times more likely to be renting than 20 years ago. The system is broken, the symptoms are many, but the root cause is always a lack of housing supply. This is basic supply and demand, and we must take the action needed to address what is a spiralling crisis.

I speak out on this issue because I have been there. I understand it and I know that millions of young people are suffering because we are not building enough homes. In short, my lived experience makes me a “yimby”, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) called it—yes-in-my-backyard, pro-housing, pro-development and cognisant of the economic potential that house building brings. I want to see us build it now and build it all: social, affordable and unaffordable, even. All can play their part in tackling the housing crisis.

So what must we do to get things moving? Quick wins to deliver more housing supply would include the restoration of mandatory housing targets to at least the 300,000 previously committed to by the Government and ideally more; but beyond overarching targets, we must stand by the requirement for councils to show a five-year supply of land, and ensure that local plans are still required to be evidence-based and open to challenge from a planning inspector. Failure to do so allows local authorities throughout the country to under-provide consistently if they wish to do so. That is a scandal, and enabling it to happen would be an abdication of the Government’s basic duty to provide a safe and secure home for all.

What of new ideas to improve housing delivery? We should give urgent consideration to the introduction of a “builder’s remedy” in areas where no credible local plan exists. If a local authority is unwilling to play its part in tackling the national housing crisis, central Government must step in and compel it to do so. The builder’s remedy is not new; it has been around in the United States since the early 1980s, when the California State Legislature passed the Housing Accountability Act 1982. Such a measure in the UK would ensure that local authorities agreed to a compliant housing element in their local plan documents. If they did not do so, their development controls would be restricted, and development would be not just centrally determined, but determined under far less stringent requirements.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): There may be something in what the hon. Gentleman is saying. However, following a planning appeal in Goring, in my constituency, the inspector said that even if every bit of grass in the whole town were built on, the council would still not be able to meet the Government’s theoretical target—and that would mean no green gaps at all between habitations. Would the hon. Gentleman allow exceptions to his general proposal?

Andrew Western: Given that this is a multi-layered and complex process, I am not certain that I would. I would be looking into questions such as housing density, and considering other flexible options that we could adopt to deliver that result, alongside broader reforms of the planning system. If we are to tackle the housing crisis credibly, we must look at planning reform as well as the supply of land. I will say more about that shortly.

Those are the quick wins—including the builder’s remedy—but what of the sustainable longer-term changes that we need to plan effectively for greater housing delivery? There are two key elements: reforming the planning system, and increasing the supply of land. First, we must accept that our 76-year-old discretionary planning system is not fit for purpose. The Town and Country Planning Act 1947 should be scrapped, because it stymies development. Perfectly acceptable applications are rejected on the flimsiest of grounds if there is local opposition, often coming from those making their feelings known from the safety and security of a comfortable home of their own. What should replace that planning system? We must shift away from a discretionary system to one that is rules-based, underpinned by a flexible zoning code, and determined nationally for local implementation. Land would be allocated for certain uses, and if a compliant application for the usage deemed appropriate for that land was received, it would be automatically approved. The system would be clear, fair, even-handed and efficient.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fascinating speech, and a powerful case. Does he agree that as part of reform of the planning system, developers should be encouraged to build on existing brownfield sites in towns and cities? Many such areas are very large and could contain a large amount of housing, and many English towns and cities have relatively low density and a great deal of brownfield land.

Andrew Western: I entirely agree. I am in no way opposed to increasing density, and, indeed, unlocking the more than 1 million homes that currently have planning permission on brownfield sites. However, that alone will not resolve the issue. In comparison with our European neighbours, we are short of some 4.3 million homes per capita, so there is more to do than simply increasing density on brownfield land, although there is a potential for up to 1.5 million additional units.

Of course, even a reformed planning system needs adequate land supply. There are few issues thornier than this, but the fact is that whatever the density, whatever the tenure type and whichever way we cut the cake, there are not enough brownfield sites in urban areas to meet our housing need. We have to be honest about that, and we fail future generations when we are not. It is for this reason that I believe we must now look to the green belt for additional land capacity.

One option would be to provide brownfield land within the green belt for development, as my colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench propose. I would support that in a heartbeat, but a more radical option—to which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden alluded in connection with the use of garden cities—would be to allow all green-belt land within 1 mile of a commuter railway station, and not subject to

[Andrew Western]

any other protections, to be used for housing. Such a move could deliver between 1.9 million and 2.1 million homes in locations where people actually want to live: on the outskirts of major conurbations, with the connectivity enabling them to take advantage of all that that offers. However, the point about protections is important, because with either of these options, national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest and green spaces with protections would be left untouched. Our genuine natural beauty would be preserved, rather than the artificial construct that is the green belt—in truth, less a green belt than an urban choke.

That is how we should drive the delivery of new housing. We need testing housing targets, five-year land supply, sound local plans and a builder's remedy now, planning reform, flexible zoning and strategically managed building on the green belt in the long term. None of this is easy, but if we are to tackle generational inequality, uphold the promise that each generation should do better than the last, deliver rapid economic growth and ensure that everyone has access to a safe and secure home of their own, we must meet this challenge regardless. We have a unique opportunity to side with the builders, not the blockers, and to truly start planning for growth. I am, and always will be, proudly Labour and proudly yimby, but I am proudest of all that it is now clear that a Labour Government will respond to this unprecedented challenge and deliver the new housing that our country so desperately needs.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind the House of my advice about seven-minute speeches. Others will be squeezed if Members do not stick to that. I am sure that Kit Malthouse will provide a brilliant example.

7.47 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I will do my best, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, tangential though it may be. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on his speech, much of the contents of which I agreed with.

Some four years ago, when I was Housing Minister, I decided to hold a housing summit in my largely rural constituency—220 square miles of beautiful rolling Hampshire downland, much of it an area of outstanding natural beauty. About 150, shall we say, more senior members of society showed up for the event in a village hall, and it was obvious from the outset that I was heading for a beating. I began my remarks by posing two questions to the assembled group. I asked them first to put their hands up if they had a child or grandchild over 25 still living at home, and about half of them did so. I then asked them to put their hands up if they had bought their first home in their 20s, and about two thirds of them did so.

Having thus posited the problem, we went on to have quite a civilised conversation about where houses should be going in my constituency and, indeed, in much of the south-east—for these people had come from far and

wide. In truth, the message to people who are resistant to or nervous about housing development—even to the small number of verifiable nimbys among us—is that whether they like it or not, the houses are coming. A generation that has been denied access to housing will eventually come of age and be able to vote for councils and councillors, Members of Parliament and Governments, who will deliver what that generation has been denied and put those houses in place.

Mark Pawsey: How many sites have been allocated following that meeting?

Kit Malthouse: I am pleased to say that my constituency overall is forecast to take something like 30,000 homes over the next 10 years or so. There are some questions to be asked about where the houses are going and what they are going to look like, but those are fundamentally the only two questions that we have to ask. We are building a lot. Indeed, I hope that over the next 10 years, Andover, the main town in my constituency, will get close to double the size that it has been in the past.

This is not just a problem for those individuals who are denied housing; it is a problem for the nation as a whole. We can see the impact of restrictions on housing and the inability to access housing elsewhere. In the United States, for example, a brain drain is taking place from major coastal cities such as San Francisco, New York and Washington DC as young, highly productive people who cannot access housing are leaving in large numbers. In this country, we might see that spreading to other parts, but because we are a smaller country geographically, we will see other impacts. We have seen lower household formations over the last 20 years than we have before, along with a declining birth rate, and more and more young people are choosing to live and work overseas. The history of human economic achievement has shown us that the closer we gather and crowd together, the more productive and innovative we are, so there is going to be a long-term impact for us overall, economically as well as individually.

Now, how do we deliver those houses? I do not think that anybody believes that we should not be delivering 300,000 houses today. When I was Housing Minister, I had a church totaliser on my whiteboard showing me where those houses were going to come from and how we were going to get there. For me, there are broadly three things that we need to do. The first involves the planning system. It has long been an obsession of wonkery that the planning system needs to be swept away because it is not working, yet local authorities tell us that 92% of applications are approved and that it is functioning. They do, however, express a frustration with it, which is that the system as it is currently configured has become a huge game of poker. Developers, councillors and local people are gambling on what is going to happen, and somebody in a suit, male or female, from Bristol—the planning inspector—will be the final croupier who decides who wins the game of poker. That is just not good enough. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston said, certainty is what produces results.

So for me, the first step is the abolition of the Planning Inspectorate, alongside setting hard targets for local authorities but giving them an absolute right democratically to choose where those houses should go in their area.

Hopefully that will be brownfield, and some of it may indeed be garden villages. It is a great sadness to me that the Oxford-Cambridge arc seems to have been abandoned by the Government; I had huge ambitions for that part of the world. If we can create certainty by putting local authorities in charge, with those hard targets, they will know that they have their fate in their own hands and we can just get on and build.

The second element of the planning system that needs to be removed is the viability test. Many developers over-density and hide behind the viability test. They do the local community out of its rightful contribution from the uplift in value because they show a spreadsheet of whether a development is going to make money or not and they justify adjustments here and there. That is particularly the case in London, where it is simply impossible to overpay for land. The viability test says that anyone who has overpaid for land can just build a 44-storey skyscraper that will pay for their effective overpayment and largesse. If we get rid of the viability test, we would get an actual market for land and it would be possible to overpay. We would then see realistic values and get more land coming through.

Finally, one of the key elements for the acceptance of housing in local areas, alongside the need for the restoration and strengthening of neighbourhood planning, is a strong sense of aesthetics. I certainly see this in my constituency. I have joked in the past that if they would only build thatched cottages in my constituency, we could build thousands of the damned things. Aesthetics matter. When we look at some of our historic towns and cities, we see that they have been scarred by previous generations building rubbish stuff. The houses that were built in the 1960s and '70s have largely been—or will largely be—bulldozed and replaced. Hardly anything from that era will be deemed to be a conservation area, unlike so much of the mass development created by the Victorians. If we get the aesthetics right, along with providing local people with the certainty that they are in charge of their destiny on housing, acceptability will rise.

Let me give the House an example. Anyone who has the joy of going to Stamford in Lincolnshire—I did not mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) that I was going to mention his constituency—can see a game of two halves. They will find developments in the classic tradition that look like Stamford, and people queue round the block to buy those houses. On the other side of town, they will see developments that look like the same old rubbish that is built anywhere else in the UK, and they will scar that beautiful town for many generations to come.

We need a rigid aesthetic code looking at vernacular architecture. We need to put local authorities in charge, rather than having arbitrary decision making by the Planning Inspectorate. We need to get rid of artificially inflated land values through the abolition of the viability test. We also need some hard numbers that will add up to 300,000, or possibly more, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston said. Then I think we would stand a chance of answering the question that we have to answer for the next generation: will their life be better than ours? If we can do all that, the answer may well be yes.

7.55 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is good to follow the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse); I think I agreed with everything he said. I will focus my brief comments on public housing supply across Northern Ireland. We have a chronic under-supply of homes across the country. In terms of public supply, I believe that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive remains the largest public housing organisation not just in the United Kingdom but in Europe. By and large, it does a fabulous job in very difficult circumstances. It used to be the organisation that managed some of the largest housing estates across Europe. Many of those estates were sold off, and some were bulldozed because they were not effective or efficient. The impact resulting from those decisions is that we do not have a good supply of public housing.

Unlike other public housing authorities, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a statutory duty to meet need for the homeless when they present as homeless. This is difficult enough in normal UK housing circumstances, but in Northern Ireland community tensions flare up from time to time, which puts additional pressures on public bodies, not least the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. For example, last year we had a feud between certain sections of the community, and that internecine dispute between rival groups and organisations impacted on people's lives. Threats were levelled at people, and people were put out of their homes. The crisis became a real problem going into a particular weekend during the year. On that crisis weekend, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had on its books five properties across the whole of Northern Ireland that it would have been able to give people if they presented as homeless. It is little wonder that we have a housing accommodation emergency in Northern Ireland. Those five properties were for the entirety of Northern Ireland, not just for dealing with that particular one-off situation of the feud. Those properties were all that was available to deal with all the other problems relating to the lack of housing supply.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has to deal with other routine housing need. Levels of homelessness are hidden from sight, more in Northern Ireland than anywhere else. Indeed, post pandemic, the levels of homelessness have been exposed. The opportunity to sofa-surf at a relative or friend's house is no longer available. However, the number of properties available is nowhere near the level necessary to meet the need, despite the fact that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is still the largest provider of public housing.

The figures are significant. The demand for temporary accommodation—a marker of homelessness—soared from a pre-pandemic level of 3,000 placements in Northern Ireland in 2019 to 9,000 placements last year. This week, I got new figures from the Housing Executive to suggest that we will probably exceed the 10,000 mark this year. Those are the most up-to-date figures that the Housing Executive has presented to me in recent days. As an elected official for more than 26 years, I have worked very closely with the Housing Executive. It is an amazing organisation that is staffed by great people who care, but they are struggling to meet very intense need, which must be addressed by a new strategy.

[*Ian Paisley*]

The Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area is not coterminous with all my North Antrim constituency, but it gives a sample of what the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is up against. From November 2022 to January 2023, 438 people presented as homeless and 252 of them were offered temporary accommodation. The rest could not be facilitated. That is approximately three families a day presenting in one part of my constituency and the biggest public housing provider does not have stock available. This is not sustainable and radical action is required to fix it.

Across Northern Ireland, households stay in temporary accommodation for up to 32 weeks on average. Thankfully, the average is lower in the Mid and East Antrim area, at about 16 weeks—it is about 14 weeks in the Causeway Coast and Glens area—but it is still a massive problem. There is so much reliance on private landlords, who are themselves working in a squeezed marketplace.

Migration and immigration have had a knock-on impact on Northern Ireland's housing need, too. Northern Ireland is pulling its weight with both refugees and migrants, doing proportionately more than some parts of Scotland, but the impact on the availability of housing and temporary accommodation has been challenging.

Hostels and hotels have now become a Home Office policy, and they are regularly filled by long-term contracts for migrants and refugees. They are not available to meet indigenous housing and homeless need. A number of hotels in the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area are now full-time occupied, so their availability for urgent temporary accommodation has gone.

I would like the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to be given power to assist in two ways. First, I would like it to be permitted to buy back stock and to add to its asset base, including by being permitted to buy no-longer-used nursing homes, hotels and other such facilities to start to address the 10,000 people who require homes. Secondly, I would like it to be able to borrow money and engage the market, instead of having to fight in a buoyant housing market with one hand tied behind its back while housing associations are not restricted in the same way. Allowing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to borrow money would enable it to compete on a fair basis.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive invests hundreds of millions of pounds in housing stock each year, and it is regularly the choice of tens of thousands of people in Northern Ireland who want a happy, settled, good-standard home, but in the modern era it must be able to invest to improve and compete.

At the end of this debate, I do not expect the Minister to be able to address all these issues. I respect her greatly, and I know I will not hear any platitudes from her about how this is best addressed through the Northern Ireland Office or how this would all be sorted out if we just got the Government sorted out in Northern Ireland. None of the issues I have raised requires a Northern Ireland Government to be in place; they require the housing sector to be liberated to do the things I have asked. I encourage the Minister to speak to her Cabinet colleagues and to encourage our Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to push for these issues to be addressed, to allow the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to borrow money and to buy back housing stock, otherwise the housing crisis in Northern Ireland will deepen.

8.3 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for securing this debate on such a pressing and important topic, which I have been involved with, in one way or another, for 20 years in elected office. I was pleased to lead a Westminster Hall debate on the related topic of the future for SME house builders just the other week, and today's debate provides a welcome opportunity to hammer home some of the points I made then.

As a Conservative, the idea of the UK as a property-owning democracy is one about which I feel very strongly, and it worries me deeply that, for many younger people, home ownership is increasingly out of reach. Unsurprisingly, given my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for SME house builders, I have a strongly held view that the sector can play an important role in helping to address the dual problems of housing accessibility and affordability across the UK.

The Home Builders Federation reports that, in 2020, the SME house building sector delivered about 22,000 homes. To put that in context, according to the Federation of Master Builders, SME builders could deliver 65,000 homes by 2025, compared with 12,000 in 2021, given the right conditions.

For those who are not aware of how vital the SME sector is to housing delivery, let me explain. SME developers typically carry out smaller developments built on trickier sites, and the SME sector tends to go where volume house builders cannot. As well as this, they often face less vocal opposition, as they deliver brownfield housing up and down the country, instead of the large-scale developments that often do not have the infrastructure to go along with them and which are responsible for so much so-called nimbyism. The sector delivered 39% of all homes built in England in the late 1980s yet, 40 years later, it barely manages 10% of our annual housing completions.

The rising cost of materials is causing difficulties for developers across the board, which is why I welcome initiatives such as the one developed by Travis Perkins, based in my Northampton South constituency, that enables SME house builders to access building supplies and materials directly without facing lengthy pre-approval checks. Another issue for SME house builders is access to finance, on which my APPG is soon to deliver a report. That includes difficulties in the Land Registry process for recording changes of property ownership. Labour shortages are another issue, as labour is crucial to the whole process.

Kit Malthouse: It is extremely important to recognise that small house builders, which were largely wiped out in the 2007-08 crash, have not re-emerged. Does my hon. Friend think the Government should look at the generation of new house builders—in the '70s we had Lawrie Barratt and the chap behind Redrow, these big house builders—in the same way that they are looking at the generation of new scientists and new companies that promote science and technology? They have a strategy and funding all of their own, but I have yet to see anything that would stimulate new house building companies for the future. Does he agree that is something the Government should look at?

Andrew Lewer: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, and the APPG produced a report in which we suggested a Homes England for SME house builders to try to address those points.

The planning system has already been touched on in this debate, and I say it again for the record that removing binding national housing targets from our house building system was a mistake. When the history of this Government is written, that mistake will loom larger than it already does. A different way was available and that was, if not a zonal planning system reset, some way towards that, as referenced by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). This Administration are probably out of time for anything so radical, but other options exist.

I have come to understand that the issue of planning also relates to planning officer case load. As one town planner said to me, although a 20-unit brownfield development built by an SME is likely to require less work than a 400-unit greenfield development built by a volume house builder, it will not require 20 times less work. SME house builders are therefore disadvantaged in the planning process. Indeed, the explosion of process is a speech in itself. We have an entire sector that can help, but it is blocked in so many ways.

In his opening speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden touched on migration in detail. Eight million—it is on us as national politicians, whether or not we supported that unsustainable level of migration. I did not, but it does not matter. A national solution of greatly increased house building is absolutely essential.

Ideas are flowing. My right hon. Friend made insightful and challenging points in favour of garden towns and cities. Then there are the ideas in the Bacon review, an impressive and important piece of work led by my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) and commissioned by the Government, and now in need of implementation. It is about self-commissioning, not just self-build. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) outlined ideas on building up, adding storeys, not high rises, about which I was recently interviewed on Times Radio. There is also the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) and for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and our fellow members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, as I wish it were still called.

It may be something of a cliché to say that many of our people will only truly believe in capitalism if they have a piece of capital of their own but, as Terry Pratchett once wrote:

“The reason that clichés become clichés is that they are the hammers and screwdrivers in the toolbox of communication.”

8.9 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate, which was eloquently opened by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). We have heard some fantastic contributions from Members across the House.

I know that we would all agree that housing should be a basic human right and that it should be safe, secure and genuinely affordable, whether it is to rent in the

private rented sector or the social sector, or to own. Yet in Britain today that is simply not available to all. Far too many people are homeless. We have more than 100,000 families in temporary accommodation. Hundreds of thousands of people are trapped in the building safety crisis, many in a tenure called leasehold. Of course, it should be a feudal relic of the past, yet it is still alive and kicking in England and Wales. Those people are classed as homeowners, but we know that in reality that is not what they are, as they have fewer rights than homeowners. In fact, someone has more rights if they purchase a toaster than they do if they are a leaseholder. That is an unfortunate fact and many across this Chamber have again spoken eloquently about it.

We have 1.2 million people in genuine housing need now. The fundamental issue here is a lack of housing supply with the right mix, in the right places and with the right tenure. I am going to focus on public housing, which the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned, because without public housing or social housing being a fundamental part of the mix, we will never meet what should be a consensus figure: about 300,000. I know that some have been more ambitious and suggested 350,000. If we look back to the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, we had about 90,000 to 100,000 social houses built. Whether under a Labour Administration or a Conservative one, that must be a fundamental part of the mix. History is staring us in the face there. Yet last year's figure was minus 14,000, when we take into account right to buy and demolition. Just 7,400 were built. If we map things forward over the next five years, the figure is just 6,400—even less than that pitiful figure of 7,400 last year.

How do we achieve this? I concur with the concept of garden cities and garden towns. I am a son of Wythenshawe, which was the largest council estate in Europe, thanks to the likes of Lord and Lady Simon. So I have seen the impact that can be made. People had gardens for the first time. They were beautiful gardens and this was well-built social housing. So we certainly need greater intervention, regardless of what political party is in power. Conservative Members will not be surprised to hear that I have no faith in the current Government delivering on that scale, because the past 13 years have demonstrated that that is not going to happen. However, we need that bold transformation—that intervention in the housing market.

I would direct the right-to-buy subsidy to the First Homes initiative; that is a great idea. The former shadow Housing Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), proposed that. It is a great idea but it is not resourced properly. In fact, only 35 First Homes were built last year; the target was 10,000. Again, there was an over-promise but a lack of delivery. It is a good idea in principle so why not use that subsidy more creatively? Why not use the £23 billion a year that is spent on a dysfunctional private rented sector in housing benefit to build genuinely affordable social housing and indeed garden cities? That could be done through Homes England or whatever it may be called in the future—it could be done through a Government agency.

Too many people, young people in particular, have had the drawbridge pulled up from under their feet in regards to home ownership or renting, at an affordable rate, a safe, secure home. The only way to do this in future is for everybody, across the political persuasions,

[Mike Amesbury]

to be bold and show leadership in their communities. Sometimes genuine concerns will be raised about a lack of infrastructure in what we might class as “cowpat communities”. The former Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), referred to some shoddy build that we have in estates across the country, which is undoubtedly the case. So let us build something beautiful in the future. Let us kick that drawbridge down and let us have opportunities for generations to come.

8.15 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing this important debate, in which I am going to draw on the experiences of my constituency, where we are doing our part to deliver new housing at scale. I also want to talk about the challenges in delivering new homes and in delivering the infrastructure that is needed alongside residential development, and thus the reasons why people often do not like development in the first place.

In Rugby we have an exemplar of high-quality, infrastructure-led development at Houlton, on the eastern side of the town. It is a sustainable urban extension to the town of Rugby, which has been master-planned by the developers Urban&Civic. Once complete, it will boast some 6,000 homes, four schools, a district centre, transport connections by both road and rail, and a variety of leisure, retail and community spaces. Houlton has been developed on a brownfield site, one previously home to the famous Rugby radio mast, which was clearly visible from the M1 motorway.

The Houlton development pays tribute to that history, as the first transatlantic message from the United Kingdom to the United States was broadcast from the site to the town of Houlton in Maine. One interesting fact is that by the time the new community at Houlton in my constituency is complete, its population will be significantly greater than that of its namesake. I understand that it is also a unique example of a place in the UK taking its name from a location in the US, rather than the other way around.

An important part of getting that development under way has been bringing communities along and getting support for the proposals. Back in the noughties, when I was a councillor at Rugby Borough Council, very extensive community engagement was done to understand the concerns of neighbouring communities to this site that we now know as Houlton. Particular engagement was done in Hillmorton and the village of Clifton-upon-Dunsmore to alleviate the concerns that residents nearby might have. Technology was used to provide computerised effects of what the new development would look like, to take out the uncertainty factor and the fear that people had about what they might be having there. That technology has advanced in recent years and it should be used on all occasions to give people a clearer idea of what the development is going to look like.

People are bothered about the fact that when new homes are built, often the roads, schools and health provision come afterwards. At Houlton, the local authority—Rugby Borough Council—Warwickshire County Council and the developer have worked together

to bring forward infrastructure at an early stage. Road access, with a link road between the new development and Rugby’s town centre, was delivered very early, with a financial loan from Homes England. That has enabled traffic to flow in and out of Houlton without having to travel through the community of Hillmorton, where people might have reasonably objected to this new development. The developers have brought forward outstanding educational provision, building a secondary school around the historic radio station, the one that broadcast around the world. The design is of such quality that it beat Battersea power station in a competition about the re-use of original buildings.

A primary school was also opened there four or five years ago. When it was built, there was not only respect for the area in which it was built, but sufficient investment to develop something at scale. But one area where we have encountered difficulty in securing the infrastructure that we need is in the development of health services. Here I would like to contrast the difference that I have experienced in dealing with different agencies and bodies. The Department for Education, Homes England and Warwickshire County Council have demonstrated great flexibility in bringing forward the road and education provision. But, regrettably, the health service and the network of bodies, boards and bureaucracies that support it have proved very inflexible. A surgery for eight GPs has been approved as part of Houlton’s district centre, but so far we are nowhere near getting any agreement to bring that facility forward. I hope that, as we continue this vital debate both today and in the future, Ministers will engage with those other bodies to ensure that infrastructure is delivered on time.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden made a good case for garden cities—for additional, totally new communities. However, we have been down that road before and nothing has happened. The sustainable urban extension to existing sites is the only way that we will practically achieve anything like the volume of housing that we need. Of course, expanding an existing community has a wider economic benefit, particularly in respect of our town centres, many of which are struggling, as people are buying more and more online. I was very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) say that one of his communities will be expanded to double its existing size. It will always be easier to expand an existing community.

Central Government have a role to play in encouraging local authorities to take a proactive and pro-sustainable approach to development. If Government fail to properly require planning authorities to build the new homes, we will not see the significant progress that everybody in this Chamber wants to see. We must encourage our local authorities—Rugby has already done this—to develop clear and comprehensive local plans that set out in detail where development should take place. My real concern is that, in withdrawing the targets and making them advisory, we have created a charter whereby development is constantly stymied by the loudest voices who often oppose development.

8.22 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the debate and congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing it.

I think that we are all in agreement that we have a housing crisis, and that young people in particular deserve an opportunity to buy a decent home for themselves, or at least to rent one at an affordable price and of a decent habitable standard. The proportion of people renting in the UK has grown substantially since the mid-1990s, from 29% to 35%, and, in tandem, more people are paying a higher portion of their salary to rent their homes. Shelter UK estimates that private renters are spending more than 30% of their income on rent.

Finding a good-quality home at a fair price has become a never-ending task for some people. There is a general consensus that we need to deliver around 300,000 new homes every year if we are to overcome the crisis. However, despite the efforts of successive Governments, this has not been achieved since the 1950s, and we should ask ourselves why that is.

It seems like an obvious question, but much of the debate focuses on planning, and indeed on blaming the nimbys. But if we look at the numbers, we can see that building, not planning, is the key driver behind this shortfall. In the past six years, we have granted planning permission for an average of just over 300,000 homes per year. Some 80%, or possibly more, of planning applications were granted last year. Although I agree that the process needs to be streamlined, that is not the reason why the homes are not being built.

So what is the reason? The first is to do with profitability. Developers build at a rate that the local market can absorb without depressing prices, because, obviously, they need to make a profit on their activities, which is quite reasonable. Another reason is capacity in the industry. We do not suffer high rates of unemployment in the construction industry—quite the opposite, in fact. In the absence of thousands of construction workers sitting about with nothing to do, the simple reality is that it is not possible for us to build 300,000 houses a year without an informed strategy to train and retain the workers required to deliver them.

It is also important to consider the types of housing that we want to see built. We urgently need affordable housing, but developers make most of their money from larger, more expensive homes, and that worsens the shortage of affordable housing. I am sure that we all have examples in our constituencies of local developments with affordable housing quotas being specified as conditions of planning permission, only for those quotas to be significantly watered down on the basis of commercial viability as that development progresses. The result is that the least well-off in society are bearing the brunt of the housing crisis, because it is at its most acute in the affordable and social rented sectors. Here again, demand is outstripping supply, often forcing people to live in cramped and unsuitable temporary accommodation while they await their chance to be allocated a property from the housing register.

Overall, the National Housing Federation has estimated that there are currently 8.5 million people in England with some form of unmet housing need. That is putting huge pressure on the private rental market, keeping rents unaffordably high and preventing many young people from saving for a deposit with which to buy their first home.

I wish to focus my attention specifically on the provision of social housing, especially in rural areas. I also broadly agreed with the comments of the hon. Member for

Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) on social housing. The NHF estimates that 4.2 million people would benefit from a social housing solution, and that 145,000 additional affordable homes need to be built each year, including 90,000 for social rent, and that is just to meet the current need for social housing in England. Despite that, last year just 60,000 new affordable homes were built, and a mere 7,500 homes were built or acquired for social rent.

Put simply, those are astonishing statistics. However, based on my constituents' experiences, they are not surprising. A lack of affordable and social housing is a particular issue for rural constituencies such as mine in North Shropshire. The all-party parliamentary group for rural business, of which I am a member, has estimated that 175,000 people are on rural housing lists at present, with homelessness increasing, especially among young people.

Rural homelessness may be invisible, but it is estimated to have increased by 24% in the past year, according to a study commissioned by English Rural. With average house prices 8.6 times higher in rural areas than in urban areas, this is hardly surprising. Only 11% of annual affordable housing delivery is built in rural areas, and that figure is falling. For every eight homes sold through the right-to-buy policy in a rural area, only one has been replaced. Overall, only 8% of rural housing stock is affordable compared with 19% in urban areas. This not only deprives people of the basic need of a home, but creates a barrier to the rural economy, causing businesses to struggle to recruit the quality of workforce they need to survive. In short, we need more affordable and socially rentable homes, and we especially need them in rural areas.

The impacts of this deficit of social housing are depressing. Many people waiting for social housing are forced into the private rented sector, where homes are often inappropriate, insecure and really expensive. They are also pushing up demand and average rents, working to inflate the demand for housing benefits. Alternatively, those waiting on the housing register are often housed in so-called temporary accommodation—often rooms in bed and breakfasts, hotels or shared houses. Even in my constituency, I have found that they can be unsuitable and even hazardous solutions to the lack of available social housing, and that housing register applicants live in them for far longer than a period that could be considered temporary.

Of course, that lack of housing comes at a substantial social cost. Shelter has suggested that, of the nearly 100,000 households living in temporary accommodation, more than 25% live outside the local authority area they previously lived in. Not only do those people suffer the threat of homelessness, but their only chance of being offered a roof over their head involves moving away from their places of work, critically their support networks, often including childcare, and their children's schools. For a family already suffering the threat of homelessness, that intensifies an already incredibly tough situation.

In my constituency, I have families facing lengthy waits to be provided with a house, and a lot of my casework deals with the quality of social housing. I have a family of seven in a two-bedroom house, unable to find something more suitable despite having been given priority status. I have a woman whose mental health is at rock bottom, having been placed in a bed and breakfast for months on end, and a family with a disabled child unable to find a home with step-free access.

[Helen Morgan]

Like most hon. Members, I also have a constituent struggling with mould and damp in council and local authority housing, which, instead of being treated, has just been given a new extractor fan. One constituent has a disabled child and another suffers from asthma. We all agree that that property is not adequate to meet their needs, and those are just a few examples I have picked out from my casework. We must go further and build at least 150,000 new homes for social rent per year, delivered by empowering local authorities to commission the housing that they need, with an independent inspectorate to evaluate their assessment of that need.

As I noted at the beginning of my speech, none of that can be delivered without training the workforce to deliver it. I think we agree on the need to increase the housing supply, with the right homes in the right places, but social housing must be a key element of delivering that. We need to empower local authorities to put those homes where they are needed and we need a coherent workforce strategy to be able to build them.

8.30 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Mayor. I think this is a very important debate—[*Interruption.*] I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was away with my local government head on there, rather than my parliamentary one.

Clearly housing matters. We should never forget that a house is a home, a place where people live as individuals and bring up families. Therefore, we want to see improvements in housing. We want to see increased quality and we want to see quantity improve. We want to ensure choice in social housing, in the rented sector and, most importantly of all, in the owner-occupier sector. We must also remember the other markets, such as the student let and the holiday let markets, that have a role to play in housing.

As has already been said, in many respects the solution is straightforward: we simply need to build more homes. However, I appreciate that there are barriers to achieving that.

Bob Seely: I have listened to all the contributions, and I am probably out of step with quite a few hon. Members here, but nobody is talking about the failure of the builders to build. The builders are getting the permissions in their tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, but they are land banking the permissions and the land promoters speculate on that. If we could tackle that, would we not get closer to solving the problem?

John Stevenson: I am not totally convinced that that is correct, but it is an interesting point that my hon. Friend makes.

I appreciate that in housing there is a degree of controversy in particular parts of the country, but we should be careful about making lazy assumptions. There is not a national housing market; there are many variations up and down the country. London is different from Manchester, Cornwall is different from Leeds. There are differences between urban and rural, and in many respects the housing market is regional and sub-regional. In my county of Cumbria, the Lake district is a very

different market from Barrow or Carlisle. What is affordable also varies considerably depending on values, supply and of course salaries. Therefore, the housing market is a bit more nuanced than we sometimes think, and we must respect and consider that when we come to making policy.

It is also important that we do not see housing policy in isolation. Tax, whether it is council tax, stamp duty, capital gains tax or inheritance tax, can influence the housing market. How we organise our infrastructure and connectivity—train lines, roads, access to housing and housing developments, bus routes—also has an impact on the housing market. So too, most importantly, do businesses and economic and employment activity.

There are solutions, which hon. Members have already touched upon. I wholeheartedly agree that the responsibility for a local plan lies with the local authority and, if it does not produce one, one should be imposed upon it by Government. I think that is right. On tax incentives, we need to look again at our tax regime, particularly stamp duty and council tax, and hon. Members have already touched upon the planning rules that also need reform.

However, we also need to be bigger in our thinking. We need to think strategically. The Government need to be bold, imaginative, visionary and above all brave. We have an unbalanced nation, principally a north-south divide in our economic performance. The north clearly needs a great deal more investment, both public and private.

We have economically underperformed in the north for many years, but there are opportunities emerging. We have the green revolution, we have the energy policy and the prospect of nuclear plants, and there is an industrial renaissance—I hope—starting to happen. The northern economy is still 15% manufacturing, so there are opportunities. We need more business investment and we need to grow that economy.

The Government should make a commitment to build half a million new homes in the north of England and shift activity to those areas. To achieve that, we need better connectivity and greater incentive for business. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) about new towns. That is an eminently sensible solution. Garden villages can also be part of the solution, as can reclaiming brownfield sites.

I will give two little examples of what can be achieved. In my Carlisle constituency, we have a proposal for a garden village of 10,000 homes. That has been opened up by housing infrastructure funding that will improve the road infrastructure, which will release those 10,000 homes over the next 10 to 20 years. It is well supported: people want to see places such as Carlisle grow, because we need critical mass to support the services that we have in our area. We are, in many respects, an area that needs to attract a greater population.

I was involved with the borderlands growth deal initiative. There are 1.5 million people in the borderlands area. If we superimposed a plan of that area over London, it would stretch to Brighton and almost to Cambridge and Bristol—an area that contains more than 20 million people. There are opportunities for housing and places for people to move to, but at present we do not have the housing supply. With economic

activity, private investment and public infrastructure investment—housing policy cannot be seen in isolation—that would be a win-win for all. It would take pressure off parts of the south, create a stronger north—fundamental to improving the overall performance of our country—create a more balanced country and, above all, create homes for all.

8.36 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing the debate. He will be familiar with New Earswick outside York—the first garden village, and such a desirable place to live today. As York nears the end of its 77-year journey to secure a local plan, I hope that the inspectors look at Labour’s proposals to create new garden towns on the edge of York. That is very much in keeping with the history of our city, where we have 15-minute connectivity and the infrastructure—schools, healthcare and transport facilities—that we need to make the community work.

York has a significant housing supply challenge: along with a low-income economy, the cost of housing is exceptionally high. A single person can afford just 5.6% of properties, but finding those properties is a real challenge. Last year, the cost of properties in York rose by 23.1%—the highest rise anywhere in the country. That costs our economy and families. The challenges are not abating. The only difference is that last month York voted for a Labour council. We are committed to doing everything possible to build homes that people can afford to live in. We need to look at how we can develop supply, especially when it comes to starter homes and social homes.

I encourage the Government to ensure that, when analysing their consultation on short-term holiday lets, robust measures are applied to return lets to residential use. Today, 2,079 lets are being advertised across the York area, and we need those homes back in circulation.

Starting with land, Labour has set out its stall on compulsory purchase. Land needs releasing at scale and at pace, not just for local authorities but for housing associations. Too much is banked, and although that may be profitable for developers, it prevents much-needed house building. We need measures under which land is re-evaluated and brought into use—through compulsory purchase orders, if necessary. Too many are gaming the system. Although our policy and priority is “brownfield first”, green spaces—green lungs—must, where appropriate, be placed in the centre of our communities. That is so important for people’s wellbeing and mental health. We saw throughout the pandemic the price paid by people who were locked into high-density communities.

Secondly, we must address funding. In 2012, the Government imposed a housing revenue account debt on local authorities. Despite the HRA debt cap being removed, councils still have to put money aside to pay the debt and interest. The amount available for repairs and retrofit of existing stock is therefore squeezed, blocking the development of social housing, as that money has to be available to pay off the loan. That is freezing development in York and elsewhere.

In York, the HRA holds about 7,500 properties. The council had to pay for that housing stock using the Public Works Loan Board loan of £121.5 million, which

demands £4.5 million of interest payments each year. We need the Government to address this issue, as it is restraining development. I urge that the debt is lifted from local authorities’ balance sheets, as it is choking off development opportunities and local authorities do not have the resources to meet the demands. The Government will respond that they have lifted the cap on the HRA, but borrowing will be at an even higher interest rate, so we need to see that debt moved to a different balance sheet. I want the Minister to respond to that point, because the debt is having a chilling effect. Local authorities also need greater flexibility with right-to-buy funding, with receipts currently capped at 40% to reinvest.

York’s income from its stock is only £30 million, so once we have addressed our old stock—retrofit and repairs—and put in sustainable measures, there is very little to spend on development without getting into greater debt with greater interest, so we end up with low build and a housing crisis, as many of our authorities face today. The Government need to build out at pace and scale, so we need to address refinancing. If we think about housing as an investment—and as a 60-year investment, because we want to build the quality homes that are needed—we start seeing the equations change, and that investment will bring forward not only housing but opportunity.

Bob Seely: The hon. Lady says that the Government need to build out. The Government do not have these planning permissions; it is the planning industry and the developers that do. How would she persuade the developers to build out? Is that not the issue?

Rachael Maskell: That is what I have been talking about; it is about the structure and the infrastructure of the building environment, which the Government do control.

Thirdly, the Government need to build sustainably. That can be achieved if Homes England is properly funded. I am grateful to Homes England for its time and for enabling me to see what it can achieve. It must not be underfunded, as it needs the right resources to build the required volume and to provide the injection of funding that local authorities need. We need adequate grant funding, as required by the local authority, to build volume at the necessary standard, rather than having to waste precious land—as we see on many sites—on luxury developments that are often set aside for the far east market as opposed to being brought into local use. We need to build according to need, so that we do not waste resources and build luxury developments that nobody can live in; that is a real frustration for my community.

Fourthly, we need to make the numbers count. Rather than having targets, we need obligations. The Government made a significant mistake in bringing house building numbers down to targets only, because the numbers we need to see and the scale we need to talk about will be drawn back.

On planning, we need to ensure that the larger developers are not just sitting on sites, stalling development and gaining on the land. We need to get those sites into use as quickly as possible. That has been a significant failing, because as prices rise, the market itself rises too; we are certainly seeing that in York. We need investment

[*Rachael Maskell*]

in planning departments. We recently took control of the council in York, and found that the planning department had been hollowed out. We do not have a chief planner and the department is significantly understaffed. Even if all the infrastructure is put in place, if we do not have the planning staff on hand, the opportunity for development will be stalled.

We need land, resources, workforce and ambition. In 18 months, Labour will build the homes people need, tackling the burning injustice of housing poverty, and realigning government priorities to create a new generation of sustainable homes. I trust government will move soon.

8.44 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It has been a genuine pleasure to be part of this evening's debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) in his absence on securing it. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for what I thought was an exemplary speech, in which I really could not find anything to disagree with. I say that with deep admiration.

We must confront the stark reality that we are facing a severe shortfall in housing because of the policy choices of successive Governments, a dearth of political leadership at both local and national level, and a lack of honesty with the public about the consequences every time a Member of this House, a local councillor or a local campaign group celebrates blocking new homes. The Centre for Cities estimates that our shortfall is as great as 4.3 million homes. That crisis is stunting our economic growth, leaving young people without the space to start a family, and trapping renters in unsafe accommodation. At our aimed-for build rate of 300,000 homes a year, it would take us some 50 years to put that right, and we are not getting anywhere near that build rate.

Of course, historically we did much better. Home ownership was a moral mission for the Macmillan Government, and it may not have escaped the attention of Conservative Members that his achievements underpinned his huge election victory in 1959, in the way that Mrs Thatcher won huge support through her right-to-buy policy. The contrast with the 1960s could hardly be more stark: in that decade, we built 3.6 million homes, more than we have built in total since the turn of the century. We have created a supply and demand feedback loop of the worst possible kind.

I am afraid that I must take issue with the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) when she says that the planning system is not the problem. I am afraid that it is: that system is fundamentally broken. It is what is driving the fact that someone buying their first home now faces paying nine times their income for it. In the 1980s, the figure was just three times the average salary.

Helen Morgan: I would just like to clarify: it is not the only problem. We give planning permission for all these houses, but we do not build them. We need to address the build-out problem as well as the planning issue.

Mr Clarke: I think the issue of land banking is something of a straw man in these debates, because I have never seen compelling evidence that it happens. I think the reality is that developers need a predictable land supply in order to have a programme of forward build, and that is what largely accounts for that question.

I do not want to make this a starkly political debate, but I am very conscious that it is often the hon. Lady's party that is—I am afraid to say it—the worst offender when it comes to campaigning cynically against the development that we need. I refer colleagues across the House to the Chesham and Amersham by-election a few years ago to see just how detrimental that policy has been to the wider debate. Arguably, it was that election result that led to the disastrous removal of targets, which I think is what is driving tonight's debate in the first place.

Bob Seely: My right hon. Friend talks about the planning system being the problem, not land banking per se. Does he accept the figures from Lichfields, which show that from getting planning permission, it takes eight and a half years for a first house to be built on a large housing estate, and that on average, a 2,000-home housing estate is built out by developers at a rate of 160 homes a year? It takes the best part of two decades to build out a 2,000-home housing estate. Is my right hon. Friend really saying that the development industry is not the problem?

Mr Clarke: I think it is much more about the developers seeking to make sure that they can sell the homes that they are building and about their having a supply of land predictably available to allow them to build into the future. Developers are obviously very constrained at the moment by the scarcity of supply.

The consequence of where we find ourselves is that, according to Schrodgers, the last time house prices were this expensive relative to earnings was 1876, the year that Victoria became Empress of India. That should make us all reflect on what kind of society we have become. Clearly, part of the problem is that we need to control immigration more strictly, and I strongly believe that the numbers announced just before recess were unsustainably high, but this is fundamentally a home-grown problem. Our society does not build the homes that we need to accommodate our existing population, and therefore we need to establish clear targets for housing supply. Doing so is not some kind of Stalinist five-year plan; it is the best way we have yet identified to prevent councils from backsliding on their responsibilities and caving in to what are often small, if noisy, pressure groups. It is my view that the regrettable decision taken by the Prime Minister last year to weaken those targets by removing their legal force was a mistake that has already had far-reaching consequences.

I am prepared to have a sensible debate about how we set our housing targets. We could change our approach and take as our starting point the existing occupied housing stock of an area and apply a rate at which it should be increased in line with the national house building target of 300,000 homes a year. Urban areas would see the highest levels of need, allowing a brownfield-focused policy, and no part of the country would be asked to contribute more than its fair share. This stock-led starting point for a standard method would remove the reliance on discredited housing projections, and it could

be nuanced with carve-outs for AONBs, sites of special scientific interest and places with high concentrations of holiday lets or, indeed, where historic drivers of demand, such as university expansion, have ceased to exist.

One thing I would say is that we cannot insist that the green belt should be out of bounds wholly and completely, as the Prime Minister implied recently. The green belt was a 1940s mechanism to prevent urban expansion, pretty crudely drawn on the map. It is not—I repeat, not—a sophisticated environmental protection measure. It is, however, the beneficiary of effective branding. We have to raise awareness that about 11% of our brownfield land lies within the green belt and that 35% of the green belt is intensive agricultural land of minimal environmental significance. The public deserve to know that. Perhaps areas of the green belt that do not have genuine environmental value could be designated as orange or amber belt, capable of being developed in exchange for substitution elsewhere.

There are other things I could talk about. I could talk about the onerous nutrient neutrality rules, which are blocking huge swathes of housing from the Solent up to Darlington.

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean) *indicated assent.*

Mr Clarke: I can see my hon. Friend the Minister nodding from the Front Bench. I urge the Government to act on this issue. There could be a grand bargain, whereby we carve house building out of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 in exchange for more robust action on the actual polluters—that is to say, our water companies and bad farming practice. I will say no more on that.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), we need the appropriate infrastructure to make sure that new developments succeed. That is certainly something I want to see in Coulby Newham in my constituency, where new homes are in contemplation at scale. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) on the importance of aesthetics. We need to build beautifully to win the argument with communities that we can build well. I also agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden about new garden towns and cities. Where is the ambition that led to Welwyn Garden City or Milton Keynes? It is vital that we try to concentrate developments where they can make the most difference, which will often be around the capital.

My final point—I crave your indulgence on this, Madam Deputy Speaker—is that this is a cross-party issue. It is an area where we need to work together and not take cynical advantage where politicians or councils of the opposite party try to do the right thing, because it is the easiest campaign in the world to fight new house building, but it is against the interests of this country. We risk becoming a profoundly unequal society, fractured on the twin fault lines of low home ownership and unaffordable rents for cramped, undesirable properties. That is not progress. That is not something of which any of us can be proud. I do sense that the mood in the House is changing on this question. I profoundly hope that Government policy will follow suit.

8.53 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Chelmsford, my constituency, has a vibrant community, excellent schools, low crime rates and a popular city centre, and is an easy commute to London. It is also the home of the legendary Essex Cricket, so it is no wonder that it is a very popular place to live. Since becoming a city in 2012, Chelmsford has grown considerably. In the past five years, about 1,000 new homes have been built every year, and in Chelmsford a new garden community is being built right now. Many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that they want to see more new garden cities and communities—if they pop on the train down to Chelmsford, I will take them to see what we are doing.

Many of the new homes that have been built meet the Government's definition of affordable housing, because when a new development of over 11 homes is built in Chelmsford, the local authority applies an affordable housing obligation of 35%. Furthermore, over the past decade many Chelmsford people have used Government schemes to help them get a foot on the housing ladder. However, despite the many new homes, the fact that many of them meet the Government's definition of being affordable and the many years of generous support to help people buy their homes, we still have a shortage of housing that people can afford either to buy or to rent.

The pressure on social housing is acute. About 360 families are currently housed in temporary accommodation, which is an all-time high. I spoke about that in this place when I presented my Bill on conversions of office blocks into homes. In Chelmsford, many office blocks are being converted into homes. In the past nine years that we have data for, approval was given for over 1,400 homes to be created by converting office blocks into flats, and we are expecting to see even more of that. Post pandemic, more people are of course working from home and there is less demand for office space, so we expect to see more conversions.

However, there is currently no ability for the local authority to apply an affordable housing obligation when a commercial property is converted into flats. Someone can take an entire office block and convert it entirely into luxury flats without causing one single extra affordable home to be created. My ten-minute rule Bill would enable local authorities to apply an affordable housing obligation to conversions of commercial property to residential use. If we had had that in the past decade in Chelmsford, it could have released 453 more affordable homes—that is more than the number of families who are currently in temporary accommodation because they cannot get social housing. I do hope that my wonderful hon. Friend the Housing Minister is listening this evening, and that she will continue to look favourably at my suggestion.

Another issue that is often raised by my constituents is infrastructure. Many people in Chelmsford tell me that they are not opposed to new homes being built—they know that people need somewhere to live—but that they are getting more and more frustrated at seeing new homes going up and the infrastructure not keeping pace. It has not kept pace with the massive growth in housing in Chelmsford. In Chelmsford, the city council uses the community infrastructure levy, which is much better than the old section 106 approach. It gives more flexibility to how developer contributions are used for

[Vicky Ford]

infrastructure, which means that both existing residents and residents of a new development can benefit from the new infrastructure.

However, there are some problems with CIL funding. For example, there is no CIL contribution for new houses on previously developed land. As a lover of the green belt, of course I want to prioritise building on brownfield sites. I recognise that some brownfield sites are costly to develop due to previous contamination, and if a levy cost was put on top of the decontamination cost, that might make those sites unprofitable for developers and they would not get developed. However, not all previously developed land is contaminated and brings that cost, yet every single home that is built puts additional pressure on the infrastructure. Let me give an example. If someone builds on a field that used to be a farm, provided there are more than 11 homes, they pay a contribution towards infrastructure, but if they build on what used to be a riding school, they do not. I hope that the Minister, through the work in the Department, will look at closing that anomaly.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): In many ways, what my right hon. Friend is saying cuts across what I am going to say, which I think is because property values in Chelmsford are much higher than they are in Lowestoft. We are therefore illustrating what my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) said, which is that we actually have lots of different property markets throughout the country. Would she not agree with me that what is right for one place may not necessarily be right for another?

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree that what is right for one place may not be right for another. I would just like to point out that the purpose of all my suggestions is to enable local authorities to make the right decisions for their area. These would not be top-down quotas set by Government; they would not set the proportion of affordable homes to be put on which office block development. That would be the decision of the local authority in line with the local plan. At the moment, however, the local authority does not have that power at all.

A second point about CIL funding is that at the moment it is not sufficient to cover all infrastructure needs, especially when we have larger infrastructure projects due to larger developments. I am extremely grateful to the Government for the quarter of a million pound housing infrastructure fund grant for Chelmsford. As a result of that grant, a new train station is being built. This is the first time a new train station has been built on the Great Eastern main line for over a century. It is the most amazing engineering project, and the grant will also help to deliver our north east bypass. Both of those are crucial to delivering the garden community. However, those two projects alone will not deal with other massive problems we have from traffic jams due to the increased number of people living locally. People from all over Essex are wasting valuable time stuck in Chelmsford's traffic jams and that is hampering economic growth in large parts of Essex. So I ask DLUHC Ministers urgently to help me get support for the bid, currently with the Treasury team, for funding to upgrade the Army and Navy junction with a package

of new sustainable traffic measures. Without that investment, Chelmsford will grind to a halt and will not be able to support the future housing growth.

Finally, there are real concerns about how CIL money is allocated locally. The process is not transparent and decisions about significant amounts of money are made without them coming back to full council members for approval. Cost overruns appear out of control, especially since the Lib Dems took control of the council. They spent £4 million on refurbishing a theatre, which was meant to cost £1 million, and redesigning Tindal Square with fancy pavements at the top of the high street has cost over £4 million, more than double the original budget.

Furthermore, CIL monies are not necessarily being spent by the Lib Dems on people's priorities. My constituents often tell me about the pressure on NHS GP surgeries. Tens of millions of pounds have been spent in the past four years, but the two projects to help enlarge the capacity of GP surgeries have been massively delayed. We need better planning by local authorities in all the different areas that need infrastructure, including the NHS, to ensure that all sectors of critical infrastructure keep pace with housing growth. If we do not do that, we will lose public support for the new homes.

9.2 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to be involved in this debate and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is not currently in his place, on bringing the debate to Parliament. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said, this is something that needs cross-party consensus, and I think that broadly we have achieved some degree of consensus over the course of the debate. That is important because successive Governments over the past four or five decades—perhaps even longer—of every colour and political persuasion, have tried to resolve the housing issue. Unfortunately, the interventions they have made have been probably no more than tweaks, which have further distorted the complex feedback system that is what we call the housing market. It is not really a market in the traditional sense. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) noted, it could at best be described as a series of local markets, distributed pretty randomly around the country.

Most of the interventions that Governments have made over the last half century or so have been demand-side. We have had far too many demand-side interventions, which have just driven up prices and driven away affordability. We are simply not building enough houses in the right places and the shortage of housing supply has a direct impact on house prices. The cost of home ownership and renting has been rising steadily, outpacing wages and inflation. In the UK, the gap between house prices in high demand areas such as London and the rest of the country has doubled over recent years. So our market is broken. Land prices follow economic activity and drive up house prices.

Bob Seely: I apologise for intervening yet again. Developers restrict build-out in order to keep land prices high. Is not the answer a “use it or lose it” rule, or to put pressure on developers, or to find a market

mechanism that makes developers build more quickly? There are 1 million outstanding permissions, 500,000 of which are on brownfield sites.

Ben Everitt: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. I think he might be zeroing in on a particular aspect of the picture that I have painted of the broken market. The behaviour—or perceived behaviour, in some cases—of developers and builders is not necessarily the cause of issues that I have been discussing; it is more a symptom.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. On the numbers given by my county colleague, my hon. Friend from the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), at the current rate of building, which is 200,000-odd homes a year, outstanding permissions would account for four or five years' supply. That is in an uncertain planning environment, where seeking planning permission, as I illustrated earlier, is a huge gamble. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) agree that it is more likely that land prices are driven by the existence of the viability test, which means that you cannot overpay for land, rather than land prices being driven by the value of the property—that is, downwards? That means that land is at an unrealistic value.

Ben Everitt: Absolutely. I could not agree more. In any regulated environment, the market players require, and are incredibly hungry for, clarity, consistency and certainty. The system is so complex, and subject to so many historical and, to be frank, future changes; there is not the clarity, consistency and certainty needed by the market players—the people who will provide the houses. They do not have the confidence to put bricks and mortar on the ground. We are calling for massive reform, but we need certainty, which we will put to good use. It should be massive reform first, and then some certainty. I am grateful for the interventions.

The market is broken. Land prices follow economic activity. This is the critical point: what was once a symptom of the need to level up is now a cause. When we have gone through all the pain of getting through the planning process and getting houses built, very often we end up with identikit estates of massive, four-bedroom houses that look exactly like the suite of estates in our existing stock. That does nothing for mobility between our existing sector, which is of course about 99% of our stock, and the new build sector. It does not make moving out a viable option for people who are under-occupying former family homes in the existing sector. New build homes are not genuinely affordable and attainable for young, local, first-time buyers, and they are not appropriate for elderly people who are looking to downsize and live in retirement living. There are multiple issues, but fundamentally we are building the wrong kind of houses in the wrong places.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) touched on the subject of small and medium-sized enterprise builders, labour and material shortages, build cost, inflation, and access to finance, so I will not go on about those, but one of the key barriers to mobility between existing stock and new build stock is stamp duty. Stamp duty is a tax on social mobility.

It is crippling mobility in the sectors that we need to drive economic activity. We need to set people free in terms of their labour mobility as well.

I will skip the bits of my speech about the planning system and resourcing planning departments, for reasons of time. I want to end with a reason to be optimistic and hopeful. We have a huge opportunity. We are pouring billions of pounds into left-behind communities through the levelling-up fund, the high streets fund, the shared prosperity fund and the towns fund. All of that is based on the concept of levelling being about opportunities for people who need somewhere to live. So we need to revisit the algorithm and recast the targets. We need to put much more emphasis on where we create and stimulate demand through the billions of pounds the Government are investing through levelling up and make it sustainable, so that communities can benefit from the economic growth from the levelling-up agenda but be sustainable, because people are living and building families and communities in the places near where they work.

9.10 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Very little has been said about the reason we have such demand for housing and the problems with planning at the moment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) mentioned that the population is 10 million greater than in 1997. In this last year alone, we had net migration of 606,000. If we multiply that for the next 26 years, without population growth of excess births over deaths, that is a population of at least 15 million more over the next 26 years. If the deficit in the number of houses required today is 4.1 million, it will only get worse.

One wonders where the new people coming into the country—the 606,000 just last year and the big number the year before that—are actually living. Students are one issue. They may be in halls of residence, but many people will be joining family in the UK and friends perhaps, and they will not have found their feet yet. We also have to think about the existing population who are trying to leave home for the first time. Where will they live? We managed to accommodate some 170,000 from Ukraine over the last year, but that was almost an example of sofa-surfing. If people stay, they will want to find their feet in their own accommodation, which will not be shared HMO-type high-density accommodation, so we are building up an even bigger problem. No one has even discussed whether we will ever have enough builders and building materials to build out those numbers. My argument is one of supply of people and how we go about solving this issue.

Andrew Western: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: I want to make progress; we have very little time this evening.

We need to reduce immigration. We need to take measures to reduce internal relocation, which does happen within the country. That is very much on the levelling-up agenda. No one would be more pleased than I, living in the south-east, if populations relocated up towards Carlisle and elsewhere. I would be absolutely delighted with that. Do we need to encourage families? We live differently these days. In times of old—perhaps I do look to the past—families stayed together. They lived

[Craig Mackinlay]

together in multigenerational units, not least looking after each other as they got older. That is quite a norm in European countries. We may have to build prolifically and that is what we have been discussing this evening. Where do we build? We are all nimbys in one way or another and it is not surprising that most people in the country are. The property they own is likely to be either their biggest asset in life, or, more than likely, the biggest liability in terms of what they owe on it, so they do not want what they have purchased and created in their own communities to be at all tainted, and I do not blame people for thinking that way.

If I reflect on some sites across my constituency—we all have such sites—when there is a proposed development, there is always a great deal of opposition. In Preston, a village in my constituency, there was an old transport site. There was huge opposition while it was being built out. In Ash, another village, there was huge opposition when a development called Harfleet Gardens was being built out. But sometimes these smaller villages need extra development to make them credible-size villages, where one can support the shop, the pub, the chemist and everything else. So there is a sweet spot and I think most people recognise that.

I am in favour of brownfield development wherever and whenever it can happen, but a lot of new builds end up looking exactly the same, as described by many Members this evening, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). Instead of solving a problem, they often create one.

I want to concentrate on putting our existing housing stock to best use, by using the tax system. Why do we not consider a downsizing relief for stamp duty? That would liberate some bigger houses that widows and widowers may be living in that are not perfect for them by any standard—expensive to heat, high council tax and all the rest of it. But when they look at the stamp duty cost of downsizing, particularly in higher cost areas, older people know the value of money and will say, “I’m simply not paying that, so I’ll stay where I am”—in the wrong accommodation and in the wrong place as their needs change.

Most importantly, there is an issue of capital gains tax. We are stopping people getting rid of second homes. A number of studies have been carried out of how many second homes there might be in the country. Rather than penalise people with increasing council tax and saying, “We know best. We aren’t going to allow you to have a second home—how dare you?”, I would rather create a tax system in which people are encouraged to get rid of their second home.

I am in practice as a chartered accountant, and I have had a number of cases of a client coming through the door, newly widowed, who has said that they would like to get rid of their second home. It might be in Devon, Kent or anywhere else. They are often smaller properties in the right places, where communities are complaining that they have been hollowed out because there is no settled community. They come to an accountant like me and say, “We’ve had this home since 1980. It cost us £20,000. I’d like to get rid of it.” I have to tell them, “You can’t get rid of that. You’ll face a 28% capital gains tax charge and then, if that cash is in your

account and the natural happens in due course and you pass away, you will face an inheritance tax charge on the cash in your account. If you are not in a taxable estate, the value if you keep that property will simply be uplifted for your family, completely free of tax.”

We are binding up hundreds of thousands of second properties in the right places because of the tax trap. That could be hundreds of thousands of houses—perhaps whole years’ worth of the development that we are looking for, in the right places, simply because we are not brave enough. We are frightened of what the Opposition might say. We have talked a lot about cross-House unity. Surely, at times such as this, we should use the tax system to liberate homes and save some green belt or green areas that always cause problems, not least from the Lib Dems at election time. Let us work together and maximise the properties that we have. That would be a sincere step in the right direction.

I am taking a slightly different tack this evening. We have to look at the number of people—that is very much an immigration case—but let us use the properties we have, by using the tax system. That does not need one new build, one new builder or one new development. Let us do that first.

9.18 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing and leading it.

Before I came to this place, I practised as a chartered surveyor for 27 years in Suffolk and Norfolk. Much of my work focused on the residential development sector, advising landowners, house builders and local authorities. Today, my involvement revolves around meeting the needs of often desperate constituents seeking a decent home, addressing concerns about the pressure on infrastructure that arises from developments and working with local authorities to regenerate town centres.

The extent of the national housing crisis has been graphically illustrated by what we have heard across the Chamber this evening, and by the briefings provided by Crisis, the National Housing Federation and Policy Exchange. They all illustrate the advantages of a vibrant and dynamic house building sector. In the time available, I shall briefly highlight how I believe we can meet this major challenge.

First, it is important to focus on all sectors of the housing market, including the elderly. We need to ensure that we have sufficient and properly laid out and designed homes for older people. I mention that as I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on housing and care for older people, along with Lord Best, who does much vital work in this sector. We have an ageing population who need and deserve properly adapted and comfortable homes. The provision of more such accommodation will free up other homes for others to move into.

Secondly, we must also build more homes for social rent. Crisis and the National Housing Federation both calculate that we need to build 90,000 homes for social rent each year if we are to tackle the current homelessness crisis. Policy Exchange also highlights that if we invest in and expand social house building, we will also restart the stalled conveyor belt of home ownership.

Thirdly, there is a need to improve the planning system, to ensure that all local planning authorities are functioning properly, have up-to-date local plans, supplemented by local design codes, and that they all determine planning applications promptly. Planning departments must be properly resourced and adequately staffed in order to do that, which means they need funding from national Government.

Fourthly, one of the solutions to the housing supply crisis is already in place in the form of Homes England, which does good work in facilitating development on challenging sites in urban areas and provides development finance through the levelling-up home building fund. It would help if its role and resources could be increased, so that it can do more to facilitate urban regeneration.

My fifth point is that we should consider whether there is a need for investment zones to promote the redevelopment of derelict sites in urban areas. In Lowestoft, in my constituency, the enterprise zone, which is focused on commercial development, has been a great success, although to a degree it has run out of steam and is in need of re-energising. The proposed investment zones, announced last September, provided a vehicle for doing that. The proposals, worked up by Suffolk County Council and East Suffolk Council, included three large, primarily residential redevelopment sites—the Sanyo, the Jeld Wen and the Brookes sites. It is disappointing that the plans for investment zones announced in the March Budget were much more limited than those originally proposed.

Finally, I am mindful of another challenge that confronts us in towns and cities across the country: the decline of our high streets and town centres, which urgently need revitalising. In those locations there are millions of square feet of former office and shop space, often on upper floors, and we need to promote and encourage their residential reuse. If we do that, we can provide customers for the shops and leisure facilities that remain in those town centres. Invariably, such properties can be difficult to convert, so developers prefer greenfield sites, too readily at times. We need to work with those developers to remove the barriers to carrying out town centre projects. As a start, the Government could consider the zero-rating of VAT for conversion and refurbishment work, so as to put such projects on a level playing field with new build.

In conclusion, increasing the supply of new housing opportunities is a panacea for many of the challenges that we face: providing people with warm and decent homes, enabling them to get that first important step on the housing ladder, improving the nation's health, regenerating urban areas and town centres, and delivering meaningful levelling up.

9.24 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am going to break the consensus slightly, but not, I hope, in an unhelpful way.

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who made some excellent points, especially about shops. This is one of the things that nimby rebels such as me raised with various right hon. Friends: the need to use the stock that we have. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for securing the

debate. I agreed with a lot of what he said, but it is not an “either/or”; it is an “and”—yes to new towns, yes to new villages, and yes to new green garden villages, towns and cities. But we also need to get the system working.

I take issue with those who say that this is a system failure. I think that, above all else, it is a market failure. I agree with the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) about the need for rural affordable housing, which is a massive problem in my patch. On the Isle of Wight we have doubled our population in the last 50 or 60 years, but we have never really built for locals. We need to prioritise local building, and I would overwhelmingly prioritise affordable housing. Yes, I would set lower targets, because we have an amazing landscape—75% of the Island is protected, and we need to maintain that protection—but we also need to look after our own people, which is especially important on an island.

I am going to throw out some facts. I know that we have a problem with house building in this country, but I do think that it is important to note some of the facts. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) that we have built 2.5 million homes since 2010. Last year, according to the House of Commons Library, there were 400,000 first-time buyers, the best figure for 30 years; 829,000 people have been helped under this Conservative Government; and since 2015 we have built, on average, 222,000 homes a year. That is quite respectable, especially, dare I say it, in comparison with new Labour's—according to the Library—171,000 homes a year. We have a problem, but those who say that we are not building, when we have built 2.5 million homes since 2010 and 222,000 a year since 2015, should slightly nuance the points they are making.

We know that other factors are playing a role in this. For instance, we have huge rates of immigration. When the net immigration figure is 600,000, unless we are building close to 1 million homes a year we are in trouble. As a sensible man such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland will know, the printing of money—quantitative easing—is very bad news because it leads to inflation in house prices and assets. Interest rates have been too low for too long. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) will also know, we have a problem with second homes.

In the few minutes that I have, I will rattle through a few more points. What do I mean by “market failure”? Following the crash, 70% of supply is delivered by the 10 largest developers, and they are responsible for a vast number of our planning permissions. According to the surveyors Lichfields—a very respectable outfit that does a lot of the thinking on this sort of thing—it takes 20 years to build out a housing estate of 2,000 homes, and the period between the initial permission and someone having their first home is eight and a half years. I am sure that we could speed that up. Much of this is due to developer slowness. There is then a build-out rate of 150 or 160 homes a year. That means that a developer who is granted a 2,000-home planning permission now will finish the development in 2043.

Is there something we can do to speed up that process? Should not a builder with a good reputation who has a small brownfield site and is going to throw in some social housing, or who is working with affordable housing,

[Bob Seely]

go to the front of the queue? A builder who says that they will build out very quickly will bounce the big developers into better behaviour. I wonder whether there is much more that we could be doing.

I want to say a few things about the so-called nimby rebellion—which I do not think was very nimby, and I am not even sure it was a rebellion. We had a few issues, including a significant issue with something that pains me: the lazy developer reliance on greenfield, low-density, out-of-town housing estates, because they are unsustainable. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) made an impassioned and eloquent speech, but when it comes to greenfield land, where does “develop, develop, develop” fit in with our climate change agenda?

We know that high-density cities provide a critical way of reaching net zero, but we have some of the lowest-density cities in the world. Sheffield’s population density is one tenth of Barcelona’s. That is an extraordinary statistic. Sheffield has 1,500 people per square kilometre, while Barcelona has 16,000. They are both slight outliers, but London has 8,000 or 9,000 people per square kilometre, while Paris has 12,000. Newcastle, Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham have about 3,000, while the density of Valencia, Basel, Milan, Bilbao and Geneva is almost double that. So we have a problem with density in our country.

Then there are top-down housing targets. The problem with those is that developers game the system. They get the permissions, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire said, and sit on them for eight or nine years. Then they come back to councils such as ours on the Isle of Wight and say, “You haven’t built, so we are going to push through more.” That system is not working.

But what else do the so-called nimbys want? We want greater powers for compulsory purchase. We want Government to say to lazy developers who sit on places for years, “You have six months to build out or we will put the place on the market for you.” We have also strongly recommended a character test for builders, so that a bad builder who does not treat people with respect or who does not build will not get the permission. We want more focus on smaller sites. We need still more focus on the half million brownfield site properties. London is particularly bad; it is building a quarter of the homes that we need, which is stifling the targets and the numbers.

I love the idea about properties above shops. We said that to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities when we were negotiating for this, and we want more emphasis on that. We also want more emphasis on affordable housing so that councils such as Shropshire and mine on the Isle of Wight can force this stuff through. Rather than being nimbys, what we are doing often is finding a better way to fix the system. That could include plans for last-time sellers. If someone is old and they want to downsize, they could pay a significantly reduced rate of stamp duty. This would encourage people to free up the market. We could have 50-year or 30-year fixed-rate loans so that people would know what they were getting. Last year, before interest rates started going up, although house prices were rising, interest rates were low and housing was statistically relatively affordable, historically. It is less affordable now because interest rates have gone up to 5%, a historic

average, rather being at a historic low. I hope the Government stick to the agreements. There is a lot that we can do to free up the market and to make the market work, rather than just attacking the system.

9.31 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for this important debate. North Devon presents challenges consistent with those in many tourist destinations for delivering new housing alongside retaining our existing housing for local residents. The planning system is not designed for rurality. North Devon is remote, and with a lack of planners, builders and materials, we build at just 18% affordable units due to viability concerns. The local plan has mostly delivered the targeted number of houses, but we still have nothing like the number of affordable homes we need. Everything takes an eternity, and far too often the affordable element is cut out of developments. Brownfield sites—particularly derelict buildings—lie empty for years, if not decades, while stuck in planning disputes, often relating to retaining late-listed façades that are not valuable enough to warrant historical investment schemes yet render them unviable for development.

Fortunately, the five-year land supply is now back intact, but that has taken three years, and numerous developments on beautiful green fields have been waved through due to this situation. Also, the rapid switching by landlords, after the Osborne tax reforms that came in during the pandemic, from long-term rentals to short-term holiday lets means that we have lost 67% of our long-term rentals post-pandemic. Moving to North Devon for work or being able to afford to buy at all is just not viable in one of the fastest rising house price regions in the country. This leaves us with a housing “crisis”—a word I do not use lightly. Hopefully there will be some light on the horizon with accommodation being the next phase of development on our hospital site, as health and social care are the sectors that are worst impacted by the current housing crisis, closely followed by the other emergency services and our schools.

Solutions are hard to come by, but building on endless green fields to tackle the situation in North Devon—which has unique challenges, being highly designated and prized for its remote beauty—is not popular or, to my mind, the least bit desirable. We need a more strategic and better resourced planning system for all of Devon. Our small district councils almost have a rotating door policy of planners moving from one council to another for a better position or a final stop before retirement. I do not blame them, because there is nowhere nicer to retire, but we need an extended and enhanced planning team that proactively wants to deal with the derelict buildings scattered across my constituency. They include empty hotels in Ilfracombe, a care home in Instow, and the former lace factory and the Oliver buildings in Barnstaple, alongside the redevelopment of the old leisure centre.

Numerous empty properties are scattered around, yet in the past week alone my inbox has seen planning applications for properties above shops in Barnstaple town centre turned down as it might flood in 84 years’ time. Locally, the council could reverse the planning restrictions it has placed on properties that, when built, were only allowed to be holiday homes when the owners

would now prefer to move to permanent residential. Surely that is to be encouraged, but no, the owners face an endless series of hurdles, from being told they have to sell the property to installing all sorts of extra measures just so that a barn can be converted for a child to live in, although that child is now an adult. But they can convert a holiday let with no problems at all. It is no wonder that developers struggle to build in North Devon. Even when they do, it is easier to build holiday lets than permanent residences, as borne out across endless farms. For small villages, community land trusts need to be simplified, with learnings from rural communities more widely shared. Again, delays in planning mean it is months and months before any response is forthcoming for even pre-application work.

When we do build, we need to ensure that properties are available to local families who want to live and work in North Devon. Far too many properties are sold as holiday lets. We have to take some responsibility as a community if we want to remain a community and not become a cross between a holiday park and a nursing home, with no staff to service either.

I would not mind an additional town, but I am not thinking of Milton Keynes. A town the size of my third biggest town, 4,000 to 5,000 residents, within commuting distance of Exeter, adjacent to the link road, may be an option. Unless we can sort out our strategic planning so that there is public transport and proper facilities, such as health, education, water—we already have a hosepipe ban—and a road network that is fit for purpose, we will struggle to deliver the houses that our community so desperately needs.

First and foremost, we should use the properties we have more effectively. Since being elected to this place, I have campaigned relentlessly on tackling the exponential increase in holiday lets in North Devon. Yes, we love our tourists and warmly welcome folk from all over the world, but our housing market is out of kilter. There are now not enough homes to enable people to live and work in our vital tourism economy. We need: to expedite plans for registers of holiday lets; to introduce planning changes for properties to move from long-term to short-term rentals; to reverse the Osborne tax changes or, at the very least, to ensure an even tax playing field between long-term and short-term rentals; and to ensure there is not a discrepancy within schemes such as energy performance certificates, which are designed to protect tenants but, in old, rural properties, are increasing the flood of landlords exiting the long-term rental market to a tidal wave.

If our housing stock were utilised more of the time, we might not need to build so much. I rent on a close of fewer than 30 houses, where one has been derelict for more than 15 years and almost half are second homes, often left empty for three-quarters of the year or more. These are two or three beds-up, two-down homes, and the latest to be valued, at £575,000, is out of reach for most locals. Is there no way that some of these properties, empty for so much of the year, could be made available to our invaluable public sector workers?

We cannot allow our coastal communities to become ghost towns for much of the year, and I hope more will be done to utilise more effectively the buildings that are already standing, and to improve our strategic planning to tackle and rebalance our housing market.

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

9.37 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond to this important and timely debate for the Opposition. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing it, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I also thank all the hon. Members who have participated this evening. In addition to the right hon. Gentleman's thoughtful and compelling opening remarks, there has been a large number of extremely well-argued, informed and insightful contributions.

While there is good reason to treat sceptically the argument that boosting housing supply, in and of itself, will quickly and significantly improve house price affordability or address what are now essentially static levels of home ownership, there is no question but that a significant uplift in house building rates is an integral part of the solution to England's chronic housing crisis. It is undeniable that, as a nation, we have clearly not built enough houses in recent decades to meet housing need, particularly in London and what might be termed the greater south-east, so it is imperative that we address this historical undersupply of homes.

To the best of my knowledge, no Conservative Minister has ever explained precisely why the number was chosen, but the Government made a manifesto commitment to build 300,000 homes a year by the middle of this decade. Even accounting for the additional supply facilitated by the progressive expansion of permitted development rights since 2013, many of them incredibly poor-quality office-to-residential conversions, the Government have never come close to approaching, let alone hitting, that annual target. In 2021-22, net additional dwellings stood at just 232,820. That level of output, respectable but ultimately insufficient, was, of course, achieved prior to the range of concessions the Government made, in their weakness, to the so-called "Planning Concern Group" of Conservative Back Benchers late last year.

In the aftermath of that abdication of responsibility, we have, predictably, seen scores of local plans across the country stalled, delayed or withdrawn. In the face of this alarming trend, Ministers contend that we need not worry because the proposed changes to the national planning policy framework will ultimately boost local plan coverage and, in turn, housing supply. Even if that is what ultimately transpires—there is good reason to doubt it—it would be a form of increased local plan coverage that is entirely disconnected from the Government's purported aim of building 300,000 new homes per annum, because the intended effect of the proposed changes is to allow local planning authorities to develop and adopt local plans that fail to meet the needs of wider housing market areas in full. As such, the Government's manifesto commitment to 300,000 homes a year remains alive but in name only; abandoned in practice but not formally abolished, in order that the Secretary of State and his Ministers can still insincerely cite it in a risible effort to convince this House and the British public that they did not agree, consciously and deliberately, to plan for less housing in England over the coming years in order to placate a disgruntled group of Back Benchers.

Bob Seely: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to a disgruntled Back Bencher. If he reads the NPPF letter, the “Dear colleague” letter, he will find that although there is leeway on housing targets, there is set to be higher density and more liberalisation in many areas. A lot of what we tried to achieve was to free up the market to make it work better.

Matthew Pennycook: I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman on that. Whether it is by means of the emphasis in the proposed NPPF on locally prepared plans providing for “sufficient” housing only, the softening of land supply and delivery test provisions, the ability to include historical over-delivery in five year housing land supply calculations or the listing of various local characteristics that would justify a deviation from the standard method, the intended outcome of those changes is to allow local authorities to plan to meet less than the targets that nominally remain in place.

As I said, the choice the Government made entails a deliberate shift from a plan-led system focused on making at least some attempt to meet England’s housing need to one geared toward providing only what the politics of any given area will allow, with all the implications that the resulting suppressed rates of house building will have on those affected by the housing crisis and economic growth more widely. The next Labour Government will fix this mess. When it comes to housing and planning, our overriding objective will be to get house building rates up significantly from the nadir we will surely inherit, including, as part of that effort, markedly increasing the supply of affordable homes and, in particular, genuinely affordable social homes to rent. We do not intend to pluck an annual national target out of the air and ineptly contort the system to try to make the numbers across the country add up, as the Government have done by imposing an entirely arbitrary 35% uplift that most of the 20 cities and urban centres in England to which it applies are clear cannot possibly be accommodated.

Bob Seely *rose*—

Matthew Pennycook: I will not give way.

But we will insist that the planning system is once again geared toward meeting housing need in full. To that end, if they are enacted as expected, a Labour Government will reverse the damaging changes the Government propose to make to the NPPF in relation to planning for housing. However, although reversing those damaging changes to national planning policy will be an essential first step, more far-reaching reform will be required if we are to overcome the limitations of a speculative house building model, a broken land market, and a planning system that is at once both too permissive and too restrictive. That will mean, among many other things, overhauling England’s dysfunctional planning structures so that the system more effectively facilitates strategic housing growth across those sub-regional areas with significant unmet need. That might be by way of extensions to existing urban settlements or entirely new settlements—I would argue that we need both in good measure. It will mean more proactive public sector involvement in housing delivery on large sites across the country, so that quality place making and long-term value creation become more than just the rare exception.

Let me make it clear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Labour’s approach will not be premised on a drive for units at any cost. We appreciate that many local communities resist development because it entails poor-quality housing in inappropriate and often entirely car-dependent locations, without the necessary physical and social infrastructure for communities to thrive, or sufficient levels of affordable housing to meet local need. We would argue that that outcome is a direct consequence of the Government’s over-reliance on private house builders building homes for market sale to meet overall housing need. Yet when it comes to house building, there need not be an inherent trade-off between quantity and quality. A Labour Government will be determined to see increased rates of house building, but equally determined that much more supply comes via a long-term stewardship approach so that, if not removed entirely, public opposition to significant development in contested areas should at least be much reduced.

Similarly, we reject the notion that building more homes must come at the expense of wider national policy objectives. In addition to increasing housing supply in a way that prioritises quality of build and quality of place, we will act to ensure that the housing and planning systems play their full part in addressing other pressing national challenges such as the drive towards net zero, the need for urgent nature restoration and the need to improve public health.

To conclude, it is not the only way of solving England’s housing problems and it certainly will not be a panacea for them, but building more homes remains the most effective way that we have of tackling almost all of the housing-related problems with which our country is contending. The Government needed to build more homes before the so-called planning concern group extracted its damaging concessions late last year. As a result of the Government’s appeasement of that group, we now face the very real prospect that house building rates will plummet over the next 12 to 18 months.

We desperately need a change of approach, but it is a change that the present Government and the Ministers on the Front Bench are incapable of delivering. It is high time that we had a general election, so that they can make way for a Government who are serious about ensuring that we build to meet housing need in full and boost economic growth.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the Minister to speak, I have to say that I am extremely disappointed that some colleagues were not present to hear the winding-up speech from the Opposition. It is as important to be here for the Opposition’s wind-up as it is to be here for the Minister’s wind-up. It is extremely discourteous not to be here.

9.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for securing this important debate. It is a tribute to him that so many people have come to the Chamber to reflect the experiences of their constituents and to speak about local housing conditions.

I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western); the two former Housing Ministers who spoke, my right hon. Friends the Members for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke); the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley); my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer); the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury); my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey); the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan); my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson); the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell); my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous); my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford); and my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). All of them gave thoughtful, constructive, knowledgeable and, in some cases, rightly challenging contributions.

The points that have been raised today have underscored the importance of this Government's mission to drive up housing supply and to deliver on our manifesto commitment of delivering a million additional homes by the end of this Parliament. They have emphasised the urgency of our work to build more homes of all tenures in the places where they are so desperately needed. *[Interruption.]* Is somebody trying to intervene?

Bob Seely: I was looking for a point to come in to show my support for the Minister. I remind her that this Conservative Government have averaged 222,000 homes a year, when new Labour managed about 171,000. Therefore, even when we are doing allegedly badly, we are still 50,000 ahead of Labour.

Rachel Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, which I was just about to make.

The Government remain committed to our ambition of delivering 300,000 homes a year—homes fit for a new generation, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden said. I agree with him: as a Conservative, I support a property-owning democracy, and despite the economic challenges of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and global inflation, we have made real progress towards that target. In 2021-22, more than 232,000 homes were delivered—the third highest yearly rate in the last 30 years. Since 2010, more than 2.3 million additional homes have been delivered. That is the achievement of a Conservative Government, and it is fantastic compared with the woeful record of the last Labour Government.

At the same time, we are not complacent about the scale of the challenges that have dogged England's housing market for decades, as many hon. Members have mentioned: demand outstripping supply, local shortages and residents being priced out of the places they grew up in. That is why we have committed £10 billion of investment to increase housing supply since the start of this Parliament to unlock, ultimately, more than 1 million new homes.

Hon. Members will know how committed the Government are to the supply of affordable housing. I think every single hon. Member who spoke referred to that. That is why, through our £11.5 billion affordable

homes programme, we will deliver and are delivering tens of thousands of affordable homes for both sale and rent.

Moving on to the specific campaign or proposal from my right hon. Friend—

Mike Amesbury: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I will not at this point, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, because I have a lot to get on the record.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden has passionately advocated for new towns. We agree that an ambitious pipeline of housing and regeneration opportunities is crucial. I am a representative of a new town, Redditch, which currently houses about 70,000 people, so I know how successful and how important those developments can be. That is one of the reasons why we are already supporting delivery at scale along the lines he suggested through several funds, including the garden communities programme, which will support the delivery of more 3,000 homes by 2050, most of them in the north, the midlands and the south-west.

To pick out a couple of examples, Halsnead garden village in Knowsley will deliver more than 1,600 new homes in Merseyside, along with new businesses. Another, West Carclaze garden village, will support up to 1,500 new homes in an innovative and sustainable new community that promotes the health and wellbeing of its residents. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford noted the fantastic development in her local area, and I look forward to continued active discussions with her about the proposals in her Affordable Housing (Conversion of Commercial Property) Bill.

We must also work to unlock large complex sites through initiatives such as our housing infrastructure fund, which my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle has welcomed in his area. The fund delivers the infrastructure needed to ensure that new communities are well connected and supported by local amenities.

New towns, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden rightly asserted, can deliver high-quality, sustainable urban development and make an important contribution to housing supply. However, they require considerable resources and co-ordination, a long-term vision or masterplan, strong local support, enabling infrastructure and a significant capacity and capability commitment that is often beyond the abilities of local authorities.

For all those reasons, the Government believe that new towns can be part of the solution, but not the whole solution, to alleviate housing demand. They should be considered alongside regeneration opportunities to make the most efficient use of brownfield land and maximise the benefits of existing transport infrastructure. All our reforms are based on the principle that we will deliver housing only with the consent of communities and elected representatives at all levels. We know that wherever development takes place, local people will express the same concerns, so we have to get it right.

Kit Malthouse: Would the Minister at this point like to address the issue that a number of us have raised about the removal of hard targets and the uncertainty that that creates, particularly for the industry? For example, as she will know, gearing up to deliver 300,000 homes a year is a huge logistical exercise that requires

[*Kit Malthouse*]

massive capital investment to produce bricks, building machines and all sorts of stuff. That requires a very long horizon of certainty of delivery. If there are no targets, how is she going to give that certainty to industry?

Rachel Maclean: My right hon. Friend will, I hope, hear the remarks about that later in my speech.

Unfortunately, I cannot do justice to all the questions that are being asked, but I will touch on the importance of a healthy and diverse housing market, including the SME builders that were rightly mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South. We have launched the levelling up home building fund, which provides £1.5 billion in development finance to SMEs and modern methods of construction builders. Our Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill makes changes to the planning system to make it much easier for SMEs to operate.

Every Member has spoken about the importance of a modern, responsive and transparent planning system. I think it vital that our reformed planning system helps to bring certainty to communities and developers. That will enable them to take those positive steps towards building more housing, regenerating their local areas and supporting economic growth.

To address the point on which my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire challenged me, he will know that we have just concluded a consultation on the NPPF. A number of those policy questions are live and the Government will respond as quickly as possible to provide that certainty to the market and to local authorities. However, it is a huge consultation and it is important that we get it right.

Mike Amesbury: Does the Minister believe that building 35 first homes for first-time buyers is sufficient or ambitious?

Rachel Maclean: I am very proud of the Government's record of building affordable homes and homes for young people.

I am aware that I need to conclude my remarks, so let me reiterate my huge thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden. He is absolutely right to articulate so powerfully the case for driving up housing supply. That is our ambition—to build the homes that this country needs—and that is what this Conservative Government, working with Members on all sides of the House, will achieve.

9.56 pm

Mr David Davis: The extraordinary importance of this issue is measured by the sheer number of people here, and not just the quantity but the quality. We have had ministerial experience, local government experience, professional experience and even APPG chair experience. I deliberately chose the subject “delivering new housing supply” so that it was as wide as possible, but it is notable that we have had complete unity on the aim of closing the gap in supply. We have had a massive multiplicity of ideas, all of which are necessary, frankly. If we are to deliver a proper property-owning democracy to the next generation, we have to use everything that we have heard today. I thank everybody for their contributions.

Vicky Ford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I spoke earlier, I should perhaps have referred to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am an unpaid member of the board of the legendary Essex Cricket. I hope that Members will forgive me and that the record can be corrected.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. I know that she genuinely regrets not mentioning that, and I am sure that the House will appreciate the fact that, as soon as she realised, she came to point out that she perhaps should have declared it before.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of delivering new housing supply.

Healthcare Facilities: Royston

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

10 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I am very glad that I have been able to secure this debate about healthcare facilities in Royston in my constituency. I have been concerned for some time that there is a danger of Royston not receiving the recognition that it needs from the national health service and the health facilities fit for such a fast expanding town.

Royston has almost 17,500 residents. That is rising in the near future to about 20,000, given the local plan and approved developments. It has a catchment area of villages in Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Essex, covering at least another 24,000 residents. The area is expanding fast—not just Royston, but the villages around it. I will mention Melbourn and some of the other villages in a moment.

Royston is recognised as an important town by retailers; it houses one of the largest Tesco Extras in the region, as well as Marks & Spencer and Lidl. It is home to the major FTSE 100 company Johnson Matthey, which has its headquarters there. The area is full of innovative businesses, including successful science and engineering companies, and the same is true of the area around it. For example, Melbourn Science Park is part of the corridor that is recognised as being part of Cambridge, the A1 corridor and so on. It is clear that Royston is widely recognised as an important hub in this part of the east of England.

Earlier this year, the two main GP practices merged to become part of Granta Medical Practices, which is one of the largest and most innovative organisations when it comes to bringing together a range of local services, while retaining the close link between patient and clinician. Its inspirational leader—the managing partner, Dr James Morrow—has pioneered this approach over many years from his base in Sawston, Cambridgeshire, and he believes that to make the most of this new merger, Royston needs a state-of-the-art health centre and community diagnostic centre. But Royston appears to be a forgotten part of the region by NHS decision makers.

In January, via a reply to a written question to the Secretary of State for Health, I was told that it was for the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board to determine whether such a centre is needed in Royston. Now, the Herts and West Essex ICB covers much of my constituency and has some relevance to Royston, but it is not the lead ICB for Royston. When I queried this with the Department, I was told that I was right and that the Cambridge and Peterborough ICB would be making these decisions. That makes a lot more sense, because it includes Royston within the list of areas that it covers. Cambridge is very close and has good transport links with Royston, and many local residents have always used and continue to use Addenbrooke's Hospital as "our hospital". These examples show that Royston is falling between two stools; for a town of such significance, that is not good enough.

One of the four aims on the Cambridge and Peterborough ICB website is to "Think Local". We want it to "Think Royston" and help our GPs to realise their vision for the future. Investigations show that the

NHS may be doing anything but that: the Cambridge and Peterborough ICB estates plan proposes transferring clinical services from the current Royston Hospital site into the Royston health centre, and then disposing of the hospital site. Royston Hospital—a site of six acres—currently offers a number of clinics and treatments, including in obstetrics and gynaecology, and physiotherapy. It also houses our community transport, is the base for our district nurses and is Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust's depot for its medical devices.

Royston's growth as a town and its close relationship with its villages nearby is reflected in the fact that the two practices that have merged have patients not only in Royston but in nearby villages in Cambridgeshire, Essex and Hertfordshire; it is a wide catchment area, not just for retail and industry but for health. The opportunity to merge the two practices provides the opportunity for modern facilities and for the secondary sector to follow Government policy and delegate services such as diagnostics to the primary community setting by way of a community diagnostic centre. I understand that Addenbrooke's Hospital is a keen advocate for that approach and believes that Royston could be a good centre for the CDC.

In Royston, local people have seen the idea of a refurbishment of Royston Hospital co-located with modern community services as the way ahead. There have been campaigns over time to save the hospital site, but that is not out of sentiment or dogmatism; it is simply because it is a six-acre site close to the town centre and already in the NHS fold. If another site were identified and its benefits outlined, I am sure that Royston people would give it a fair hearing, but we do not want to lose our hospital site and be left struggling in the existing GP practice buildings, which come from a time when the town was half its current size. Where would the advantages of the sort of modern state-of-the-art health centre that we want be? They would be absent. There would be no room for our diagnostics unit. A new modern building would mean that the patients reliant on Royston would have guaranteed long-term primary care services provided in a locally based setting, satisfying the ICB mission to think local. It would also be future-proofed.

Local primary care services are suffering from recruitment problems in our area. I am sure that both Government and the NHS want to show professionals a modern vision for the future. What local doctors are proposing satisfies the current national programme seeking to improve access to common diagnostic tests using community diagnostic centres. The combining of services from the two Granta practices plus utilising the opportunity to cascade services from Addenbrooke's into primary care and diagnostics at Royston is both opportune and efficient, and it would help with solving the problem of staff shortages. This issue is addressed in Dr Morrow's recent *BMJ* article with Dr Sinsky about how to retain GPs, the importance of the patient-doctor relationship and how CDCs can help with that by doing the diagnostics locally and enabling that relationship to flourish.

I would like to see constructive discussions between Granta Medical, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB and Addenbrooke's Hospital, hopefully supported by the Hertfordshire authorities, to see how this vision can be realised. The Minister has kindly already had one meeting with me and the various stakeholders, and he has played a part in helping this to happen. I note that last week I received a letter from the Cambridgeshire

[*Sir Oliver Heald*]

and Peterborough ICB—I wonder if it was aware this debate was to take place—asking me to work with it on a programme of engagement with local people and communities about health and care services around Royston. It also made it clear that no decision has been made about the future of Royston Hospital. I welcome that, and I will be happy to take part, but I hope that the Minister will continue to help us by backing the vision of our local doctors and ensuring that Royston does not fall off the map again.

If we take the map of the ICB area for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and place it next to the map for Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB, the significance of Royston emerges clearly. It is in the middle, it is one of the fastest growing towns, it is surrounded by burgeoning villages, and it is at the heart of the innovation and engineering corridors that are the future of the UK economy. I am certain that, if meaningful discussions were held between all the interested parties, a long-term solution could be found for Royston. I am hoping that today's debate, with the support of the Department, will go a long way to persuading Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB to re-evaluate its options and to accept that a health centre and CDC in Royston is an eminently sensible way forward.

10.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) on securing this important debate and I thank him for his work advocating for health services for his constituents. If there were any danger of Royston being forgotten, my right hon. and learned Friend and his activities are ensuring that that does not happen. It was genuinely a huge pleasure to meet him, his local ICB, Addenbrooke's and in particular his local GPs, who I thought were a particularly impressive and thoughtful bunch with many interesting ideas that he is helping to catalyse. I also congratulate him on his imaginative and thoughtful advocacy on behalf of Royston Hospital and the opportunities presented by that site, which he has explained further in this debate.

We absolutely recognise the importance of suitable and well-functioning premises for healthcare facilities, expanding our NHS workforce further, and accommodating and enabling good-quality healthcare services for growing populations, particularly in areas such as Royston that are expanding so rapidly. We are taking action to support ICBs in that aim, and we are aware that many areas, including Royston, are set to experience further increases in population, which of course puts pressure on local health services.

We announced in the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care, which is part of the wider review going on of the national planning policy framework—the subject of the most recent debate, in fact—that we would be better considering how primary care infrastructure can be supported and how we can get more of the profits of development flowing into our primary care facilities. So we will be updating guidance to encourage our local planning authorities to engage with ICBs, particularly on large sites where there is opportunity and the need for extra primary care capacity.

NHS England is currently undertaking a formal assessment of all general practice premises through a primary care data collection programme, and this will provide an overview of the current capacity, suitability and ownership of all premises, with the information made available to local commissioners to inform their planning. But the activity of my right hon. and learned Friend in pointing out the opportunities and the challenges will be very clearly in the minds of his local ICB as it thinks about its future plans.

From 2023, a substantial proportion of primary care business-as-usual estates and GP capital is included within overall integrated care system capital funding envelopes. That allows local systems to take a more cohesive and coherent approach to how they spend capital across that system, and to prioritise the primary care investment needs in their own local strategies.

As well as funding from specific national programmes, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB—as we now know, it is responsible for commissioning health services in Royston; my right hon. and learned Friend was quite right about that—received £77 million in operational capital funding in 2022-23, totalling over £205 million during this spending review period. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough integrated care system has worked in partnership with NHS Property Services to develop the first estates strategy for the region. This was consulted on earlier in 2023 and approved by the ICB on 10 March.

The ICB has been working closely with primary care providers to try to stabilise primary care provision locally, and is now reviewing estates and local health care provision to make sure that they are also fit for the future. I know that the ICB is in conversation with the Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust, Granta Medical Services, and NHS Property Services—my right hon. and learned Friend has mentioned some of this—to review all the sites and consider options for a potential healthcare centre, co-located with primary care and diagnostic facilities.

In its decision-making capacity for estates and healthcare service commissioning, it is essential that the ICB is able to fully assess capital and revenue costs, and service implications, that would arise from any decision. The ICB has noted that, while it recognises the community hospital is not currently functioning as it should, it is important that any future decisions on its use are not taken until it has fully considered and appraised all options, as my right hon. and learned Friend has quite rightly insisted on. That is why the ICB is about to begin a comprehensive listening and engagement exercise for an initial six weeks, encouraging local communities to take part in that conversation through a range of routes. The ICB will share more details in the coming weeks, on its website, on social media channels and through updates to key stakeholders, as well as via the printed materials in the community so that everyone knows that this conversation is ongoing.

Another approach and consideration that integrated care boards may take when they are shaping healthcare estates locally is the reconfiguration of services. This is a clinically-led local decision following appropriate engagement with patients and stakeholders. Responsibility for the delivery, implementation and funding decisions for services ultimately rests with the appropriate NHS commissioner. All substantial planned service change is subject to a full public consultation, and must meet

Government and NHS England's tests to ensure good decision making. As my right hon. and learned Friend has sometimes pointed out, community diagnostic centres are an important development to allow patients to access planned diagnostic care nearer to home, without the need to attend acute sites. That is only one of the ways we are doing that, including through virtual wards and a closer tie-up between primary and secondary care. Funding for community diagnostic centres has been allocated so that areas with unmet need receive more funding. That will help to tackle health inequalities.

My right hon. and learned Friend rightly raised the Priors Field surgery closure at Sutton. NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB is pleased to confirm that from 1 April, Malling Health took on an interim contract to provide primary care services to the patients of Priors Field surgery. While that interim solution is being secured, the ICB continues to work with key stakeholders in the local community to ensure that communities in Sutton and the surrounding areas continue to have access to primary care services that meet their needs, both now and in the future. Knowing my right hon. and learned

Friend well, I know that he will not be backward in coming forward to make the case strongly for investment in his local community and constituency, and we will continue the useful and helpful conversation that we have been having.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to the Minister for the help he has given us. Would he be prepared to continue to take an interest in Royston and its future plans, because I think that has been very helpful so far?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to conclude as I started, by saying that I would love to continue that conversation with my right hon. and learned Friend, his constituents and local clinicians. I thought it was extremely interesting, and they had some powerful ideas. I look forward to continuing that with my right hon. and learned Friend and local clinicians.

Question put and agreed to.

10.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 5 June 2023

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

Higher Education Students: Statutory Duty of Care

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee on 16 May 2023, on a statutory duty of care for higher education students, HC 1343; and summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee, on a statutory duty of care for higher education students, reported to the House on 26 May, HC 73.]

4.30 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 622847, relating to a statutory duty of care for higher education students.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank the 128,292 petitioners and pay tribute to the lead petitioner, Lee Fryatt, who lost his son Daniel to suicide, all others who have given evidence or whom my office has spoken to—Ben West, Hilary Grime, James Murray, Maggie Abraham, Mark Shanahan, Hema Patel and Alice Armstrong—and all those who have lost loved ones and been on a long journey not just to get to today's debate but to take on the universities and the Government with one focus: preventing any more young people from taking their lives.

Through my work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, and in the many debates that I have led as a member of the Petitions Committee, I have spent much time listening to family members who have lost loved ones by suicide—heartbreaking stories, every single one of them. As Ged Flynn from PAPYRUS stated, the longer he works in this field the more he realises

“how complex suicide is. The contributory factors to suicide are so many and so varied...but there are commonalities in those stories that we must learn from.”

The question today is whether one of the lessons is to put in place a statutory duty of care for students in higher education.

I will run through some core statistics, which do not make for good reading. Between the 2017 and 2020 academic years, 202 male students died by suicide, as did 117 female students—319 lives that could have been saved. The Petitions Committee ran an online survey asking petitioners about their experience of poor mental health at university, the support provided by their university, and their views on introducing a statutory duty of care for higher education students. More than 1,500 people replied. The figures showed that an extremely large percentage of the current and former students had suffered, or were suffering, with their mental health. Around half felt that their university was very unsupportive and did not feel that they could discuss the issue with their tutor. For institutions that exist to work with young people, that is poor.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I, too, congratulate all the petitioners on securing today's debate. My hon. Friend is outlining some stark statistics. Mental health in higher education has become a lot

more complex and serious following the covid pandemic, which revealed quite a lot about the mental health of students. Does he agree that it is probably time to review the law in this area to ensure that we have everything in place to protect students, as more of their mental health problems become apparent?

Nick Fletcher: I could not agree more, and Members will hear more of my thoughts on that.

Returning to the survey, parents and guardians were equally disappointed, with 79% stating that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that the current mental health support for university students is adequate. A large percentage also thought that if their child were showing signs of mental health issues, the university would be in contact. We will learn later that that is not always the case.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when a student at university attempts suicide their parents should be told? I find it inexplicable that that is currently not the case. Secondly, I understand that Universities UK has drawn up suicide prevention guidelines, which the vice-chancellor of Bristol was talking about this morning. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as an interim measure, those should be made compulsory for universities, rather than optional?

Nick Fletcher: On the right hon. Gentleman's point about not contacting parents, I believe that some universities cite GDPR as an issue. In my experience, safeguarding always overrides GDPR, so that is definitely something we need to look at. I will speak later about the guidance, but I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution.

Overall, the survey showed that support for students varies significantly across the 200-plus universities and higher education settings. Both students and parents expect better. I have heard terrible stories, including of students being told by email that they are being asked to leave their university; zero marks being given without explanation and with no one available to talk to immediately; emergency contact numbers not being called in times of crisis, as the right hon. Gentleman just mentioned; deaths being announced before family members can tell their wider family; universities deleting student records in advance of any coroner's inquest; data protection laws being used wrongly so as not to tell parents; and a general lack of training. Given that students are paying £9,000 a year to universities, is that acceptable?

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. As many Members know, this subject is incredibly difficult for me to talk about, given my personal experiences, but I would like to highlight the case of one of my constituents. Mared Foulkes from Menai Bridge was in her second year of studying pharmacy at Cardiff University when she received an automated email from the university, hours before her death, saying that she had failed her exams and would not be moving on to her third year. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is completely unacceptable?

Nick Fletcher: I know how important the subject is to my hon. Friend, and I agree that that kind of behaviour from universities is appalling. Their entire being is about young people. They really need to do better.

[*Nick Fletcher*]

The petitioners call for a statutory duty of care, akin to employers' duty of care for employees, to protect them from foreseeable harm caused by either direct or indirect actions. Parents said that a duty of care would improve communication with families—as we have seen, that definitely needs to happen—take into account extenuating circumstances and the need to offer further support; lead to better availability of support services and staff training; mean the recording and investigation of student suicides, including the publication of student suicide rates; and give consistency of service at all universities.

The Government say that universities have a general duty of care. There is a case in which that was found not to be the case, but because there is an appeal in respect of the case, it is not possible to discuss the details any further. Universities UK has said that they have a moral and ethical duty, while also suggesting that there could be some kind of mandatory excellence framework, as it believes in continuous development.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. I want to speak out on behalf of my constituent Esther Brennan, who is here with us today. Esther lost her son Theo. Theo went through all the processes that the university put in place, and the university failed him at every level. At the inquest, the university claimed that it did not have a duty of care, and the inquest found in favour of that position. That cannot be acceptable. We cannot have this uncertainty. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need clarity on this issue?

Nick Fletcher: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution. I send my sincere condolences to her constituent's family. It is a terrible issue and a terrible blow to the family. I will come to her point later.

AMOSSHE, the student services organisation, recently stated that it did not believe that an additional statutory duty of care

“is the right approach for embedding the wider improvements”

that it is committed to

“and that have been identified by bereaved families and the LEARN Network.”

PAPYRUS agrees that there should not be a statutory duty of care and that a more societal approach should be taken instead.

Further questions that have arisen from my research include the following. Why are all universities not implementing the trusted contact system and then using it? Why have all universities not signed up to the “Suicide-safer universities” guidance and the university mental health charter? Why are universities still carrying out bad practice such as telling students they must leave by email, without any thought of the inevitable emotional and mental impact? Why are universities not coming together to go through the coroners' reports of the 319 tragedies that I mentioned to find common themes and spread best practice to avoid future deaths?

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an impassioned speech. My constituent Anu Abraham was on placement as part of a three-year

course with Leeds Trinity University, training to be a police officer. Not only was he failed by the police, but he was failed by his university. Sadly, he took his own life in March this year due to the bullying that he was subjected to at his first placement, at Halifax police station. Far too often, calls of this nature are put to one side. As the hon. Member has said, a duty of care is needed, but does he agree with me and Anu's family that we must ultimately learn from these cases? If we do not have a duty of care, we certainly need a much more holistic view to ensure that parents are fully understanding. Ultimately, parents put their trust in these institutions to look after their children, and that trust needs to be repaid with responsibility.

Nick Fletcher: Again, I send my condolences to the family of the hon. Member's constituent. In this debate, we need to discuss that exact issue. The petitioners want a statutory duty of care, but there are many voices to be heard. I hope that we will have a good debate and that the Government will learn from it.

I hope this debate, with the facts that I have listed and the questions I have raised, will help all stakeholders come to the right decision for our young people. Before I finish, I want to state how I see the issue. Too many young people are taking their lives, but why? I believe we need to build more resilience in our young people. Life is tough, but it has always been tough—it is just tough in different ways. Work needs to be done to see how we can better prepare all our young people in the years before they go to university.

I say to universities: these young people are not just customers; they are students, and the sole reason for you working in the environment that you do. I know time and money are pressing, and I know many students are off and on campus and can live elsewhere, but surely to goodness you have to try harder. We legislate in this place when things go wrong out there, so please sort out what you are doing and get your heads together. If signing up to the guidance and the charter is a good step, which I believe it is, then please get on with it—no exceptions. You are meant to be the brains of this country. We should not have to debate this issue here. You are doing some good work, but you could be doing so much better.

I say to our Government: a statutory duty of care would ensure that all parties knew where they stood, but until we have one, please use the levers you have to make the universities do better at helping our young people. If they do not, do what the petitioners ask and legislate so that they must.

I say to parents: your child might think they are grown up—mine certainly do, and many in this place keep telling me that they are; the Opposition want to give them the vote at 16—but you know and I know that even at 23 they still have a lot of growing up to do. We all need our parents at some point. So, parents, please make that call, send that text or go and see them, even when they say no. Tell them that you love them. They need it more than you know. We all need support, however old we are. I know those that I have spoken to have tried, but everybody needs to. Everyone who has lost someone wishes they could still make that call, so do it now—and every week and every day if you think it is necessary.

As a result of having led these debates, I constantly ask my own children whether they are okay. They call me daft; they laugh at me for asking. I do not care—I ask, and tell them I love them, because I do. I say this to every young person out there: nothing is that bad. Trust me; I have heard it all in this place. No matter how bad things are, there is always someone to help, but you must ask. You are all precious and you are all priceless. There is only one of you. So ask. Make that call. Confess that issue. Tell someone that you are struggling. It does not matter what it is; it only matters that you ask.

Finally, I am sure that I speak for everyone here when I say that each suicide is a tragedy that will haunt family and friends for the rest of their lives. Although it is a great thing that, as the Office for National Statistics tells us, the suicide rate per head of population has declined by 28% since 1981, that is no comfort to those who have lost a loved one. Let us all play our part and do what we can in this place and in the world outside as we go about our daily business. I look forward to hearing colleagues' thoughts and the Minister's response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that the petition being debated relates indirectly to a claim against a higher education institution. The legal case is ongoing and therefore sub judice. Mr Speaker has agreed to my exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of resolutions on matters sub judice to allow limited reference to the findings of the county court in that case. However, I ask that Members do not refer to details of the case or the conduct of the case, including by attributing particular arguments to the parties involved therein. I remind Members who wish to speak to bob, as there are quite of a lot of you.

4.47 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called first and to contribute under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on his contribution in opening the debate. Like him, I thank everyone who signed the petition, which ensured that we had this discussion today. I particularly thank the bereaved parents who have driven the campaign. I cannot imagine anything worse than their loss—sending a child off to university, full of expectations and hope, as Lee Fryatt described at the pre-debate evidence session, and then finding that that journey and excitement ends in the tragedy of suicide.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group for students, which was set up to provide a voice in this place for those studying in further and higher education, and I have followed the issue very carefully. I was pleased to join the recent LEARN Network event in Parliament and listen to all the powerful personal testimonies, particularly those from parents. I was also pleased to be invited to join the Petitions Committee's pre-debate evidence session, and I have read the transcript of the part of the session that I missed. All that I have learned convinces me that today's debate is necessary.

The number of suicides in this country is mercifully low, and it is much lower among students—across all age groups—than among the population as a whole, but even one suicide is clearly one too many. As Ged Flynn

from POPYRUS emphasised at the pre-debate session, suicide is very much a preventable death. That should focus us acutely. Everything must be done to save lives, and the action that we take makes the crucial difference. We should be asking what more our universities can do, and indeed what more the Government can do, recognising that we face a mental health crisis, particularly among young people.

At this stage, we need to recognise that not all of the 2.8 million students in this country fit the conventional model of young people going away from home to university. A quarter of them are commuter students travelling from home. Half a million are over 30, and half a million are part time. Many are postgraduates, international students and so on. However, the focus of much of this discussion has been on that younger cohort, and we need to recognise that last year, 25% of 17 to 19-year-olds in England were experiencing poor mental health. That figure is growing as a result of many factors, and it is up significantly from 10% six years ago.

One thing that shocked me on becoming an MP 13 years ago, was that when I went into schools, as I do every year, to talk to young people about what they think my priorities should be as their Member of Parliament, I was told that access to mental health support was their top issue. That has been repeated almost every year. Those young people emphasise the inadequacy of the support available to them. There is too little in schools, and where schools are acting to provide support, money is diverted from teaching budgets. It takes too long to get a first appointment with child and adolescent mental health services after referral, and even when they get into CAMHS, there is too little treatment because of the way the sessions are capped. It is therefore probably no surprise that so many students are entering university with mental health problems. UCAS estimates that over 70,000 students enter higher education every year with a mental health condition, but around half of them told UCAS in a survey that they had not shared that information prior to entry.

Universities have responded. I think they have been learning, but not consistently and perhaps not quickly enough. In 2017, the mentally healthy universities framework was launched. That formed the basis of the university mental health charter created by Student Minds, with whom the all-party parliamentary group has worked. The charter framework rightly provides an approach of improving the support available to students and addressing the determinants of student wellbeing, including aspects of the academic process that might have an impact on wellbeing, such as assessment, fitness to study and dismissal. The problem is that not every university has signed up, and clearly more should be done to ensure that they do.

The responsibility does not just fall on universities. In the pre-debate evidence session, National Union of Students vice-president Chloe Field said that

“universities have become almost the only port of call for students if they are suffering from mental health, because of the failures of the NHS and the long waiting lists that the NHS has. Students struggle to get through to that NHS service. There is a huge number of students who try to access that support.”

She also pointed out the many factors that were exacerbating poor mental health, including academic and financial pressures. Because of the financial pressures, people face

[Paul Blomfield]

difficulties in juggling so many jobs just to see themselves through university, as well as meeting their academic commitments.

I highlight all of that not to diminish the responsibility of universities, but to illustrate—as we were told several times in the pre-debate session—that there is no silver bullet. What more could universities do? Mark Shanahan made a really useful contribution. His son took his life in Sheffield, in one of the two universities that I am pleased to represent. He drew a comparison between the teaching excellence framework and the research excellence framework, which provide a disciplined approach of expectations on universities, and he asked why we do not have a student support excellence framework. Professor Steve West, who gave evidence on behalf of Universities UK, took up that point, acknowledging that there was not sufficient and consistent best practice, but we should not talk about this as best practice; we should be talking about it as basic practice across universities.

I am not convinced that a duty of care will do the job that those advocating it want, and it may indeed have unintended consequences, but there need to be clear expectations—not encouragement, not a willingness to do well, but clear expectations—on universities to up their game consistently across the sector. I hope that when the Minister winds up the debate, he will set out how he thinks that might be delivered; I am conscious that he has already done that to a significant degree in the letter he circulated to us today. Clearly, it should not be a one-size-fits-all solution, but there should be consistent expectations.

I also hope that in winding up, the Minister will recognise—even if it is not his responsibility—the other factors contributing to the mental health crisis. Will he share with us what he will do with colleagues across Government, particularly Health Ministers and, in this context, probably the Chancellor, to make available the sort of support working alongside universities that is really necessary to tackle this crisis? As I said, I do not think that there is a one-size-fits-all solution, given the diversity of our student population, but there must be a real commitment from Government, from the sector and from all of us in this place to reducing student suicide.

4.56 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I do not believe that this subject requires a long speech, because for me the situation and the decision by the Government seem to be relatively clear. It became distressingly clear to me when my constituents Valerie and Andrew Hayter came to see me in my constituency surgery in Andover one Friday morning to talk about the loss of their son Alex, who, just a couple of years before, had taken his own life following unexpected disengagement from his university course and exams over the course of one summer. Their view was that but for a simple phone call, a gentle nudge or a small human connection by somebody at the university, the life of their son may well have been saved, yet it became clear from their account of the events that unfolded that that was not an approach that would get much purchase in universities.

Whatever we may think of the current state of universities—many of them do a fantastic job—they have become much more transactional places. There was a time,

certainly when I was at university, when they referred to themselves as communities—when they were there for not just academic growth, but spiritual and emotional growth. They recognised that they were taking on young people who were adults legally, but perhaps not fully formed adults emotionally, and who, at the tail end of adolescence, would be going through particular difficulties and a developmental stage in their mental acuity that required a particular kind of attention and pastoral care.

We see that change in universities in their retreat into defence when these horrible, tragic events happen. The defence is that students are adults—a legal defence. Or there is a bureaucratic defence, as my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) mentioned, about GDPR. There is never a mention of basic kindness or human connection, or—an overused phrase sometimes—a common sense, or even a sense of morality about what somebody might do when they notice behaviour that might give a family cause for concern.

The university sector also retreats into the notion that, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, suicides in universities are lower than the average. Well, so they should be. This is a supervised or semi-supervised environment where there is supposed to be a latticework of support and care, and where young people are given the space to grow emotionally as much as intellectually. The fact that the rate is lower is not a matter for congratulation or celebration; it is actually a notion that they are not doing quite as well as they should be. The case for a general duty of care is a strong one, particularly where we have a sector that is retreating into, as I say, these bureaucratic and process-driven arguments and that we all think has a responsibility to our young people beyond just teaching them.

The Government have said that they believe a duty of care already exists in common law. That will be decided by the courts, but more than one coroner believes that that is not the case and, most importantly, far too many parents believe that that is not the case. Far too many families have seen and felt in their own lives that that is not the case, and they often feel that they are dealt with in a casual or offhand way. They feel that their kids are not disposable and should not be forgotten, and that there should be some change to prevent anybody else from going through what they have gone through.

There has been much talk about mental health support in the debate and more widely. To be fair, universities have done a lot, and the Government have spent a lot and have given money to universities specifically for mental health support and care. The NUS has done some work, as have others. I hope the Minister will agree that the best and most basic mental health support that people can get is a loving family. The idea that families should be excluded from the process, particularly when their child is exhibiting distressing, alarming or even unusual behaviour in a university seems inhumane and immoral. I ask the Minister in his summing up, because he is a thoughtful and independently minded man, to depart from the Government line hitherto and think again about this notion. We have imposed an awful lot on universities, given their new freedoms and the fact that they have often become big businesses. We have an Office for Students to guarantee the quality of courses, and we have just imposed legislation on them to guarantee free speech. Why would we not impose something on them to try to guarantee the safety and lives of our children?

5.2 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for leading the debate. I thank the 25 families behind the petition, which has well over 100,000 signatures, and express my sincere condolences to all of them. I extend my condolences to Lee, Hilary, Mark and Ben and thank them for their appearance before the Petitions Committee last month.

University should be an exciting, life-changing experience for young people and their families; it should not be life-ending. No parent should ever be told that their child has taken their own life—not ever. The fact that over 100 students take their life each year reflects that something is seriously wrong with the current system. I must say that the Government’s response to the petition has been quite insensitive. How can a Government say to families who have lost their child that it would be disproportionate to implement a statutory duty of care. Disproportionate to whom? One hundred students are taking their own life every year. If there had been a statutory duty of care, they might be here today.

What we have now is a general duty of care, but let us be frank: a general duty of care just does not work. If it did, we would not be here debating the petition. Last year, a senior judge ruled that no relevant common law duty of care existed in a case from a bereaved family against a university. We could say that a general duty of care does not even exist, and that needs to change. The petition that we are debating is the right response: it is fair, just and reasonable, and it has my support. A general duty of care is too vague and does not provide clarity or consistency. A statutory duty of care would change that and give students and their parents peace of mind that they were protected.

The Minister said that legislation might have unintended consequences at this time. What does he think those will be? While he is here, I want to put on the record the wider mental health crisis among students. As we have heard, the NUS has found that a third of students feel that the cost of living crisis is having a major impact on their mental health. There has been a mental health crisis at universities for over a decade now. To make matters worse, those in crisis have to wait ridiculous lengths of time to see a professional. I say to the Minister: please do the right thing—ignore the advice of your Department and implement the measure in this petition. It is sensible, justifiable and it will save lives. We owe that to those who have lost their lives.

5.6 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The campaign that led to this debate first came to my attention when I met my constituent Hilary Grime and her son Hamish in December last year. Hilary’s daughter Phoebe had been a pupil at Cranbrook School in my constituency, where she had been a happy, outgoing student who loved surfing and ice hockey. But she struggled when she moved to university, and tragically, on 5 June 2021—exactly two years ago today—she took her own life in her university accommodation. The pain and ramifications suffered by families who have lost a child to suicide are unimaginable, but very sadly many other parents and families have been touched by similar devastating losses.

Over 2.8 million students are in higher education in England and Wales. Over the past 10 years, one student in England and Wales has died as a result of suicide every four days. It is an absolute tragedy that we are losing so many of our young people right at the start of their lives. Yet despite that, the law remains very unclear and limited when it comes to what duties and responsibilities universities have in relation to their often very vulnerable young students. The law in its current form was tested recently. In that case, a claim of negligence failed because the judge found that no relevant duty of care existed.

By contrast, the Government’s response to the petition appears, on the face of it, to have a rather different expectation of universities. They said:

“Higher Education providers do have a general duty of care to deliver educational and pastoral services to the standard of an ordinarily competent institution and, in carrying out these services, they are expected to act reasonably to protect the health, safety and welfare of their students.”

They go on:

“This can be summed up as providers owing a duty of care to not cause harm to their students through the university’s own actions.”

That statement is too simplistic and cites no legal authorities whatever in support. Lawyers have argued that the general duty does exist, but those arguments have thus far been unsuccessful.

In answer to a question asked in March this year by the shadow Minister for Higher Education, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), the Government conceded:

“The existence and application of a duty of care between HE providers and students has not been widely tested in the courts.”

Therefore, at this moment, beyond certain very specific circumstances, the law offers only limited protection to students who suffer harm because of their university’s negligence.

This issue affects a significant and very vulnerable section of our society. University students are adults in law, but they are often living away from home for the first time in their lives. They are sometimes located great distances away from their established support structures of school and home. University students are not covered by the laws that protect students at primary and secondary school, nor do they receive the legal protections afforded by employment. There is a gap: far too many students fall through the middle and do not receive the protections to which they are entitled.

Some progress has been made on prevention in recent years. Universities UK represents 141 universities and, working together with agencies such as Papyrus, is improving access to mental health and pastoral support for students, but such support is not consistent throughout the country. Universities UK concedes that one in four students have a diagnosed mental health issue and one third are recognised as having poor wellbeing. It says that the university mental health charter, created by Student Minds in partnership with UUK and others, provides a framework for institutions to adopt.

Universities UK says that the framework would enable a whole-university approach for safe, inclusive, healthy settings for students, but there is no requirement for universities to sign the charter. There are at least 285 higher education providers in the UK and, of the 141 universities that UUK represents, only 61 have signed the charter.

[Mrs Helen Grant]

Only five have been awarded charter status and none have thus far achieved the two higher levels of accreditation: merit and distinction.

Although some universities are clearly raising their game, others are lagging behind, creating something of a care and wellbeing lottery for students in the UCAS application process. A statutory duty of care would set the bar to level up that standard—a standard that requires all higher education providers to do what might reasonably be expected, while maintaining their autonomy in deciding exactly how that will be achieved. That is the backbone of this debate.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I apologise for not being able to stay for the whole debate; I must be on the Front Bench in the main Chamber soon.

As a Bristol MP, I have been in touch with the vice-chancellors of the University of the West of England—who is the national lead on mental health—and of the University of Bristol to try to get assurances that they are taking this issue seriously. I believe they are. The hon. Member made an important point: the focus is very much on the big universities, but we also need to work with other further education establishments and those that are less in the spotlight. Does the hon. Member think that the statutory duty of care is the way to bring those organisations onboard? Or is there another way to do that?

Mrs Grant: I certainly do. As I said a few moments ago, a statutory duty of care would level up the standard of care in the way that our young people deserve. Obviously, we must put in place all the other suicide prevention measures, but they are not working. They are insufficient. We need both. We need more. We need clarity in the law, and we certainly do not have that at the moment.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I apologise that my Select Committee duties prevented me from being here at the start of the debate. The hon. Member mentioned that one in four students say they have mental health challenges. A more transparent framework or a duty would surely give students the confidence to come forward to the university to seek help and support. I can imagine that when they are facing mental health challenges they often feel there is nobody to turn to, and they do not necessarily have confidence in those institutions. A duty of care would surely help them to come forward and share their struggles.

Mrs Grant: A statutory duty of care would certainly help, but we need everything—it is about having a multi-pronged approach, which I will come to in a moment.

Suicide is a complicated issue, and preventing it requires many different approaches. In that respect, let me say something about two other important and related issues. The first issue is combating stigma. People who struggle with suicidal thoughts may be afraid of being judged or stigmatised if they talk about their feelings. Some pastoral carers have concerns about talking to people they know may be at risk for fear of increasing the likelihood of suicide. Contrary to that, research has shown that asking direct questions about suicide can help to save lives.

The second issue is about learning from tragedy to help us to prevent future deaths, which is precisely what Hilary Grime and her colleagues at the Lived Experience for Action Right Now Network are striving to achieve. It was their petition that brought this debate to the House of Commons. Through a presentation in the Jubilee Room in April, they educated many MPs about the need for a statutory duty of care. They are helping us to learn and giving us the chance to make a change through the loss of their children: Natasha, Kieran, Stefan, Mared, Ceara, Phoebe, Jared, Lucy, Oskar, Harry, Romily, Kim, Cameron, Daniel, Rory, Ben, Harrison, Alexandra, Theo, Charlie and Naseeb.

In conclusion, the decision of Judge Ralton in *Abrahart v. University of Bristol* is being appealed in the High Court. That will allow the arguments surrounding the existence of a common-law duty of care to be looked at again, although judges are often reluctant to confirm the existence of a duty where none has existed before. The introduction of a statutory duty of care would, however, remove the current uncertainty and ambiguity. It would allow all stakeholders to contribute to the development of a set of legal norms that would strike the right balance between students and their teaching institutions. It would also bring our law into line with other common-law jurisdictions, such as the USA and Australia.

I have written to and spoken with the Minister, on behalf of my constituent, making the case for a statutory duty of care. In his written response to me, dated 25 November 2022, the Minister set out in detail the policies, practices, frameworks, champions and data that exist in relation to suicide prevention. The response failed, though, to address the uncertainty surrounding the duty of care for students in higher education. I hope that today's debate will allow the Minister to listen carefully to the arguments and look again at this vital issue.

5.19 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Robert. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for compellingly introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

I first became aware of today's debate by chance, just a few hours after meeting with my constituents, the parents of Naseeb Chuhan, who took his own life at the end of his first year at Leeds Beckett University in June 2016. They have campaigned tirelessly ever since to secure a statutory legal duty of care for students in higher education. I can appreciate that this is a complex matter—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) set out some of the reasons why—but it is on their behalf that I want to support the aspirations of the petition, and to do so by sharing a little of Naseeb's story.

There were clear signs that Naseeb was struggling. At the time of his death he had eight outstanding pieces of university work, yet it appears that no welfare checks were made to follow up on his missing work or his attendance issues. The day before his death, he visited the university wellbeing service, where he was honest and up-front about how he was feeling. Naseeb's parents

have looked into that interaction and are clear that, in their view, the service failed to adequately identify, assess and respond to risk.

Following Naseeb's death, his parents sought to make a complaint about the university's handling of his case and its lack of effective pastoral care and support for him. They discovered that complaints by parents are not routinely accepted by universities without the consent of the student concerned. In fact, this is discretionary, despite consent being impossible in such tragic circumstances as the student has already passed away. That is an absurd position for grieving parents to be in and is a result of the lack of regulation in this area. There simply must be a statutory duty of care placed on universities to support their students properly with any mental health issues that they face—a duty of care that already exists for universities regarding their staff and for under-18s in higher education.

Naseeb's parents have since produced a report, which I have circulated to a number of parliamentary colleagues, calling for a series of changes in the light of Naseeb's death. Specifically regarding universities and student wellbeing services, the report makes the following recommendations: university and student wellbeing services should be accountable, with an independent complaints procedure accessible by parents automatically if a student dies; universities should monitor and follow up student attendance and performance to check on the wellbeing of anybody who is struggling with these issues; university staff should be trained in suicide risk and prevention, along with mental health; students should have a clear pathway if in academic crisis; universities should work with coroners and keep records about student suicide; student wellbeing services should have training on suicide and keep appropriate records.

Those recommendations should not be too much to ask for. They are reasonable and proportionate and would almost certainly fall within the requirements of a statutory legal duty of care of universities to their students, which I why I am so supportive of the petition that we are here to debate.

I note the Government's response to the petition, but I must say that, much like my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), I find myself considerably frustrated by the response that was submitted along with the details of the petition and today's debate. The response appears to fall somewhere between the "nothing to see here" approach—that this would be a disproportionate response as suicide rates among students are relatively low—and the "why regulate when this happens anyway?" argument.

If it happens anyway, what is the problem with regulating existing practice? Of course, in Naseeb's case—and, from talking to other parents in similar situations, I suspect in the case of many students—this is not what happens in practice. It is for that reason that I hope the Minister will listen to today's debate and respond positively to the arguments made. For that reason also, I thank everybody who signed the petition, and pay tribute to Naseeb's parents for their campaigning in the face of such devastating personal tragedy.

5.24 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher)

for opening the debate and for his tireless work supporting the mental health of men and boys. I also thank the 394 petitioners from my constituency of Guildford, which is home to the excellent University of Surrey. I should declare that my eldest child is currently a university student.

Although I recognise that universities are autonomous, the petitioners are—reasonably, in my view—calling for a statutory legal duty of care for students in higher education. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for sending a detailed letter to all colleagues in the House about why the Government believe the statutory duty is not required, and I am sure he will go into more detail on the Government's position. I also acknowledge the significant funding that has gone into the university sector to support mental health, and the Government's drive in setting a target for universities to sign up to the mental health charter by September 2024.

I am grateful that the Government have stated that if they do not see a proactive and positive response from the sector, they will ask the Office for Students to explore targeted regulation to protect students' interests. The Government are also right to be wary of unintended consequences, but the main thrust of their argument seems to be that we must wait so as not to stifle innovative projects. I love innovation, and universities are particularly well placed to innovate, but I am afraid that it is too late for the families in the Public Gallery who have lost a loved one to suicide while they were at university, and it will be cold comfort to families who will lose someone in the coming months and years while the Government wait.

From both reading the evidence given to the Petitions Committee and my conversation last week with Dr Mark Shanahan, who is a politics professor at the University of Surrey in my constituency and who is here today with his wife Jacquie, having tragically lost their son Rory, it is clear to me that the families are not looking to replace the work that has already gone into the mental health support for our young people. They are not trying to reinvent the wheel, nor do they wish to seek retribution. They simply wish to fill a legal gap—an anomaly.

My understanding is that there is a duty of care in place for further education students, no matter their age. We have worked so hard to bring parity of esteem between FE and HE, and for society to recognise the value of apprenticeships in particular. It is a shame for our world-leading university sector that any parent listening to the debate could deduce that they are more likely to be contacted by the provider of their family member's education when there is a mental health crisis if they choose further education.

Not all 18-year-olds are ready for university, and not all 18-year-olds should go to university. Some 18-year-olds and their families have no idea that they are neurodiverse until they go to university, such has been the level of support and coping mechanisms in place until then, and we all know that the prefrontal cortex does not fully mature until about the age of 25. Potential changes in diet, misuse of alcohol and/or drugs, and sleep disturbance or deprivation can wreak havoc on the neurotypical. For the neurodiverse, they can spike anxiety and a downward spiral very quickly. There are no protections for such students if they are undiagnosed.

[Angela Richardson]

As a constituency MP, I have had the sadness of having to support parents of university-age children who have had psychotic episodes and have had to be hospitalised. It is horrific. Once someone knows their child is mentally not well, they never stop worrying that they have just had their last phone call or text message from them. When they cannot be contacted, that worry escalates. It does not ever really disappear over that child's lifetime—and I speak from personal experience.

As has been mentioned, there have been instances of misunderstanding of GDPR that have led to no contact with families. The university sector clearly needs to improve its understanding of how to use GDPR properly. Each young person going to university could have an automatic nominated point of contact in case there is a mental health concern or crisis. It may not need to be a family member, and could be a trusted friend. The fundamental question is: why should parents be contacted on the death of their child, but not before?

Finally, I thank Dr Mark Shanahan for telling me about Rory and the desperately sad circumstances around his suicide, and how it was dealt with by the university in question. It is cold that universities simply wait for a medical “fit for study” notice so that they can issue an invoice for fees. It is a shame that students taking a break are often hounded about when they will return to complete their studies. It is not right, and we need to get it right.

All the families in the Public Gallery cannot bring back their loved ones, but they dearly wish to prevent other families from suffering needlessly. I thank them for their selfless battle for others. The Government need to look again at how they can work with the Office for Students to plug this legal gap. If the universities do not come to the table and explore targeted regulation, anything else is no more than hand-holding, a cup of tea and warm words. That is not enough.

5.30 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Robert. I pay tribute to the 128,000-plus people who signed the petition, many of whom have their own very personal stories. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for making a very passionate, thoughtful and human speech at the beginning of the debate. Indeed, I found everybody's contributions personally moving, and I am sure that people in the Public Gallery also thought so.

In paying tribute to all those people who signed the petition, and in particular those who had a very personal reason for doing so, it is my privilege and honour to speak in memory of Oskar Carrick, who died by suicide two years ago. His parents, Maxine and Gary, are with us today. As the hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) said just now, everybody involved in this campaign is immensely selfless. They have lost somebody utterly dear to them, they have experienced—are experiencing—appalling grief, and yet their thought is, “What can we do to protect other families from the same thing?” We all owe them a huge debt of thanks for their care for those who come next and for their determination to ensure that practical lessons are learnt.

Oskar had made an attempt on his life, and despite the fact that both he and his parents had consented for the university to disclose information, that incident was not passed on to Oskar's mum and dad. Whether that was because of GDPR concerns—a sense of a person's right as an adult to privacy—or whatever else, that was massively wrong-headed. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) pointed out, a huge proportion of students at university are not 18 to 22-year-olds, but whatever their age they are potentially vulnerable, and we all need to have somebody who cares for us on the outside. The thought that a higher education institution of any kind should have any hesitation about sharing such vital information with parents and loved ones—because of concerns about legality, form, traditions, GDPR or whatever it might be—is clearly wrong and it is important that universities understand that. I hope that the Minister will be clear that parents and loved ones should be informed when there is a legitimate concern about somebody's mental health.

The simple ask of the petition is that a statutory duty of care should be placed on universities, and having worked in higher education for 13 years before I entered this place, I understand why there is some pushback. But universities are wrong to push back. The truth of the matter is that students are not regular customers. As other hon. Members have mentioned, universities have a duty of care to their staff and yet apparently not, in the same distinct way, to their students. Students are not the same as regular customers for obvious reasons. Despite the fact that many do not fit the typical demographic, the majority are young people living away from home for the first time, and of course they have recently gone through, as we all have, the enormous disruption of covid and all that went along with it.

We are also in a time when it feels like there is a great unkindness in the discourse. In the '60s, Andy Warhol said that in the future everybody would be famous for 15 minutes. He did not know the half of it. In this future, everybody is famous all the time on social media. People like us—Members of Parliament—are meant to deal with that professionally; we are meant to be resilient. But human beings who are not Members of Parliament— young people, whatever age they are—do not have the resilience to cope with that constant judgment and exposure because of the society we are in. Of course universities need to take their duty of care seriously: it should be statutorily placed on them.

I have two kids at university. I also spent 13 years working in higher education before I entered this place. Before that even, I was the president of Newcastle University's students' union. It was a different kettle of fish in those days, not least because there were fewer students. People did not pay fees; there was not even the concept of students being customers. Universities were smaller. It was less possible to disappear in the late 1980s and early 1990s as it is today. Universities are far larger now, with cities full of students from more than one institution. The ability to get lost is that much greater. The need for us step in and take care in a practical way is much greater than it was then.

It is not all down to universities. This is not me castigating the entire higher education sector for its failures. I am reminding them of the fact that they have responsibilities—some legal, some moral. Today we are talking about potentially making the moral responsibilities

also legal. As has been mentioned, by the time a person who has a mental health condition, or is perhaps developing one, goes to university, they may well have been let down for several years before they get there.

The simple fact is that universities are very often filling the gap that child and adolescent mental health services have not been able to fill due to a lack of funding for years before. Today we have a society where we talk about mental health more than we did. That is a good thing, and there is less of a stigma, but we are a society that breeds worse mental health than any other in human history.

We talk about parity of esteem and treating mental and physical health the same, but we do not. If an 18-year-old or 19-year-old playing rugby, cricket or football or running or whatever breaks their leg on a weekend, they are straight into the system there and then. The healing begins that day. If something not visible to the eye were to break in that person, even if it happened to them when they were 14, they may wait months and months for a first appointment to be seen. This is something we all own and all have responsibility to, not just the higher education sector.

We have to learn the lesson of the importance of building resilience in youth, not just in dealing with poor mental health, but building good mental health. I go running not because I am ill, but to try to fight off middle age and make sure I stay relatively well. The same goes for our mental health. We must look after our mental health before we become unwell. Young people need help to do that. That is why outdoor education is so important and should be integrated in residential and into every child's learning experience at primary and secondary schools, so that that level of resilience is built for when tough times come.

As has been said, suicide is preventable. In many ways, that is the most heart-breaking thing about it. I know that from personal experience of a loved one of mine who passed away in that way—thinking of whether there is something that I or any of us could have done. I want to pay tribute to POPYRUS, which does wonderful work in engaging with and supporting suicide prevention, but also to the three dads—Mike, Andy and Tim—who drew attention to their own plight, having lost their daughters Beth, Sophie and Emily. They tried to make sure, like the families here today, that others do not experience what they did by recognising the importance of trying to build suicide prevention into the curriculum.

All of us must take on that responsibility. This debate is focused on the petition, which asks higher education institutions to step up to the plate and accept that duty of care, and indeed for the Government to impose it on them. We entrust our young people into the hands of august higher education institutions. It is so important that as we entrust our young people—predominantly, young people—into institutions' care, they respond by providing care and kindness, paying attention to their needs, not letting anybody fall between the cracks and making sure that people's loved ones back home are always kept informed of how they are. That way they can intervene and prevent appalling tragedies occurring again in the future.

5.39 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): Throughout this debate we have heard tragic stories: it is clear that the problem affects many families up and

down the country. I am afraid I am going to add the case of Harry Armstrong Evans, whose parents, Alice and Rupert, have been running a campaign in his memory. He came from Launceston in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). Because my constituency has the only university in Cornwall, the parents also approached me since they felt this was important.

Harry had had an exceptional set of exam results during his time at the University of Exeter, but he went from being a star pupil to having an unexpectedly set of poor results in his final year. He was in anguish and tried to reach out to his course tutor to discuss it, but it was during half term and the course tutor was not around. As a result of that anguish, Harry took his life. The great tragedy is that his parents were not aware that there was a problem. They had no reason to expect that Harry would have unexpectedly bad results in his final year and saw no reason to reach out to him to say, "Don't worry if it does not go well in the final year", or to try to broach that conversation with him.

Some colleagues have said this afternoon that suicide is preventable. It is important to recognise that although it is preventable, that does not mean that there is someone else to blame. When people experience a suicide in the family or among friends or work colleagues, there is always a sense that if only they had known that there had been a problem, they would have reached out to somebody to tell them that there was no need to worry or to be concerned.

It is important that we are clear with universities. When we say that there is a case for a statutory duty of care, we are not necessarily saying that they are to blame for everything that might happen. We are all just collectively saying that there are things that we could do differently, that suicide is preventable, and that if we work on getting things right, we can reduce the number of such tragedies, for suicide is always a terrible tragedy.

Following the death of Harry, Alice and Rupert launched their own parliamentary petition to call for something that they have called Harry's law. This focuses specifically on the issue of requiring universities to at the very least publish the suicide data that they have. It would simply require that where coroners inform universities that there has been a suicide of an enrolled student, that university has to declare it and make that information public. If the Minister is resistant to going all the way to having a statutory duty of care, or if he is advised by departmental lawyers that such a step is unnecessary and does not add much, at the very least could we require universities to publish the suicide data? If they are required to publish that, I think it likely that they would pay much more attention to the work that they do and the pastoral care that they provide to avoid such terrible tragedies.

Alice and Rupert Armstrong Evans have also proposed that if a university is performing particularly badly and has a highly disproportionate number of suicides, they should potentially be placed in special measures or be given the support that they need to make sure that they get in place the right kind of pastoral care. If the Minister is not willing to support a statutory duty of care for universities, I hope he will look at what can be done to improve the transparency of data and require

[George Eustice]

universities to publish that as a first step, and then perhaps a statutory duty of care could be considered at a future date.

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): We now have the Front-Bench wind-up speeches.

5.44 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I express my particular thanks to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for his impassioned speech. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, all of whom I believe have spoken with a degree of respect and understanding that I can only hope members of the LEARN Network will feel does justice to their campaign. This debate is the culmination of the LEARN Network's tireless work. The ability for members of the group to turn their grief into such a formidable and effective political campaign is remarkable and to be commended. I thank all those who signed the petition.

In terms of the LEARN Network, I have had the privilege of meeting many of the parents, most recently at the parliamentary reception. I must say that that event left a lasting mark on me, as well as all my colleagues who attended. The powerful testimonies were incredibly moving, and gave us all cause for reflection. I want to place on record my particular thanks to Gillian Green and Bob and Maggie Abraham, all three of whom have been instrumental in pushing forward the campaign. I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) for her role in sponsoring the parliamentary event and encouraging participation in the comprehensive debate we have had today.

I will turn to what have been very reflective and considered contributions from around the Chamber. As I said, the hon. Member for Don Valley gave a particularly impassioned speech, but I was really disturbed to hear the evidence given by certain colleagues of automated emails being issued by institutions, without any empathy or understanding, and being received cold by students. There is clearly something wrong with that.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about the wider mental health crisis we have had for over a decade, and the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald talked about a lottery that is perhaps out there in the quality of provision among our higher education providers. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), among others, spoke about how these are all preventable deaths. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) spoke about universities—institutions—becoming more transactional places. Not just the academic pressures, but the financial pressures faced by students—whether it be the fees, the maintenance costs or the cost of living—have driven so many to despair, so I agree with him on that particular point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made the point, which I think was a suggestion from his constituent and picked up by the vice-chancellor of UWE, that if we have TEF and REF, why should we not have a support excellence framework? There is real merit in pursuing that as a means of measuring. That is a point that I think has been made

around the Chamber today; there is a need to measure and understand the quality of provision among our higher education providers.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): First, Sir Robert, there was a delay in my arrival; unfortunately, the trains were not behaving this afternoon. I wanted to make an intervention, particularly given the death of our nephew, Jack, while at the University of York. One of the things we put to the coroner and the university was that in addition to ensuring there was training for all university staff at all levels—not just departmental or front-facing, but all levels involved in the administration—it was important that there should be a named advocate, if not a parent, who can be notified if there are concerns about the mental health of any student. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be a practical way forward?

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend. I totally agree, and my condolences to her on her particular experience. I believe that is something that should be introduced as well.

I will come to the powerful testimony and example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). I was surprised to hear about his constituents' experience. In many cases across the piece, we have heard of the wellbeing service failing to identify risk, but I was most disturbed by that particularly absurd and impossible situation. It was a totally insensitive situation to put a family in.

I have met many families from the network. Their diversity and number are a painful reminder that no family is immune from the consequences of the mental health crisis that affects many students on campuses today. Every suicide is a tragedy—a death that is preventable. Student suicides are no different from similar tragedies in wider society. They send shockwaves through families, loved ones and communities, and leave lasting impacts. They also represent a failure, whether partial or total, of structures intended to provide support to students in mental distress.

I appreciate the time and money that many universities give to providing mental health support for students and staff, and I am confident that student support services in universities are doing the best they can to support student welfare with the resources they have available. However, the gap between the expectations of students and parents and the reality of mental health provision in universities is far too great. A 2023 survey for *The Tab*, a student news site, revealed that only 12% of students think that their university handles the issue of student mental health well. Parents responded similarly, with 67% saying that their child had not felt that their university supported them with their mental health. Many have to wait a whole year for access to support; others are granted a maximum of only six sessions over the course of their degree.

As we have heard, demand for services and support is clearly rising, with one in four student respondents to one survey reporting a diagnosed mental health issue. Many of those issues are also starting earlier in students' lives. The number of accepted home applicants who declared a disability related to their mental health on their UCAS application form increased from around 2,500 in 2011 to almost 22,500 in 2022. We should also

not be blind to the effect of recent trends on student mental health, notably the cost of living crisis. Ninety per cent. of students surveyed by the National Union of Students in September 2022 said the rising cost of living had negatively impacted their mental health. It is almost impossible to argue there is not a serious mental health crisis on our campuses. The question, then, becomes what we can do to remedy it and prevent further unnecessary loss of life.

The UK higher education sector, by the unfortunate necessities I have described, needs to be at the forefront of tackling wider trends in mental health problems in society. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire made that point. It is therefore important for the sector to work in harmony. I welcome UUK's "Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities" framework and welcome the fact that almost all universities have used it to feed into their student mental health policies. In my many visits to higher education providers, I always insist on meeting with students and their representatives, and mental health is a topic I always cover.

It is clear that approaches vary among institutions, but that some have designed comprehensive strategies to ensuring student welfare is central and integrated into the experience. These are centres of excellence whose work I want to see replicated across the piece. Where best practice is well-informed, widely applied, comprehensive and open to constant improvement, I believe the sector can create strong support structures for students. However, I was concerned to read in the transcript of the Petitions Committee evidence session that best practice guidelines were being adopted inconsistently with little accountability. If true, that needs addressing urgently and I implore UUK to investigate it as a matter of priority.

I note that the university mental health charter has been regularly cited. The principles behind it are certainly worthy, but it is somewhat disappointing that fewer than half of universities are signatories. I welcome the Minister's announcement this morning requiring universities to become signatories by September 2024. While the charter is not a panacea, it sends an important signal to prospective and current students that a university takes its commitments to student welfare seriously. Absent a statutory duty of care, clear, unequivocal statements such as the charter would go a long way in assuaging the concerns that many people have regarding student mental health provision.

With demand for services clearly outstripping provision, however, surely the time has come for more investment in our young people's mental health. That is why Labour has committed to guaranteeing mental health treatment within a month for all who need it, by recruiting 8,500 new mental health professionals to support 1 million additional people a year. With a particular focus on child mental health, such investment might begin to stem the rising tide of the mental health crisis on campus.

Labour would also prioritise ensuring that universities are far more integrated into local national health service trusts, so that students can readily access services via their campuses and communities. Too often, students feel isolated from those services. I note that the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), announced a similar policy over a year ago, alongside the Department of Health and Social Care, so I would welcome an update on that work all these months on.

In Wales, the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 requires the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research to ensure that it is satisfied with the effectiveness of the registered tertiary education providers' arrangements for supporting and promoting the welfare of their students and staff. The point is that, although it is fine to have a charter, it has to be enforced; there has to be an audit of how that charter is being delivered by an institution—the institution cannot just have a charter mark on its wall. Wales is the first country in the UK to introduce such a requirement for higher and further education providers, and to provide for it in legislation. My question to the Minister is: has he considered, or will he consider, a similar approach for the English regulator, the Officer for Students?

It is regrettable that, rather than investigating a similar statutory requirement for England, the Government have spent two years attempting to exacerbate culture war divisions through the passage of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. I would argue that the matter we are discussing is a much higher priority. To that end, I would also be grateful if the Minister provided an update on the work of the student wellbeing champion in promoting good mental health support among higher education providers. In addition, in light of real-terms cuts for student premium and mental health funding for the academic year 2023-24, how confident is he that the Office for Students has adequate funds to promote and encourage good mental health support among providers?

Can the Minister provide an update on the UK mental health charter? What steps is he taking to encourage universities to sign by the recently announced new deadline of September 2024? How will that be audited and who will determine whether higher education providers continue to meet their duties under the charter? Finally, will the Minister provide an update on the roundtable convened by the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for Chippenham, in July 2021 on suicide prevention in the higher education sector? I also suggest to the Minister that, if he chose to reconvene that roundtable to include members of the LEARN Network, universities, myself on a cross-party basis, and sector stakeholders and student representatives, we might be well-placed to advance effective policies that enjoy a broad range of support.

5.58 pm

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for the way he opened the debate. He fairly set out all points of view on this very difficult issue. It has been a deeply emotional debate; we have heard heartrending testimonies from MPs on behalf of their constituents. I hope my remarks will set out some real things that the Government are doing. I will be limited in responding to everyone, because I want to be able to speak to the families here today, and to those watching on BBC Parliament or the internet. I thank Lee Fryatt and the LEARN Network for starting the petition, and all the families. They are rightly calling for students to be better protected when they leave home for the first time for university. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said that the selflessness of the families has been clear. He is exactly right. There is a very important description of what is happening, and what everyone has been through.

[Robert Halfon]

I know that many people listening to the debate have had painful first-hand experience of losing bright, capable young people to suicide, and it was an honour to attend the parliamentary event last month to personally hear their testimonies. We owe it to the memories of those young people to collectively take strong and effective action that prevents further tragedies. That, above all else, should be what the Government deliver for them, and since being appointed the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education by the Prime Minister last year I have made it a priority for my Department.

Let me set out what our approach will be. The first point is funding and resourcing vital services. I know that that is a concern of the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I welcome the constructive way in which he set out his argument. The second point is spreading and implementing best practice, and the third is having clear responsibilities for providers and protection for students.

First, to deliver the determined interventions that are needed we absolutely need the right funding. That is why we invested £3.6 million via the Office for Students to establish Student Space. Since its launch in 2020, nearly 300,000 students across the country have benefited from the free mental health resources and confidential support that that online service offers. We have also asked the Office for Students to distribute £15 million this academic year so that support can be targeted towards students starting university for the first time. That funding will also enable effective partnerships between providers and local NHS services so that students can better navigate the pathways for mental health provision. Those NHS mental health services are receiving record funding through the NHS long-term plan. By March 2024, an additional £2.3 billion per year above 2018-19 levels will go into mental health services in England. As a result, a further 345,000 people under the age of 25 will get the mental health support that they need.

A number of Members talked about the mental health charter, especially the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). It has been acknowledged that the university sector has made some important strides in recent years to develop clear mental health support frameworks, working with charities and experts. The suicide-safer universities framework provides guidance on suicide prevention for university leaders. There is also now postvention best practice on providing compassionate and timely support after a suspected suicide. Building on those foundations, Student Minds developed the university mental health charter, setting out the principles for a whole-university approach to mental health. That includes the need for mental health training relevant to the role of individual staff—an issue that I know the LEARN Network has raised.

The associated charter programme is not a panacea but a process—one that enables continuous improvement and that has already raised standards in the sector. As has been mentioned, I have written to ask all universities to sign up to the mental health charter programme by September 2024. It is right that just 61 universities are already part of the charter programme. I know that that concerns my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone

and The Weald (Mrs Grant), and I agree that it is time the rest got onboard. It is time that parents and students have the confidence that a safety net is in place, whatever university they have chosen to study at.

Providers that do not have degree-awarding powers are not eligible but can still follow the charter's principles, and there is an Association of Colleges mental health and wellbeing charter for colleges. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) talked about parity of esteem, and about how FE is doing these things and universities should be doing them as well. She is absolutely right. I thank all the further education colleges and providers for all they do to support learners with mental health difficulties.

I am confident that higher education can meet this challenge. However, I have made it clear that if the response is not satisfactory, I will go further and ask the Office for Students to look at the merits of a new registration condition on mental health. To those who fear it would not have the right impact, I want to be clear that any breach of such a condition would be subject to the same sanctions as breaches of other registration conditions.

I have been asked about the student support champion. For the record, I should declare that I was made an honorary professor of Nottingham Trent University when I was Chair of the Education Committee. We appointed Professor Edward Peck as the first ever student support champion in 2022, and I am pleased that he is in the Public Gallery to observe this debate. I am indebted to him for all his support and wise advice.

Professor Peck has worked with the LEARN Network to identify four more areas where providers should go further to protect students' mental health. First, providers need to identify students at risk early, with pastoral care well before they reach crisis point. UCAS has worked hard to improve disclosure of mental health conditions by breaking down stigma and promoting the benefits of having reasonable adjustments in place from day one. Providers are already finding effective ways to identify students who have not yet disclosed but need help, such as Northumbria's innovative use of student data analytics. We need to waste no time in rolling this out, but there needs to be a clear action plan, backed by the sector and students, to ensure that it happens.

Secondly, higher education needs to get behind a university student commitment on more personalised and compassionate academic processes, so that students are dealt with sensitively when they face course dismissal or receive difficult assignment results. The LEARN Network has raised the importance of that issue, and has asked for students to be treated fairly. Under the commitment, providers would review their procedures to ensure that the circumstances of individual students are considered, including their mental health.

Thirdly, lessons from existing reviews of student suicides need to be shared more widely, which I know some bereaved parents have been calling for. To ensure that that happens, we will commission an independent organisation to carry out a national review of university student deaths. That is the best way to ensure that local reviews are done rigorously, to learn from these tragic events and to prevent lives from being lost. My right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) talked about the suicide data issue. I will come on to what we are doing. I mentioned

Professor Peck and the review, and it is perhaps something we could look at in relation to that. As my right hon. Friend knows, the Office for National Statistics has published national data on student suicides.

I know that there are bereaved families listening today who would particularly like to see Universities UK guidance on sharing information with trusted contacts effectively adopted. That has been raised by a number of Members. Of course, where possible, information should be shared with parents. There may be circumstances where students do not want to share. They may be adults; there may be issues with family breakdowns or personal issues that mean they do not want to share with parents, but having a point of contact is exactly right.

As of May 2023, a Universities UK survey showed that 93% of members have adopted or are adopting the guidance on information sharing, so we should start to see a change in practice. Ensuring that best practice on information sharing with trusted contacts, whether parents or otherwise, is fully implemented will be a key focus of the implementation taskforce. The taskforce will set targets for improvement, which I will come on to.

As I have mentioned, Professor Peck is chairing a new higher education mental health implementation taskforce, with its outputs reporting directly to me. It will include bereaved parents, students, mental health experts, charities and sector representatives. Of course, where I am able to involve the shadow Minister, I will be pleased to do so.

Wendy Chamberlain: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I will in a second, but I have some very important stuff for families to get through.

By the end of this year, the taskforce will be asked to put in place an interim plan for better early identification of students at risk and for delivering the university student commitment as well as a set of strong, clear targets for improvements by providers. By May 2024, it should follow with a final report outlining the next steps, including how the sector will publicly report on the progress measures over the coming years.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. We are talking about a lot of stakeholders, and we are also talking about UK bodies. I am very keen to understand what engagement the Minister is having with the Scottish and Welsh Governments. All of us, wherever we represent, want to ensure that we prevent student suicides.

Robert Halfon: Although education is a devolved issue, as the hon. Lady knows, I will of course work with the devolved authorities—absolutely. It is absolutely essential to learn from each other. The Labour party spokesman talked about Wales, for example. There is a lot that we can learn from.

Turning to the statutory duty of care called for by the petition, I absolutely get the arguments and hope I have demonstrated that I share the petitioners' fundamental aims, which are to protect those who study at university and to prevent future tragedies. If creating a duty for higher education providers towards their students was the right way to achieve that, it would absolutely have the Government's backing. There are reasons why we believe that it may not be the most effective intervention.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) expressed some important views about bureaucracy. PAPYRUS, the suicide prevention and mental health charity, says that one of the risks of the shift from "should" to "must" is that we already see, most prevalently, a rescinding of energy. My worry is that if we introduce a framework that says "must", people will recoil even further and avoid any natural intervention that they would ordinarily make. I am worried that the thing that he wants to happen might create a one-size-fits-all approach, when we need to look at different ways of intervening for mental health.

First, the Government's view, shared by independent legal experts, is that a general duty of care already exists in common law as part of the law of negligence. That means higher education providers must deliver educational and pastoral services to the standard of an ordinarily competent institution. Recent judgments failed to find a duty of care in the circumstances of those particular cases. However, I am aware that the decision in *Abrahart v. University of Bristol* is being appealed in the High Court, so I have been advised that I am not able to comment further at this stage, although we will look at the issue carefully.

Secondly, there are already further protections for students in law. In particular, the Equality Act 2010 protects students with disabilities, including mental health conditions, from unlawful discrimination and harassment. It also provides reasonable adjustments where such students would otherwise be put at a substantial disadvantage. Providers must also fully observe health and safety obligations and requirements to safeguard vulnerable adults, as well as contractual obligations.

Thirdly, setting aside the legal position, we do not believe that the most effective way to improve student mental health is to introduce new legislative requirements when the sector is making progress on a voluntary basis. Although the sector absolutely could and should do more—I have tried to set out some of the things that we are calling for—providers are still innovating and improving, and there is not yet consensus on which interventions are most effective. That is the point I am trying to explain to my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire. It is no excuse for not doing anything or for inaction, but it does mean that the one-size-fits-all approach may not achieve the best results and support for students suffering from mental health difficulties, which is what we all want to see. As I say, we have other pieces of law already in place on equalities and on negligence.

I expect universities, as organisations with an obligation to do the right thing for their students, to rise to the challenge that we have set for them today. As I have mentioned, if we do not see the expected improvements I will not hesitate to ask the Office for Students to introduce a new registration condition on mental health. It is vital that the whole sector takes this call to action seriously.

I hope that I have been clear that we are not standing by and letting things continue as they are. I am determined that all universities will sign up to the mental health charter and that Professor Peck's proposals will be implemented. I will reiterate those aims when I host a mental health roundtable for sector leaders. We will also continue to monitor how effectively the existing law is being applied.

[*Robert Halfon*]

I want to say one thing to everybody who has talked about the need for more legislation—my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald cares passionately about this, and I thank her for all that she has done for her constituents. To be absolutely clear, I am not closing the door on future legislation if that is what is required to make students safer. For now, we are seeking actively to bolster every aspect of the support systems that are available to students. Absolutely no one should take up the shining opportunity of a university place—it is meant to be one of the greatest times of one's life—only to find that poor mental health support prevents them from getting the most out of the experience and the fulfilment of attending that university.

Sir Robert Syms (in the Chair): I call Nick Fletcher to make some brief final comments.

6.16 pm

Nick Fletcher: I thank all hon. Members who have come to the debate, and I thank the Minister for his letter and his comments. I thank all the petitioners who have come to the debate. I know that they were hoping for the statutory duty to be put in place. That was never going to happen today—this is a Westminster Hall debate, and that does not happen here—but they have heard the Minister's comments. He has written to all universities to ask them to sign up to the mental health charter by 2024, which is obviously a step in the right direction. If we do not see any improvement in the way that young people in our universities are treated, we can come back to the Minister and ask for the issue to be looked at again. I understand how important the issue

is to everybody and that they will be disappointed that we are not moving as fast as they want, but the point of these debates is to open a subject up for debate. We have heard from other charities that do not believe that the statutory duty of care is the way forward, and they are the specialists in this subject.

I talk about resilience an awful lot. The Education Committee heard last month that one in six young people has a diagnosed mental health issue and seven out of 10 believe that they are suffering with poor mental health. These young people are going on to university, where they are away from their family and friends, who may be in a foreign place, and the universities are not always doing what they should be doing. We need to look at why so many young people are struggling with their mental health. That is such a huge piece of work. It cannot be right that seven out of 10 children think they have a mental health issue. We need to grasp and look at that as Members of Parliament, as Government and as a wider society, because otherwise we will have more and more tragedies like the families here have had to suffer.

Once again, I thank everybody for taking part in the debate. It has been a tough debate, but I hope that with the works put forward by the Government and the continued pressure from the petitioners, we can get to a point where we start to see those numbers drop to zero, which is where they should be.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 622847, relating to a statutory duty of care for higher education students.

6.19 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 5 June 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Entry into Force of UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreements

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): I am pleased to report to the House that on 30 May 2023 the Government, alongside the Governments of Australia and New Zealand, ratified the UK-Australia and UK-New Zealand free trade agreements and they entered into force on 31 May.

Businesses in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand are now able to access the benefits of the agreements. Our ongoing priority is to ensure businesses of all sizes across the United Kingdom feel confident in using the agreements. Guidance can be found on www.gov.uk.

The agreements remove tariffs on 100% of UK goods exports, slash red tape, guarantee access for UK services and digital trade and will make it easier for UK professionals to live and work in Australia and New Zealand. They are uncompromising in their maintenance of the UK's high environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards.

There are robust protections for British farmers in both deals, including staging tariff liberalisation for sensitive goods over time. Protecting the NHS is also a fundamental principle of our trade policy, and these deals deliver on the Government's commitment to that principle. The NHS, the price it pays for medicines, and its services have remained off the table throughout negotiations.

These agreements are the first the UK has negotiated "from scratch" since EU exit and demonstrate what the UK can do as an independent trading nation. Alongside the conclusion of negotiations to accede to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP), these agreements are part of our tilt towards the growing Indo-Pacific region.

I would once again like to thank the House for its support and engagement in the ratification of these free trade agreements.

[HCWS815]

Trade Measures to Support the Moldovan Economy

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The Republic of Moldova has been heavily impacted by the crisis unleashed by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The UK stands resolutely with Moldova and its people as they pursue their own democratic choices and offer courageous support to their neighbours in Ukraine, in the face of Russian aggression.

The UK continues to do all that it can to support our friends and allies at this time. With this in mind, and in response to a request from Moldova, the Government have come to an agreement in principle with the Government of Moldova that the UK will liberalise all remaining tariffs on imports from Moldova under the UK-Moldova strategic partnership, trade and co-operation agreement.

The liberalisation package we are delivering will assist the Republic of Moldova during this crisis and provide opportunities to export greater volumes of goods to the UK. The UK Government offered this policy on a non-reciprocal basis as part of the UK's commitment to its economic stability, with no expectation or ask of the Moldova Government in return. The liberalisation of all tariffs for imports from Moldova will be applied to the whole of the United Kingdom and the Crown dependencies.

Key details include:

Liberalising all tariffs under the free trade agreement on goods originating from Moldova. This will see tariff rate quotas on tomatoes, garlic, grapes, apples, plums, grape juice and cherries removed.

Putting in place a temporary safeguard measure to protect domestic industry in the event a surge of Moldovan imports cause serious injury or threat thereof, and will continue to protect domestic consumers by retaining all existing sanitary and phytosanitary checks and standards, mitigating any potential food safety risks.

These changes will be for an initial period of 12 months and will be kept under review.

The Government will shortly lay a statutory instrument to amend our domestic legislation accordingly.

As the Government have made clear on many occasions, the United Kingdom will continue to support the region for as long as required following Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and ensure the security and prosperity of those countries impacted.

[HCWS817]

TREASURY

Life Sciences Growth Package

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): On 26 May the Government announced a package of measures totalling over £650 million to drive growth and innovation in the life sciences sector.

The UK is rightly recognised as a world leader in life sciences; it is home to two of the top five universities in the world for life sciences and nearly a third of European life sciences start-ups. The sector is a key pillar of the economy, attracting the most foreign direct investment in Europe. It employs over 280,000 people across the UK, with 66% of these in high productivity, high wage jobs based outside London and the south east.

The Government are committed to making the UK the most attractive destination for life sciences companies and have developed a comprehensive package of policies spanning regulation, research and development (R&D), infrastructure, skills and planning which is aimed at driving investment, growth and innovation. To that end, we have announced:

The Government response to the Independent Review of Clinical Trials led by Lord O'Shaughnessy. The response announces five headline commitments where the Government are taking immediate action backed by £121 million of funding, including developing a clinical trial directory and establishing clinical trial acceleration networks. This will be followed by a more detailed implementation report in the autumn. These policies apply to England only.

The Government response to the Pro-innovation Regulation of Technologies Review on Life Sciences. The response accepts all the recommendations in the report and commits to delivering accelerated regulatory pathways for innovative products and technologies and establishing Centres of Excellence in Regulatory Science and Innovation (CERSIs) to provide regulators with access to additional skills and expertise. The review and response cover a range of policies, with varying territorial extents.

The development of an end-to-end Medtech pathway, including the innovative devices access pathway, to support innovators generating the evidence they need to support regulatory approval and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) assessment to get innovative products helping patients faster. This policy applies UK-wide.

A new biomanufacturing fund of up to £38 million to incentivise investment and bolster the UK's biomanufacturing capability for vaccines and other medicines, and a further £10 million to expand the transforming medicines manufacturing programme to support the development of manufacturing processes for next-generation vaccines and advanced therapies. This policy applies UK-wide.

An additional £6.5 million of funding on skills to secure the legacy of skills pilots delivered by the Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult to ensure we have the talent and skills to support our domestic medicines manufacturing capability. This policy applies UK-wide.

Further details regarding the mental health and addiction healthcare missions, including the allocation of £42.7 million to support new mental health treatments and set up new research centres in Liverpool and Birmingham, and £10 million to help develop new treatments for addiction. The Government have also announced the chairs of the mental health, addiction, and cancer missions. These policies apply UK-wide.

Reform and rebranding of the Academic Health Science Networks to become Health Innovation Networks. These will have an enhanced focus on working with local partners, ensuring innovation is identified and adopted at the local level to directly address the needs of those communities. This policy applies to England only.

A further £31 million in Government and industry backing for life sciences manufacturing, under the life sciences innovative manufacturing fund, taking combined investment since 2021 to £383 million. This policy applies UK-wide.

A new £154 million investment to significantly upgrade UK Biobank to meet increasing demand for this world leading biomedical research database. This will include the construction of a new purpose-built facility at Manchester Science Park to accommodate a new archive. This investment will increase sample throughput by four times, allowing for up to 1.2 million accesses per year. This policy applies UK-wide.

A call for proposals on the Government's long-term investment for technology and science initiative, which will offer £250 million of Government support to spur the creation of new vehicles for pension schemes to invest in the UK's high-growth science and technology businesses, benefiting the retirement incomes of UK pension savers and driving the growth of critical sectors like life sciences. This policy applies UK-wide.

Planning reforms to boost the supply of life sciences lab space, including consulting on factoring R&D considerations into planning decisions, working with stakeholders to update the planning practice guidance to help local authorities take fuller account of commercial land needs of businesses and making investment into the relevant sites more attractive by working with local planning authorities to encourage proactive planning tools, such as local development orders and development corporations, to bring forward development. This policy applies to England only.

The preferred route alignment for the third section of East West Rail between Bedford and Cambridge, including a direct link to the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, marking a significant step towards delivering the scheme and helping to drive growth and jobs in the life sciences "golden triangle".

Overall this represents a comprehensive package to boost growth and investment in the sector across the UK, and help get innovative drugs and medicines to NHS patients faster.

Documents are available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commercial-clinical-trials-in-the-uk-the-lord-oshaughnessy-review>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pro-innovation-regulation-of-technologies-review-life-sciences>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/biomanufacturing-fund>

Copies of the review documents and the Government responses will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS819]

EDUCATION

RSHE Review

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The Government announced on 31 May 2023 further details of the independent panel, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/next-steps-taken-to-ensure-age-appropriate-relationships-sex-and-health-education>.

This work will inform the Secretary for State for Education's review of the statutory guidance on relationships, sex and health Education (RSHE), which was announced on 31 March 2023, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/review-of-relationships-sex-and-health-education-to-protect-children-to-conclude-by-end-of-year>.

This is the first review of the statutory guidance since it came into force in 2020. It will provide an opportunity to consider whether the guidance covers the appropriate topics and offers sufficient clarity on how to teach sensitive subjects and engage parents positively, including

sharing curriculum materials. The review will engage widely with those working with children across the education and health sectors. In addition to the work of the panel, the review will draw on work led by Ofsted to gather evidence on how RSHE is taught in school.

The panel will bring together expertise on health, teaching, curriculum development, and safeguarding. It will advise on the application of suitable age limits for some topics to ensure pupils are protected from inappropriate concepts they are too young to understand. In doing so, it will draw on wider expertise on specific matters.

The panel members are:

Professor Dame Lesley Regan, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Imperial College London and the Government's first ever Women's Health Ambassador.

Sir Hamid Patel, chief executive of Star Academies.

Helena Brothwell, regional director of school improvement for David Ross Academy Trust.

Alasdair Henderson, barrister specialising in public law, human rights and equality law.

Isabelle Trawler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families in England.

The panel will provide their recommendations to the Secretary of State for Education in the summer. These recommendations will inform an updated draft of the statutory RSHE guidance, which will be published for consultation in autumn 2023. It is the intention to publish final guidance early in 2024.

[HCWS814]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Gamebirds General Licence

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government support shooting for all the benefits it brings to individuals, the environment and the rural economy. The Government want to see a vibrant working countryside that is enhanced by a biodiverse environment.

Following a legal challenge in 2019 regarding the release of pheasants and red-legged partridges, the Government initiated a review on gamebirds and a consultation on licensing in 2020. This led to the issuing of the gamebirds general licence, known as GL43, in 2021 and again in 2022 regarding the release near special areas of conservation for flora and fauna (special areas of conservation) and special protection areas for birds (special protection areas) with conditions including a buffer zone. By law, the Government must consult Natural England, as the statutory nature conservation body, before issuing GL43.

Recognising that the current global outbreak of avian influenza is the worst on record, when considering GL43, the Government received advice that the conditions of the former GL43 (2022-23) would be insufficient for potential avian influenza impact on wild bird populations within SPAs.

Given the scale of the risk, it has been decided as a temporary emergency measure that the release of gamebirds within special protection areas and their 500 metre buffer zones will need individual licences because of the unprecedented risk of avian influenza to wild bird populations. This is not a decision Ministers have made lightly, and we will review the evidence around the impact of avian influenza, in particular in light of the

spread of the disease this year. This means that those wishing to release on, or within 500 metres of, a special protection area after 31 May 2023 will need to apply for an individual licence from Natural England, or else move their release activities beyond the 500 metre buffer zone limit. This includes releases on special areas of conservation or the 500 metre buffer zone if the site is also designated as a special protection area or is within the 500 metre buffer zone of one.

Release data from 2022 received from authorised licence users shows less than 1% of the gamebirds released in England last year were on special protection areas. We recognise that some shoots did not release birds in 2021 or 2022. We will work with industry at pace to support any affected sites through the licensing process.

Natural England has published a tool kit to help those who wish to release gamebirds understand whether they are impacted by this announcement. In summary:

Outside of protected areas, no licence for the release of gamebirds is needed at all. This covers 99% of releases.

Releases on or within 500 metres of special conversation areas can be made under GL43.

Releases on or within 500 metres of special protection areas are not covered by GL43. Those interested in releasing gamebirds in these areas will need to apply for an individual licence.

I have been clear that I expect the individual licensing process to be efficient, and I will continue to monitor this closely. Natural England has updated its online advice service to help users understand whether they can act under the general licence or will need an individual licence, and we will work with them to ensure any licence applications are dealt with swiftly. Furthermore, I have decided that Ministers will take all individual licensing decisions on applications submitted to Natural England for releases on or within 500 metres of special protection areas under this arrangement.

It is my intention to keep this change on GL43 under close review and to modify the general licence as necessary, in particular should the level of risk of avian influenza to protected birds reduce to acceptable levels. I have asked DEFRA's chief scientific adviser to lead this work.

The Government also announced on 31 May 2023 that GL43, for over 99% of releases in England, will continue, as it has in previous years. However, to give clarity to the industry, I have decided to issue this general licence for two years. The general licence will permit releases on and within the buffer zones of special areas of conservation. I am confident that extending to a two year licence indicates my desire to increase certainty for stakeholders for the duration of this interim licensing arrangement. I have no intention of moving towards individual licences across the board.

[HCWS820]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Investigatory Powers Act 2016: Consultation on Notices Regimes

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): On 9 February 2023, I published a report on the operation of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, in line with statutory obligations. Prior to that, in January 2023, I appointed Lord Anderson KBE KC

to conduct an independent report on the Investigatory Powers Act. His terms of reference are available on gov.uk and his report will be published shortly.

Alongside this work, we have also considered the Investigatory Powers Act 2016's notices regimes and today the Government are publishing a consultation on revising the notices regimes. Our objective is to ensure the continued efficacy of these notices regimes, in the face of technology changes and the increase in data being held overseas. These shifts in technology risk having a negative effect on the capabilities of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies to keep our citizens safe.

The Investigatory Powers Act 2016 provides for three types of notices—data retention, technical capability and national security. These can be imposed on telecommunications and postal operators and require them to undertake various actions, depending both on the type of notice and its exact contents. All Investigatory Powers Act 2016 notices are signed by the Secretary of State and then approved by an independent judicial commissioner.

Notices have existed since the Telecommunications Act 1984 and have proven effective in supporting the use of the other investigatory powers as well as resulting in a collaborative approach to issues between the Government and industry.

The consultation proposes five objectives for changes to the notices regimes to support the overall intention of improving the efficacy of the existing regimes while adhering to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016's fundamental principles of necessity and proportionality and independent judicial oversight through the double lock.

We are consulting to understand further the views of relevant industries on these objectives and whether there is support for adjusting the notices regimes to reflect more accurately the modern digital economy.

The consultation will run for eight weeks from 5 June, and the Government will publish their response once they have considered the responses to the consultation. A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS818]

TRANSPORT

East West Rail: Route Announcement Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): East West Rail offers a huge opportunity to unlock productivity in the Oxford-Cambridge region, boosting economic growth both locally and nationally through

improved connectivity and access to jobs, education and training, housing, and leisure. In particular, the region plays host to research and development hubs across a variety of highly skilled and highly productive sectors such as life sciences research at the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. East West Rail will allow us to connect these vital sites with a much greater talent pool and allow the region to retain and grow its reputation globally. The first stage of the railway is currently in delivery and services will begin to run from 2025.

The autumn statement in November 2022 recommitted to the Government's transformative growth plans for our railways, including the intention to deliver the remainder of the East West Rail project between Bletchley and Cambridge. The Budget delivered by this Government in March 2023 further underlined the Government's commitment to the project, setting out plans for a route update announcement and the next steps for the project in May 2023.

This announcement has been made and confirms the proposals which will be taken forward for further development. These include:

Confirming a preferred route alignment between Bedford and Cambridge, including new stations which would serve Tempsford and Cambourne, and a southern approach to Cambridge.

Revised service frequencies along the line of route to best meet demand.

Six-tracking of the midland mainline at Bedford to boost capacity and improve resilience.

Relocation of Bedford St. John's station to better serve Bedford Hospital.

Potential level crossing changes and closures which account for increased EWR traffic but preserve public access.

The launch of a "need to sell" property support scheme to help affected homeowners.

The East West Rail Company will consult further on its proposals as part of a statutory consultation ahead of an application for a development consent order. This consultation is due to take place in 2024.

Taking forward these next steps for the East West Rail scheme exemplifies this Government's commitment to long-term economic growth supported by improved connectivity, and the access to the skills, education and jobs needed to deliver national growth and individual prosperity.

[HCWS816]

Petitions

Monday 5 June 2023

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Teaching real life skills

The petition of Katelyn Banks,

Declares that the current educational curriculum does not adequately prepare students for the future; notes that that upon leaving secondary school, most students are not taught how to prepare for job interviews, manage loans or do taxes; further declares that the secondary school curriculum should therefore introduce a ‘lessons for the future’ class which teaches students how to budget, manage monetary funds and prepare for post-qualification life.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioner and make a life skills class mandatory in secondary schools.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rachael Maskell, *Official Report*, 18 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 339.]

[P002829]

Observations from the Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb):

Every state-funded school already has a duty to offer a curriculum that is broad and balanced, and promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

In addition, all schools, regardless of category and phase, are inspected against their ability to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which is designed to give all pupils the knowledge they need to achieve well and succeed in life. As part of Ofsted’s assessment of both the quality of education and a school’s support for pupils’ personal development, inspectors will consider how a school prepares its pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life in modern Britain.

The content in relation to preparing pupils for the future already features in the relevant curriculum subjects, including relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), citizenship, computing and the requirement for state-funded schools to secure careers advice and guidance.

RSHE became statutory in September 2020. Relationships education is compulsory for all primary pupils, Relationships and sex education is compulsory for all secondary pupils and health education is compulsory for all pupils in state-funded schools. RSHE is designed to equip young people to manage their academic, personal and social lives in a positive way. RSHE teaching in secondary schools builds on the knowledge acquired at primary about respectful relationships, in all contexts, including online, and develops pupils’ understanding of

health and wellbeing. RSHE includes content related to the risks associated with online gambling, including the accumulation of debt.

Citizenship is compulsory in local authority maintained secondary schools as part of the national curriculum for key stages 3 and 4. Pupils should be taught the importance and practice of budgeting and managing risk, credit and debt, insurance, savings and pensions, financial products and services, and how public money is raised and spent. The mathematics curriculum and GCSE content includes the mathematical knowledge needed to underpin these applications, including topics such as compound interest.

Computing is compulsory in all local authority maintained schools. The curriculum ensures that pupils become digitally literate by ensuring that they can use programming and communication technology, at a level suitable for the future workplace and as active participants in a digital world.

To support schools to realise the potential of all pupils, the Oak National Academy, which became an independent arm’s length body in September 2022, will provide adaptable, optional and free support for schools, reducing teacher workload and enabling pupils to access a high-quality curriculum. New Oak curriculum materials, including for mathematics, English and science, will start to be available from autumn 2023, with full curriculum packages available by summer 2024. Oak’s next phase of procurement of curriculum resources is expected to launch in late 2023, including for the subjects of RSHE, citizenship and computing.

All state-funded secondary schools in England have a legal duty to secure independent careers guidance for all year 7 to 13 pupils. Careers statutory guidance sets out that all schools should adopt the internationally recognised Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance to develop and improve their careers offer. We are investing over £31million in 2023-24 to support secondary schools and colleges to deliver high-quality careers education and work experience, including the national rollout of Careers Hubs.

The Careers & Enterprise Company will ensure that Careers Hubs increase young people’s exposure to employers and more in-depth workplace experiences. These experiences give young people a real feel for work and the skills they need to succeed.

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Onshore energy connections along the Suffolk Coast

The petition of the people of Suffolk Coastal and the wider Suffolk area,

Declares that the UK was the first G7 country to legislate for net-zero by 2050, which coupled with an even stronger need for energy independence means a Government commitment to provide 40GW of offshore wind electricity by 2030; further declares that emerging Government policy including the subsequent review of the National Policy Statements for Energy sets out that a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of onshore electricity transmission infrastructure is required recognising cumulative impact; further declares the concerns of the petitioners, that through a mixture of already granted planning consents, proposed landfall sites, cable corridors

and convertor stations the huge impact these connections would have on the communities and precious landscape of the Suffolk coast, much of which is in the AONB.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review all onshore energy connections along the Suffolk Coast and carry out a comparative study, including already suggested brownfield sites, properly assessing the environmental impact of these connections before proceeding any further.

And the petitioners remain etc.—[*Official Report*, 28 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 11P.]

[P002825]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie):

Ensuring community concerns are heard and addressed within the independent planning process is a priority for the Government and we remain attuned to community concerns in the East Anglia region.

The Government are taking steps to reduce infrastructure in East Anglia by encouraging regional co-ordination among responsible parties including developers. The independent National Grid Electricity Systems Operator (ESO) is also engaged in these efforts. They include;

Dialogue to deliver coordination between developers in the region, hosted by trade body Renewable UK.

The launch of a £100 million grant fund to support developers developing option for a more co-ordinated approach—Offshore Co-ordination Support Scheme, OCSS.

As requested by community groups and local MPs, ESO will undertake a study to re-evaluate transmission options—both onshore and offshore—in light of the OCSS outcomes.

We are also consulting on proposed changes to national policy statements and on community benefits for transmission infrastructure projects.

These initiatives are ongoing and represent significant efforts to maximise opportunities to reduce the impact of infrastructure in the region. It is important that we allow the OCSS and consequent independent ESO study to conclude before further detailed discussion can take place.

The Government set the rules for a robust and independent planning process. It is not the role of Government to undertake any assessment of alternatives to the locations chosen by the ESO or transmission operators and developers.

Within the independent and robust planning process, individual developers must demonstrate how their proposal meets nationally set criteria and have fairly considered alternatives. Each project holds statutory consultations to ensure community views are considered. All projects must be allowed to progress through the robust independent planning process where they must demonstrate their acceptability against existing National Policy Statements set out in law, and any planning decision remains challengeable in court with sufficient grounds.

We would encourage you to write to the relevant project developers and ESO to highlight the points you raise on the impact of connections in Suffolk. As the responsible organisation, independent of Government, they are best placed to respond in full on these matters.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Anglian Water

The petition of the residents of Weedon Lois, Weston, Maidford, Whittlebury, Cogenhoe, Adstone, Eydon and Towcester,

Declares that Anglian Water should adequately address the very many ongoing concerns and poor service across South Northamptonshire including with pressure fluctuations and burst water mains in Maidford; persistent sewage odours and broken sewage mains in Whittlebury; frequent occurrences of low pressure and no water in Weston, Weedon Lois, Adstone and Towcester; sewage released into the River Nene at Cogenhoe; closure of the St Loya CEVA Primary Academy due to no water, notes that residents in the village of Eydon have experienced a series of burst water mains that have cut off the water supply to the village for a protracted period; further notes that replacement to the pipework have been delayed, causing additional, prolonged disruption to supply and residents remain concerned about the impact this will have on their daily lives, further declares that Anglian Water should address the difficulties that residents have experienced in contacting them to resolve this issue and receive adequate compensation for the disruption and discomfort they have faced.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that water companies provide a satisfactory service for their customers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Dame Andrea Leadsom, Official Report*, 28 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 991.]

[P002817]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):

I would like to thank the petitioners for raising this very important issue faced by residents in South Northamptonshire with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

DEFRA officials have written to Anglian Water and have received assurances that it is working to address interruptions to supply in Weedon Lois, Adstone, Towcester and Weston caused by problems with the booster pumps at Maidford and Lillingstone Lovell. These problems have been compounded by Maidford reservoir being out of service for maintenance since 30 June 2022. Work is also ongoing to bring the reservoir back into service, which will also help to reduce the risk of supply interruptions.

Anglian Water is also due to start a mains replacement scheme in Eydon in August of this year. It assures us that this, combined with the other works in the area, should address the water supply issues that residents have been experiencing.

Teams from Anglian Water undertook investigations in response to reports of suspected river pollution last year at the River Nene at Cogenhoe. Results from samples taken at the Water Recycling Centre and further downstream found Anglian Water was in compliance and had not breached permitted levels.

Finally, Anglian Water has assured us that it has undertaken engineering investigations into the sewerage system at Whittlebury, including works with individual residents to alleviate odours. It will continue to be in dialogue with stakeholders about ongoing issues in the area.

Regarding compensation, the guaranteed standards scheme (GSS) sets the minimum standards of service for all customers of water and sewerage companies, and retailers. Where a company fails to meet any of these standards of service, it is required to make a specified payment to the affected customer. More information about the GSS can be found at <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-guaranteed-standards-scheme-GSS-summary-of-standards-and-conditions.pdf>.

Anglian Water recently published its Customer Promise on 4 May 2023, stating its promised standards, and details can be found on its website at <https://www.anglianwater.co.uk/about-us/core-customer-information/>

Good asset management is vital for resilience against flooding, to secure water resources, to provide a good quality service and to prevent environmental harm. Water companies have statutory duties to provide and maintain the infrastructure that supports their water supply systems and sewerage systems. In March, the Government published our Plan for Water, a blueprint for a truly national effort to meet the stretching targets we have set through our Environment Act. The plan will make sure water companies speed up their infrastructure upgrades, bringing forward £1.6 billion of new investment to commence this vital work over the next two years.

This is in addition to a £51 billion five-year investment package in its 2019 Price Review set out by Ofwat for the 2020 to 2025 period. This includes requirements for water companies to cut leaks by 16%, reduce mains bursts by 12% and reduce supply interruptions by 41% between 2020 and 2025. Companies must publish their performance annually against key targets.

In November 2022, Ofwat announced financial penalties of £132 million for 11 water companies, following underperformance in areas such as water supply interruptions, pollution incidents and internal sewer flooding. This money will rightly be returned to customers through water bills in 2023-24 and we will continue to

work closely with Ofwat to hold water companies to account for the delivery of secure and resilient water services.

Storm overflows are strictly permitted by the Environment Agency (EA). If overflows operate outside of permit conditions, the agency will consider all options for robust enforcement action. This can include criminal prosecution by the EA for which there can be unlimited fines. Since 2015, the EA has concluded 58 prosecutions against water and sewerage companies, securing fines of over £147 million.

TRANSPORT

Pavement parking

The petition of councillors representing wards in the Manchester Gorton constituency

Declares that parking on the pavement has a significant negative impact on people who are mobility impaired, blind or partially sighted, are neurodivergent, and parents and children.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to respond to the consultation 'pavement parking: options for change' and begin the process of instituting a default ban on pavement parking across England.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Afzal Khan, *Official Report*, 24 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 402.]

[P002834]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):

The Minister recognises the importance of this issue to all pedestrians. The Department received over 15,000 detailed responses to the consultation covering tens of thousands of open comments. Every single response has been analysed and we have been giving careful consideration to the findings.

We want to take the right step for communities and ensure that local authorities have appropriate and effective tools at their disposal. We are working through the options and the possible legislative opportunities for delivering them and as soon as those matters are certain we will publish our formal response to the consultation.

In the meantime, local authorities have the powers to restrict pavement parking wherever there is a need, by introducing traffic regulation orders.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 5 June 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill

The following is an extract from the Second Reading debate on the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill on 17 May 2023.

Kevin Hollinrake: Between 2009 and 2019, GAFAM—Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft—made more than 400 acquisitions without any regulatory intervention or referral through the voluntary mechanisms. [*Official Report, 17 May 2023, Vol. 732, c. 880.*]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake):

An error has been identified in my opening speech in the Second Reading debate.

The correct information should have been:

Kevin Hollinrake: Between 2009 and 2019, GAFAM—Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft—made more than 400 acquisitions **with minimal** regulatory intervention or referral through the voluntary mechanisms.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

New Hospitals

The following are extracts from the oral statement made by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on new hospitals on 25 May 2023.

Steve Barclay: In Lancashire, a new surgical hub will be opened at the Royal Preston Hospital, which is due to be completed this year.

[*Official Report, 25 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 479.*]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay).

An error has been identified in my statement.

The correct information should have been:

Steve Barclay: In Lancashire, a new surgical hub will be opened at the **Chorley and South Ribble Hospital**, which is due to be completed this year.

Steve Barclay: We recognise the importance of the Imperial bid; that is why we are starting to build the temporary ward capacity at Charing Cross and the first phase of work is under way on the cardiac elective recovery hub, to bring cardiac work on to the Hammersmith site.

[*Official Report, 25 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 485.*]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

The correct information should have been:

Steve Barclay: We recognise the importance of the Imperial **bids**; that is why we **will start** to build the temporary ward capacity at Charing Cross and the first phase of work is under way on **the cardiac catheter lab to help cardiac elective recovery at Hammersmith Hospital**.

Steve Barclay: We are not letting that stop our work to open a new surgical hub at the Royal Preston Hospital, for example.

[*Official Report, 25 May 2023, Vol. 733, c. 486.*]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay).

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris).

The correct information should have been:

Steve Barclay: We are not letting that stop our work to open a new surgical hub at the **Chorley and South Ribble Hospital**, for example.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 5 June 2023

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**not later than
Monday 12 June 2023**

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