

**Tuesday
18 July 2023**

**Volume 736
No. 192**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 18 July 2023

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 July 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

1. **Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help support the de-escalation of violence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [906032]

2. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [906033]

3. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [906034]

15. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [906046]

19. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help secure peace in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [906050]

22. **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [906054]

23. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent violence in Israel and Palestine. [906055]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The accelerating cycle of violence in the west bank is a cause of enormous concern, and the Government are intensely focused on the situation. While the UK firmly supports Israel's right to defend itself and its citizens against terrorism, we urge the Israel Defence Forces to demonstrate restraint, adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law and ensure that civilians are protected. The UK's position on settlements is clear: settlements are illegal under international law and call into question Israel's commitment to the two-state solution.

Paul Bristow: Regrettably, a lasting peace deal seems as far away as ever. In 2023, dozens of Palestinian children have been killed in Israeli military operations. We should never become immune to the tragedy of those deaths, but will the Minister urge the Israeli Government to show compassion and restraint and urge all sides to put respect for human life first?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Every one of those deaths is tragic and a real tragedy. In the annual "Human Rights and Democracy Report" published by the FCDO last week, the OPTs were identified as a human rights priority. The UK will continue to oppose violations and abuse of international human rights law and international humanitarian law by the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, including through our ongoing support for civil society actors. It is vital work.

Imran Hussain: Seven years ago in this very Chamber, I raised the case of 68-year-old Nora and her family, who faced being forced out of their home by Israeli settlers. Despite international opposition, last week she was tragically dragged from her home of more than seven decades. If this case is not it, what is the Government's red line? How many more Palestinian grandmothers must be forcibly evicted? Will the Minister stand by the words of his own former Prime Minister and leader, David Cameron, who told me on that day seven years ago that what we are seeing in occupied East Jerusalem is now more than an expansion of illegal settlements, but an "encirclement"?

David Rutley: Demolitions and evictions of Palestinians from their homes cause unnecessary suffering to ordinary Palestinians and call into question Israel's commitment to a viable two-state solution. In all but the most exceptional cases, demolition by an occupying power is contrary to international humanitarian law. Lord Ahmad has raised this case with the Israeli ambassador and made it clear that we urge Israel to reconsider forthcoming evictions.

Mohammad Yasin: This year has already been the deadliest for violence in the west bank since 2005. The expansion of illegal settlements keeps on growing. The UK Government now have the presidency of the UN Security Council. Will the Minister commit to supporting an International Criminal Court investigation into the killing of innocent Palestinians and suspend all arms sales to Israel until it abides by international law?

David Rutley: We are using our powers as president of the UN Security Council to convene and bring people together. We are concerned about the ongoing deterioration of the situation. We continue to monitor the situation on the ground with our international allies.

Helen Hayes: Earlier this year, I was privileged to visit healthcare facilities supported by Medical Aid for Palestinians in the west bank. This week, it has taken the unprecedented step of providing bulletproof vests and helmets to medical workers in the west bank because of an increase in the attacks they are facing. In last week's urgent question on violence in the west bank, the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) announced that the Minister responsible for the middle east and north

Africa, Lord Ahmad, would be speaking to the Israeli ambassador to demand that access to medical care is allowed according to Israel's obligations under international law. Can the Minister set out what assurances he has received from the Israeli authorities that violations against healthcare workers and barriers to health access in the west bank will be brought to an end?

David Rutley: Lord Ahmad did meet the Israeli official and talked through the importance of this matter. As the hon. Lady rightly highlights, international humanitarian law requires military forces to allow medical access in order to evacuate and treat the wounded. We are always urging Israel to live up to those important requirements.

Mrs Drummond: This year has seen the highest number on record of settlements in the west bank. In just the first half of 2023, the Israeli Government promoted 12,855 housing units and 10 new outposts. The total number of settlers in the west bank is now 750,000. This is contrary to international law and further displaces many Palestinian families as their houses and land are taken away. How will that help the peace process? What are the Government doing to uphold international law?

David Rutley: That is an important question. As was laid out in the Foreign Secretary's trilateral statement with the Foreign Ministers of Australia and Canada on 30 June, the continued expansion of settlements is an obstacle to peace and negatively impacts efforts to achieve a negotiated two-state solution. We call on the Government of Israel to reverse these decisions, and we have continued to do that with the Foreign Secretary speaking to his counterpart on 5 July.

Mick Whitley: In the first five months of 2023, the United Nations recorded 475 instances of settler-related violence resulting in casualties or property damage, which was the highest daily average since 2006. What plans has the Minister got to request that the Israeli Authorities take action to prevent settler violence against Palestinians? As the settlements are considered to be illegal under international law, will he commit to a ban on the importation of settlement goods as has been done with goods arising from other breaches of international law?

David Rutley: We welcome the joint statement from the heads of the Israel Defence Force, the Israeli Security Agency and Israeli police as well as statements by other Israeli leaders that condemn these criminal acts. We call on the authorities to ensure accountability for all perpetrators of violence. It is important that words are turned into actions.

Richard Burgon: Back in 2016, I was part of a parliamentary delegation that visited the Sub Laban family in their home of 70 years in the occupied old city of Jerusalem. Last week, Israel forcibly evicted them to make way for illegal settlers, as has been replicated time after time across occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the west bank. How many such violations of international law by Israel will have to take place before the Government act, including by banning UK trade with illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as organisations such as Oxfam, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have called for?

David Rutley: As I said, we are concerned about demolitions and evictions of Palestinians, which call into question Israel's commitment to a viable two-state solution. We are pushing for it to reconsider forthcoming evictions.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): For those of us who are friends of Israel—and proud to be—one of its strengths has been its independent judiciary, which has on occasion struck down arbitrary action by Israeli authorities. Will the Minister say, as friends, to his Israeli counterparts when he next meets them that any proposals that might reduce the independence of the judiciary in Israel would not help Israel's cause, would not help stability in the region and would make it harder for its friends to advocate for its cause?

David Rutley: I understand my hon. Friend's important point. We endorse the words of Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who is seeking a compromise. He recently said:

"In the midst of a deep and worrisome crisis, the responsible act of leadership must be to sit and talk".

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What makes this latest tragic wave of violence even more concerning is the emergence of new terror groups in the Palestinian territories such as the Lions' Den and the Jenin Brigades alongside Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, coupled with the seeming loss of control of the Palestinian Authority. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the influence of outside actors—namely Iran—in enabling and encouraging violence in the region?

David Rutley: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The actions of Iran are abhorrent and causing all sorts of challenges in regional instability, and they need to be called out.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Recently published documents reveal an ambitious peace project to establish a continuous land bridge directly connecting Israel to Jordan and other Arab states. What steps is the Foreign Office taking to support our middle east allies on this welcome peace project?

David Rutley: We welcome all steps to help move forward with the middle east peace process and follow those particular points with interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister will have heard the strength of feeling across the House this morning. Recently in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories we have seen new illegal settlements announced, increasing violence and terrorist attacks and a rise in civilian deaths. All those steps imperil a two-state solution, yet the Government's focus has been on their ill-conceived and badly designed Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill. Reports suggest that our diplomats warned Ministers that it would breach our obligations under UN resolution 2334. Is that true? If so, why is the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), undermining UK foreign policy?

David Rutley: The shadow Secretary of State is correct that these are really concerning issues and there is a lot of passion on both sides of the House. The Government's position was agreed by the FCDO and all relevant Government Departments. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has written to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee on that issue.

Sri Lanka: Alleged War Crimes

4. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If he will take steps with his Sri Lankan counterpart to ensure accountability for alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka. [R] [906035]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Foreign Secretary met Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry on 14 July, when they discussed Sri Lanka's human rights initiatives. We will continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to make meaningful progress on human rights, justice and accountability. That includes at the UN Human Rights Council, where the UK and our partners made resolution 51/1 on Sri Lanka in October last year.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Minister appeal to the Sri Lankan Government to ensure that the possible establishment of a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation commission does not mean that those responsible for war crimes in Sri Lanka will not be brought to justice?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We recognise the concerns from some members of the Sri Lankan public and victims groups about the creation of a credible domestic accountability process, given the history of impunity and unfulfilled commitments. We encourage the Sri Lankan Government to create an environment for meaningful reconciliation by addressing those long-standing and emerging concerns. That includes ensuring proper consultation, sufficient consensus of key communities and a commitment to accountability.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Human Rights Watch has reported that Tamil families looking to memorialise those who died in Sri Lanka's civil war remain subject to intimidation and banning orders. Alongside the Minister's Sri Lankan counterparts, what steps is she taking to promote free expression in Sri Lanka?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, we all understand and see that long history of impunity and broken commitments. We will continue to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to create that climate of recognition for all parties and communities, making sure that no one is left out of that process.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Nearly 15 years after the end of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war, the Sri Lankan Government continue to evade accountability and delay any scrutiny. As the Minister said, instead of justice there is impunity. Last week's FCDO human rights and democracy report recognises Sri Lanka as a priority so, in simple terms, will the Minister say when the UK will sanction those individuals responsible for the worst human rights abuses in that conflict?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We will continue to urge the Sri Lankan Government to uphold their constitutional and democratic processes. Those concerns were made clear in statements to the UN Human Rights Council, most recently on 20 June. Imposing sanctions is one response among other diplomatic tools to tackle serious human rights violations and abuses, but the shadow Foreign Secretary knows well that it would not be appropriate for me to speculate about future designations because that could reduce the impact.

Climate Finance Commitments

5. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What recent steps his Department has taken to help meet the UK's international climate finance commitments. [906036]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): As the Prime Minister set out at COP27, we are committed to spending £11.6 billion on international climate finance over the timeframe originally envisaged.

Caroline Lucas: I take some comfort from the Minister's reply. He will know that there has been much speculation—and indeed, some leaks—in the national media that demonstrate real concern that the Government were reneging on their climate finance commitments. Could he explain to me and the 50 cross-party MPs and peers who have written to the Prime Minister about this when the £11.6 billion will be delivered in full, broken down by each year? Could the Minister explain how the commitment will be met and assure us that it will not be by raiding the aid budget? He will know that the money is meant to be new and additional. It would be wrong for it to come at the expense of recipients who are expecting that aid budget and should have it.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will have noticed yesterday that there was a very considerable return of transparency in the figures published by the Foreign Office. She will have seen that the allocations for aid for next year are nearly double what they were this year. We have a commitment to greater transparency and I expect to be able to publish in full how we will reach the £11.6 billion, probably in September.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): The Minister will realise that £11.8 billion is quite a lot of money. How do the UK's international climate finance commitments compare to other G7 and G20 countries, or, historically, to before 2010?

Mr Mitchell: We are a global leader on these issues, as my hon. Friend knows, and we have set a lead. Part of that leadership, but only part of it, is in respect of money. The UK has delivered extraordinarily on its commitments. For example, we met our previous climate finance commitments, including spending nearly £6 billion between 2016 and 2021.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The effects of climate change are intensifying—NASA has just reported that June was the hottest month ever recorded—so it is important that

the Government stand by their promise to double international climate finance. Will the Minister, at the Dispatch Box, confirm that that is exactly what they will do, or is the rumour that they are about to renege actually the case?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my response to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I can tell him that we are committed to tripling our adaptation finance from £500 million in 2019 to £1.5 billion by 2025. I hope he will wait, with admitted patience, until September when we will be able to set all these figures out.

Afghanistan: Rights of Women and Girls

6. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. [906037]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We condemn the Taliban's decision to restrict the rights of women and girls. We are working with international partners to urge the Taliban to reverse its decisions to ban women from working for the United Nations and non-governmental organisations, and to deny girls access to education.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he said, in Afghanistan, households led by women are effectively banned from leaving the home and are, therefore, wholly dependent on female Afghan aid workers. With the Taliban now effectively banning female aid workers from delivering humanitarian aid, even a one or two week delay in reaching families means that mothers are turning to appallingly unacceptable negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage. What is the impact assessment of the Taliban's policy on the distribution of essential aid and what are the Government doing about it?

Mr Mitchell: The impact assessment is truly horrific. The effect of the Taliban's decision is absolutely appalling and we are working with other countries to press the Taliban to reverse its decision on education, especially that on 23 March and the ban on girls going to secondary schools. On the specific point the hon. Lady makes, we are doing everything, along with our likeminded allies and others with greater influence on the Taliban, to try to rectify that.

Indo-Pacific Region: Diplomatic Relations

7. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve diplomatic relations with the Indo-Pacific region. [906038]

9. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on improving economic relations with the Indo-Pacific region. [R] [906040]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): As was made clear in the "Integrated Review Refresh" published a couple of months ago, the Government are committed to long-term economic and security partnerships with the Indo-Pacific. The Foreign Secretary was in Jakarta last week for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Foreign Ministers' Meeting, meeting regional and global partners—the first Foreign Secretary ever to attend that

meeting. This weekend we signed the agreement—there will be a discussion on this later—paving the way for the UK's formal accession to the Indo-Pacific trade block, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, which now covers an area with a total GDP of £12 trillion.

Mark Menzies: With AUKUS subs at Barrow and Team Tempest continuing to progress at Warton, the UK's relationship with allies in Japan and Australia is not only defending our demographic values but creating jobs in Fylde and across the north-west. What assessment has the Minister made of the role the skills of those working in the defence manufacturing industry have played in developing diplomatic partnerships across Asia and the Pacific?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Our world-leading defence industrial base underpins our national security. British ingenuity and skills have therefore made us a sought-after partner, as is demonstrated by the global combat air programme with Japan and Italy and AUKUS with Australia and the United States. These enhanced partnerships will help us collectively to deliver better security for our citizens and allies. Moreover, AUKUS submarines will be based on the UK's world-leading submarine design. This project will bring extensive new jobs and skills to the UK, as well as the opportunity to help Australia in particular to build up a new cohort of experts.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Cambodia and Laos, may I ask what my right hon. Friend thinks the new and improving relationships in the Indo-Pacific region will mean for UK trade?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Indo-Pacific is important to UK security and to prosperity. It is home to half the world's people. At least 1.7 million British citizens live in the region, and given the new trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership and the improved relations resulting from the UK's status as a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the importance of our relationships with the Indo-Pacific, including those with Cambodia and Laos—in which regard my hon. Friend's work is hugely appreciated—will continue to present opportunities to the UK and, indeed, protect our security.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Tomorrow, Thailand's Parliament will vote for a second time to choose a Prime Minister, following the May election won by the Move Forward party, which is now leading an alliance of eight parties opposed to the military junta that seized power in 2014. It is likely that Move Forward's leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, will again be blocked from taking office by the 250 senators in the upper House, all of whom were appointed by the junta. While the UK may not be best placed to advise on the role of unelected second Chambers, our country is a good friend of the Thai people. What representations has the Foreign Secretary made to the Thai authorities to let democracy take its course?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We welcomed Thailand's strong show of support for democracy through the huge turnout in the May election, and we look forward to working

with the new Administration. We continue to work closely, through our teams in Thailand, to support those who will make up the next parliamentary group.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about democracy in the Indo-Pacific area, but at present Prime Minister Modi seems to be a very popular man in countries around the world, including the United States and this country. Should we not look, laser-like, at his real record—for instance, his systematic persecution of Christians in India, and his takeover of press freedom and other civil liberties?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We have a close and enduring relationship with India. We talk of a living bridge between our countries, and we are working closely with India on our 2030 road map. However, as with all our international partners with which we have close links, we are happy to raise concerns, and we do so privately on a regular basis.

Strengthening NATO Unity

8. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What diplomatic steps he has taken to help strengthen NATO unity. [906039]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary engages regularly with NATO allies, and did so most recently at the NATO leaders' summit in Vilnius last week, where allies were united on the delivery of a strong package of support for Ukraine that will bring it closer to NATO.

Chris Clarkson: The Prime Minister has made it very clear that the UK's position is that Ukraine belongs in the NATO family. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to help our other NATO allies to reach the same conclusion?

Leo Docherty: At the historic summit in Vilnius, NATO leaders agreed that Ukraine would become a member of NATO at a time when allies agree and "conditions are met". Like the Foreign Secretary, I will continue to engage with NATO allies and with Ukraine, not least because we know that Ukraine is a hugely valuable and courageous partner in the defence of freedom.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Will the Minister inform the House whether the Government will be supporting or opposing Ursula von der Leyen's bid to become the next Secretary-General of NATO? Given her lamentable performance as Germany's Defence Minister, I would urge the latter, but it is clear that she has preferment, and despite all her failures she has always failed upwards.

Leo Docherty: No.

UN Convention against Torture

10. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): Whether his Department has received recent representations on the adequacy of the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. [906041]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The UK is a state party to the United Nations convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, and works closely with partners to eradicate the use of torture.

Kenny MacAskill: War manifests itself not just in today's combat but for future generations. As a signatory to the convention on cluster munitions, the UK is aware of the reprehensible nature of these weapons. Will the Minister assure us that US supplies of those weapons to Ukraine will not be allowed through US airbases in the UK?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member makes a point about cluster munitions, and the position of the British Government is very clear: we have signed the treaty against their use. Other countries' position is a matter for them, but that is the very clear position of the British Government.

Hong Kong Nationals Living Overseas: Arrest Warrants

11. **Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the issuing of arrest warrants for Hong Kong nationals living overseas. [906042]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Hong Kong authorities' egregious targeting of eight individuals living overseas is unacceptable. The UK and our allies were swift in our condemnation, and on 13 July, at the Foreign Secretary's instruction, his senior official conducted a démarche of the Chinese ambassador. With our allies we are developing a shared understanding of transnational repression, its scale, and its impact on our democracies.

Ms Rimmer: In the last two weeks there have been repeated examples of the Chinese Government's attempting to intimidate those who have bravely stood up for the freedoms promised to Hong Kong. Does the Minister accept that we must urgently improve our own protections of the Hongkongers, especially given our moral and legal responsibilities, and take the leading role in international discussions on how to protect the Hongkonger community?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We absolutely support the three individuals in the UK for bravely speaking up and using their voices to challenge activities in Hong Kong. We will always champion freedom of speech, but I will not comment here on any support that may be in place, as I do not wish to compromise that in any way.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Home Secretary or others in the Home Office regarding the availability, if that is the word, of Chinese police stations operating here in the United Kingdom?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Earlier in July, the Foreign Secretary set out that any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the UK will not be tolerated. We have made it clear to the Chinese authorities that the existence of any undeclared

sites—sometimes known as secret police stations—in the UK is unacceptable. Their operation must cease. The Chinese authorities have confirmed that they have been closed.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Many Hongkongers have sought refuge not only here in the United Kingdom but in other Commonwealth jurisdictions, principally Canada and Australia. What work is the Foreign Secretary doing with our counterparts in those countries to ensure that there is a united and concerted effort to support Hongkongers in those countries in the face of China's repression?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We work closely with our allies and friends and we are very proud, as the UK, to have made available British national overseas visas. So far, I think, 166,000 have taken up the opportunity to be here in the UK.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Chinese communist Government have broken British laws in their threats against people legitimately given safety in the United Kingdom. If my right hon. Friend and other Ministers have spoken to their counterparts, they will know that they have brought in sanctions against officials in Hong Kong and the freezing of assets. What have we done, and if, as I suspect, we have not done anything, why not?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I say, the Foreign Secretary asked a senior official to call in the Chinese ambassador last week, which he did, highlighting that the issuing of arrest warrants and bounties for eight individuals living overseas was unacceptable. We obviously continue to express our ongoing opposition to the imposition of the national security law, and as my hon. Friend knows, we continue to consider the use of diplomatic tools, including sanctions where appropriate. I cannot discuss what we may do in future.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Last week's Intelligence and Security Committee report exposed the consequences of more than a decade of Conservative division, inconsistency and complacency towards China. It looked rather like a bad Ofsted school inspection report. It described the UK's approach to China as "completely inadequate" and it said it had left us "severely handicapped" in managing Britain's future security. National security is the first responsibility of Government. What will the Government do, in response to this report, to rectify their past mistakes and raise their standards?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The integrated review refresh, published in March, set out very clearly the Prime Minister's strong and robust position on China. The Foreign Secretary's speech at Chatham House, a few weeks later, also identified that we will protect UK assets and interests, that we will engage where appropriate, that we will align with our international partners to ensure that issues we consider unacceptable to us—the coercion we are seeing from China is one—are made very clear, and that we will use the tools available to us as required.

Kashmir: Human Rights

12. Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the human rights situation in Kashmir. [906043]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): We recognise that there are human rights concerns in both India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. We encourage all states to ensure that domestic laws are in line with international standards. Any allegation of human rights violations or abuse is deeply concerning and must be investigated thoroughly and transparently.

Rachel Hopkins: Many of my Luton South constituents have expressed concern at the recent appeal to change Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front leader Yasin Malik's sentence from life imprisonment to the death penalty, due to be heard on 9 August. The UK is home to significant diaspora communities of Pakistanis, Indians and Kashmiris, and emerging issues related to Kashmir have the potential to affect community cohesion if not handled sensitively. Will the Minister ensure that the Government conduct any action relating to Kashmir sensitively and with consideration of the concerns of the diaspora communities?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady is right that these are difficult situations and that we want always to reassure those who are here, but it is not for the UK to comment on an independent judicial process in another country. We encourage all states to ensure that their domestic laws adhere to international standards on free and fair trials and that their treatment of detainees respects international obligations. The UK Government oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, as a matter of principle, in every country.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We are approaching the anniversary of the abrogation of article 370 and the other temporary changes to the Indian constitution, which were finally removed after more than 70 years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this means equal rights are restored to people in Jammu and Kashmir and, particularly, that women now have the right to property, which was denied under those temporary arrangements?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is a passionate champion for all these communities, and I thank him for the important work he continues to do with them. His leadership is well respected on both sides of the House. Our long-standing position, of course, is that India and Pakistan should find a lasting political resolution on Kashmir that takes into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to act as a mediator.

Food Security: Developing Countries

13. Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps he has taken to help improve food security in developing countries. [906044]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We committed in the integrated review refresh, published in March, to lead an 18-month campaign to improve global food security and nutrition, and to mitigate the risk of famine.

Ian Levy: The devastating war in Ukraine and the destruction of its agricultural sector has sadly meant that, at the start of 2023, roughly one in three Ukrainian families were classified as food insecure. Whether we live in Blyth Valley or in Kyiv, food security is of the utmost importance. Will my right hon. Friend assure me his Department is doing all it can to ensure that Ukrainian families are getting the vital support they need, despite what is happening in their country?

Mr Mitchell: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. In November, Britain will host a major event in London focused on preventing children from starving to death, and on preventing malnutrition and food insecurity.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is all good and well that the UK is hosting events, but the reality is that the amount of money it has to invest in food security is declining, because of cuts to the aid budget and now because of the Home Office's use of official development assistance to house refugees. If the Home Office really wants people not to come here on small boats, perhaps it would be better to spend that money on famine relief and food security so that people do not flee their countries in the first place.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the importance of international development in tackling these problems upstream. He will have seen yesterday's publication of the very sharp increase in bilateral aid, and he will also have noticed that I announced that we will spend £1 billion on humanitarian relief next year.

Ukraine: British Council

14. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support the work of the British Council in response to the conflict in Ukraine. [R] [906045]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): We work closely with the British Council in Ukraine. The British Council continues to provide online professional development to English teachers, reaching one in five English teachers in Ukraine. The British Council's teaching centre in Kyiv reopened online in April 2022, and it teaches English to approximately 500 students.

Mr Baron: I thank the Minister for that response. The British Council's teaching and learning in difficult times programme has provided nearly 2,000 Ukrainian English teachers with help to support young people and children who have suffered trauma during the Russian invasion. Thanks to the work of Zhanna Sevastianova, who runs the programme, and Leigh Gibson, the country director, the future of Ukraine, its young children, is being safeguarded. Will the Minister therefore confirm his thanks for this outstanding programme, his support for Zhanna, Leigh and the team in general, and his recognition of the real strategic impact the British Council is having in challenging times?

David Rutley: Yes, I definitely will, and I thank my hon. Friend for recognising that outstanding team's important work. The programme has already trained

1,482 English teachers to support young Ukrainians, to whom I pay tribute for their great resilience in incredibly challenging circumstances.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You did not look at me, but I appreciate your calling me, Mr Speaker. Thank you, very much.

Hon. Members are right to point out the advantage of education, but for the children in Ukraine it is not just about education, but about the trauma they have had. What is being done to work alongside those in education and health to enable those young people to deal with the horrors that they have experienced?

David Rutley: As always, the hon. Gentleman makes important points. He can be assured that the work we are doing is not only about education, but about providing reassurance and support for these children and young people who are going through extraordinarily challenging times.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As we know, the British Council has been a force for good in Ukraine and across the world for decades. Given what we have just heard about the Government's support for its vital work in Ukraine, will the same energy and commitment now be used to support safe passage for those former British Council teachers and contractors who are stranded in Afghanistan, despite having cleared all the security checks required to come to this country through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman can be assured that we are honouring our commitment to resettle eligible at-risk British Council contractors, and it remains an important priority for the Government.

British Nationals Detained Overseas

16. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to provide consular support to British nationals detained overseas. [906047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Supporting British nationals abroad through consular assistance is an FCDO priority and of concern to all the ministerial team. The best interests of detainees are at the heart of our consular work, and we support and work with families wherever we can.

Vicky Foxcroft: More than 100 other MPs and I wrote to the Foreign Secretary expressing our concern about Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who has been perilously close to death because of hunger and water strikes, and remains imprisoned in Egypt, in awful conditions. Members of Alaa's family are in the Gallery today, hoping for a positive update. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to making a statement at the upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council in September to condemn Alaa's imprisonment by the Egyptian Government?

David Rutley: I recognise the hon. Lady's concern and sincere commitment to this important case, and I am pleased that she has raised it today. The Government continue to make every effort in our engagement with the Egyptian authorities on Mr El-Fattah's case. We remain concerned about his welfare, and are pressing for consular access and his release. We continue to provide consular support to Mr El-Fattah and to his family, whom Lord Ahmad most recently met on 6 July. The Foreign Secretary has raised Mr El-Fattah's case on several occasions with the Egyptian Foreign Minister, most recently on 2 March. Since then, Ministers have raised his case at every opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Jagtar Singh Johal, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, Morad Tahbaz, Mehran Raoof and Jimmy Lai are all high-profile British citizens detained abroad, whose families have severely criticised the Government's weak, complacent and inconsistent record in supporting them. Does the Minister agree with us that consular assistance should be a right of British citizens, not based on the whims of Ministers?

David Rutley: We take all these cases incredibly seriously. They are very challenging. I do not really understand the tone of the question, because my interactions with Opposition Front-Bench and other colleagues reflect the sincere efforts, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, to help in all the cases that the hon. Lady raises.

Iran: Human Rights Violations

17. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What diplomatic steps he is taking to tackle human rights violations in Iran. [906048]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): We detailed Iran's dire human rights record in the FCDO's annual report. The UK is at the forefront of holding Iran to account. At the United Nations Human Rights Council, we have worked with partners to establish a UN fact-finding mission. We have announced over 80 human rights sanctions since the start of the process and we raise human rights with Iran at all appropriate opportunities.

Sarah Green: I am sure the Minister will share my concern at the excessive use of force and violence by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps against those women who are protesting. This week's news that the morality police are reinstating the hijab patrols illustrates the need for possible protections for those women. Has the Minister had any conversations with the Home Office about a potential visa scheme for those women and girls who have been instrumental in the protests, who may need to flee Iran?

David Rutley: These are very important and concerning issues. For decades, the morality police have used the threat of detention and violence to control what women wear and how they behave in public. The UK sanctioned the morality police in its entirety in October 2022. It is intolerable that that institution still exists in 2023. We will continue to focus on that.

Western Balkans: Stability

18. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support stability in the Western Balkans. [906049]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): We are working with western Balkan states and our allies to create a secure, safe and prosperous region, built on strong foundations of democracy, the rule of law and regional co-operation. We have invested just over £47 million on a programme of activities supporting that vision last year, and we will always oppose efforts to destabilise the region.

Mr Dhesi: Last week, thanks to the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union, a cross-party delegation of parliamentarians visited Serbia, an incredible nation at an east-west crossroads, with an alluring, tempestuous history and so much potential. I impressed upon them the need to work together for peace and prosperity in the Balkans, but they consistently expressed concerns about the situation of the ethnic Serb minority in Kosovo. What steps is the Minister taking to help ease tensions and ensure that the mayors of the four Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo are truly representative of the areas that they serve?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his conveying his experience. We engage on all sides diplomatically to encourage positive progress, and we urge all leaders in the region to de-escalate and work towards peace.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): We all want to see a stable western Balkans. To my mind, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe is in a strong position to cohere those efforts. Does the Minister agree with that assessment and that the OSCE will need more resources to help achieve the stable western Balkans that we all want to see?

Leo Docherty: I do agree and I think it is a hugely valuable platform. We must ensure that efforts to deliver good impact from the OSCE are not derailed by Putin's machinations.

Topical Questions

T1. [906057] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is at the United Nations in New York for a meeting of the Security Council under the UK presidency.

Since the last oral questions, we hosted the Ukraine recovery conference in London, which raised \$60 billion towards Ukraine's reconstruction. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary attended last week's NATO leaders summit in Vilnius, where a new tranche of military support for Ukraine was

announced. The new White Paper on international development to 2030 is the subject of a written ministerial statement today.

Henry Smith: On Sunday, in Auckland, New Zealand, the UK signed the CPTPP—the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—which represents more than 500 million people and a GDP of more than £12 trillion, which is larger than the European Union. As well as the economic benefits to this country, what diplomatic benefits will the agreement bring?

Mr Mitchell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting the letters of the agreement in the right order. He will know that the agreement spans 12 economies across Asia, the Pacific and now Europe. By 2040, we hope that it will add £2 billion to our GDP.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): There are reports of widespread, systematic and targeted destruction of 26 communities in Darfur. Eighty-seven bodies were found buried in a mass grave last week, and fears are growing of genocide. I welcome the fresh sanctions, but what steps are the Government taking with international allies to ensure that the International Criminal Court has the resources needed to investigate and to hold those responsible to account?

Mr Mitchell: I want to assure the hon. Lady that we will do everything we can to make sure that there is not a culture of impunity in the dreadful civil war in Sudan. Together with our allies, we hold the pen at the United Nations, and with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the African Union, and the Troika—all of these different organisations—we are doing everything that we can to ensure that there is transparency on what is being done in Darfur and to bring to an end this dreadful conflict.

T2. [906058] **Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con):** In April three members of the British-Israeli Dee family were killed in an appalling terror attack. The Palestinian Authority continues to proudly send hundreds of millions of pounds to the terrorists behind these very same attacks. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning this grotesque “pay for slay” policy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The UK has not directly funded the Palestinian Authority since official development assistance reprioritisation in 2021. We do not fund prisoners’ payments and we believe that the prisoner payment system should be reformed so that it is needs-based, transparent and affordable. We continue to raise this at the highest levels with the Palestinian Authority.

T3. [906059] **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** We talk of a two-state solution, but we are witnessing an increase in illegal settlements and an increase in violence, not least in Jenin recently. How is the Secretary of State using the power of his office to set a new framework, using the articles of the UN declaration on human rights, to bring about a movement towards peace, so that we see not just talk but action?

David Rutley: We remain committed to the middle east peace process and to finding a way forward. We use our convening power as the current president of the UN Security Council, and the Foreign Secretary will no doubt be discussing these issues while he is in New York at the UN Security Council.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Most of NATO, including America, Canada, France and Germany, have repatriated their citizens from detention facilities in Syria. The United Kingdom repeatedly refuses to do so and is now an international outlier. Twenty-five British families are held in Syrian detention facilities without charge or trial. Our independent reviewer of terrorism legislation has said that, without action, this will become our Guantanamo. Will the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office review this policy to avoid our suffering international embarrassment for failing to take responsibility for our own citizens?

David Rutley: Repatriating citizens and the management of risks posed by returnees are ultimately matters for individual countries. Our priority remains ensuring the safety and security of the United Kingdom. The UK will continue to work closely with international partners in addressing the issues associated with those who fought for, or supported, Daesh and to bring to justice those who have participated in terrorism overseas.

T4. [906060] **Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab):** Last month, the UK hosted the Ukrainian recovery conference in London. Ukrainian trade unions have an important role to play in laying the foundations for the reconstruction of their country, but the general secretary of the Ukraine’s construction workers’ union had his application to attend the conference denied and was subsequently unable to secure a visa to travel to the UK in time. Does the Secretary of State regret that Ukrainian construction workers were denied a voice in a conference dedicated to the reconstruction of Ukraine, and can he assure the House that this was not the result of a proactive policy of excluding representatives in the trade union movement?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to the hon. Friend for raising that matter. I will investigate and provide an update.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for your strong response to the point of order last week on the threats against me by President Vučić of Serbia. One colleague here raised the daily reports that we are receiving about extreme identity violence in Darfur, which will only get worse. As a UK penholder, what are we doing to create a protective wedge between civilians and the militias? Will my right hon. Friend show leadership at the Dispatch Box by declaring these as crimes against humanity, because it matters that Britain says that now?

Mr Mitchell: I fully understand what my hon. Friend is saying about Darfur. She will know that I first went there with David Cameron in 2006 and saw what was happening on the ground—what George Bush called a genocide. We will do everything that we can to protect

the civilians there who are in great jeopardy today. That involves the use of words, as my hon. Friend said, and actions at the UN. We will do everything that we can, as holder of the pen, to ensure that progress is made.

T6. [906062] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Last month the UN's world food programme announced the cessation of food aid in Ethiopia following the large-scale diversion of supplies. The UN has this week estimated that 8.8 million people in northern Ethiopia are in need of food aid, and severe malnutrition has increased by 196% over the past year. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to respond to this desperate humanitarian crisis?

Mr Mitchell: We are working incredibly closely with the UN agencies, in particular the World Food Programme. We are conscious of, have investigated, and I think have now dealt with the issue of food being stolen. We announced recently that we would spend £143 million on humanitarian support in the horn of Africa.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome the written ministerial statement on the international development White Paper, although an oral statement to the House would have been better. How does my right hon. Friend the Minister intend to achieve the consensual approach that is clearly his aspiration for international development, and does he agree, having heard many examples this morning, that nutrition and combating hunger must be at the heart of any strategy?

Mr Mitchell: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. As he knows, we will hold a summit specifically on stopping children starving to death in November. I hope that the White Paper will be announced at that summit, but of course he is right. This is a cross-party White Paper designed to ensure that we reach the sustainable development goals, which are way off target at this midway point, and do something to combat the appalling dangers that the world faces, and which we have seen so graphically in recent days, on climate change.

T7. [906063] **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): For more than a year, the House has been highlighting the threat of atrocity crimes returning to Sudan, as the Minister has heard again today cross-party. Last week, we saw more mass graves and widespread and systematic identity-based targeting of communities. How much evidence do the Government need before they acknowledge those crimes against humanity, and act on their own policy to take effective action to prevent and respond to atrocities?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right in the language that she uses about the atrocities taking place in Sudan and Darfur. That point has been extensively ventilated at this question time. All I can say to her, to add to what I have said already, is that we are working very closely with our allies, particularly the Americans, on precisely the subject that she has identified.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Murder, rape and pillage continue on a massive scale across Sudan. As well as ensuring that humanitarian aid gets to those on the borders, and the financial sanctions that we introduced last week, will the ministerial team look further at ways

to cut off the source of funding for this violence, in particular by sanctioning Al-Khaleej Bank and Omdurman National Bank, which are associated with the two warring generals?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend, who knows a lot about the subject, can rest assured that we are looking at all possible sanctions and other measures that we can take. She refers to humanitarian access. She will know that 15 humanitarian workers have been murdered during the course of the violence, but we will do everything that we can to ensure that what she wants to see happen happens.

T8. [906064] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Department's travel advice is highly respected, with observance considered mandatory by many businesses. What advice will the Minister give to a British organisation that needs to send an employee to Uganda—advice that protects the rights of that employee and their privacy, while also protecting LGBT+ employees in this country from exposure in Uganda to its cruel Anti-Homosexuality Act, which criminalises LGBT+ intimacy and freedom of expression?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The British Government and the whole House are appalled by the law that has been passed by Uganda. We make very strong representations, our high commission there works closely with affected groups, and we always keep travel advice under sharp and close review.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Children being able to play is something we take for granted, yet Ministers will know from their travels that it is not something that all children around the world get to do. Play instils confidence, builds life skills, enhances resilience and restores hope, so will a Minister commit to the House that they will take a lead role in the forthcoming UN General Assembly to support the resolution for an international day of play, which is spearheaded by a coalition of organisations such as Lego and IKEA, to ensure that every child's right to play is protected?

Leo Docherty: The idea of an international day of play is very important, and we take it seriously. I will pick the matter up with the noble Lord Ahmad and keep in touch with my hon. Friend.

T9. [906065] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): In the past decade, more than 1.7 billion people have been affected by climate disasters through displacement, drought and food insecurity. The climate crisis is both creating and aggravating humanitarian emergencies. Where is the ambitious strategy for UK aid to build resilience and offset the implications of climate breakdown?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to identify climate change as the great existential crisis of this era. Two weeks ago we had the hottest temperature seen in the world ever on the Monday; it was then exceeded on Wednesday and exceeded again on Thursday. One way we have changed how humanitarian work is done is by building in more adaptation and resilience when we deploy humanitarian support, and we will go on doing that.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Evidence suggests that malaria is on the move; it has appeared in parts of the US and is creeping across Europe. Can the Foreign Office please confirm that it is serious about eradicating malaria and neglected tropical diseases across the world, and say what plans are being taken, if any, to keep British people safe?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I was recently in Mozambique, where they had managed to cut malaria infection by 50%, but we saw that climate change is now leading to its increasing again. We will do everything we can to make sure that what had previously been a successful policy of malaria eradication gets back on track as soon as possible.

T10. [906066] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): A loophole in the sanctions regime has seen Russian steel processed in Turkey and exported to the UK. The 43% increase in Russian steel exports to Turkey in the last year alone shows the extent of the problem. The Government have belatedly introduced a ban on imports of such steel, but without enforcement the ban will be meaningless. Can the Minister tell the House what the Government's plans are to enforce the ban on imports of Russian steel processed in Turkey?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): As I have said, we continue to work on our sanctions policy to ensure that we get to grips with any potential circumventions, but it would not be appropriate for me to announce any future plans yet.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Whether it is the accession to the trans-Pacific partnership, the first free trade agreement with Malaysia and Brunei, our Foreign Secretary at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit or the joint economic trade committee with Indonesia on Thursday, the Government are rightly doing all they can to bring alive the benefits of our trans-Pacific and Indo-Pacific pivot. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we in this House should all do everything we can to bring alive the potential for businesses in our nation, whether in designing frigates, cyber, EdTech or anything else?

Mr Speaker: Mr Graham, do not push it too far. I am not being funny—it is totally unfair. Some Members are not going to get in now.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is right. The opportunities the Indo-Pacific brings for UK citizens and businesses are enormous and we look forward to

the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership being one more new opportunity for them to discover one of the most exciting parts of the world.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Following up the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), a Billingham constituent is regularly in touch with me. Her Ugandan girlfriend lives in fear of her life every day, as new laws have seen more and more LGBT+ people persecuted. What more can the Government do with our allies to help people such as my constituent's girlfriend and protect LGBT+ activists and human rights defenders in Uganda?

Mr Mitchell: We are making representations as often as we can. There are limits to what we can do, but we are seeking to stretch those limits as far as possible. I spoke to the Ugandan Foreign Minister on 4 May to underline our opposition to the Anti-Homosexuality Act and highlight its impact on the safety of LGBT+ people in Uganda. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have spoken to the Ugandan Foreign Minister and the Ugandan high commissioner in London.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is finalising our report on food security, which has come into sharp focus because of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. With Russia regrettably pulling out of the Black sea grain deal, will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that the UK Government are working closely with the UN and NATO allies such as Turkey to restore that deal, which is so important for food security across Europe and in developing countries?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, we should make it clear that what Russia is doing is leading directly to people starving in Africa. Everyone should understand that, as well as the atrocious action that Russia has taken in invading a neighbouring country.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): The Minister is aware of the arrest of Yasin Malik, a Kashmiri political prisoner whose only crime is opposing the Indian military occupation of Kashmir. What talks have been had with the Indian Government about his death penalty?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said in response to an earlier question, the UK opposes the death penalty in every country in the world, including India.

Post Office Horizon IT Scandal: Compensation

12.36 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on the interim report of the Post Office Horizon IT scandal inquiry relating to compensation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I thank the right hon. Member for his question and his tireless campaigning on this issue. I am also grateful to Sir Wyn Williams for his work and for publishing his interim report. We will, of course, consider that properly in the coming days and provide a formal response to the House.

Sir Wyn's report recaps the progress made in delivering compensation. He notes our repeated commitment, which I reiterate again, that that compensation should be full and fair. He notes allegations from some lawyers that there are impediments to providing such compensation, but says that he cannot see any legal reason why we cannot deliver our commitment. He is right, and that commitment will be delivered.

Sir Wyn's first four recommendations deal with the advisory board, of which the right hon. Gentleman is a member. As he knows, the board was established at the instigation of my Department, and its composition and remit were extended as a result of discussions between Ministers, officials, himself and the rest of the board. It has already performed a very valuable service. Notably, its last meeting made recommendations about an appeals process independent of the Post Office. We are considering that recommendation and will reply in due course.

Sir Wyn also refers to the tax treatment of compensation payments. The right hon. Member will acknowledge that when we worked with him and the board on that matter, it resulted in £26 million of additional payments in the historic shortfall scheme, and exemptions from income tax, capital gains tax and national insurance contributions. Sir Wyn also suggests that we should legislate to extend the deadline for the group litigation order compensation scheme.

As we have stated, we will not let an arbitrary date stand in the way of paying full and fair compensation to postmasters. As compensation is being delivered under the sole authority of the Appropriation Act, spending on it is limited to a two-year window that closes in August next year. The Government are determined to deliver compensation by that date. That remains perfectly possible, but challenging. If it seems likely that we will not be able to compensate everyone in time, we shall of course consider legislation, as Sir Wyn recommends. I want to deliver by that date not for some legalistic reason, but in the interests of postmasters who have waited too long for justice.

Mr Jones: May I start by declaring an interest, as a member of the Horizon compensation advisory board? I thank the Minister for his remarks and for the positive and constructive approach with which he has addressed this issue. I also thank Sir Wyn and the inquiry for their ongoing work. I agree with many of Sir Wyn's recommendations. I would be interested to know exactly

when they will be responded to, especially because a lot of them were in the note that the advisory board sent to the Minister at the last meeting.

The three compensation schemes have become unwieldy, but the fundamental point is that equal and fair compensation has to be paid to all the people across the three schemes. I would be interested to know from the Minister when the recommendations will be addressed, particularly on extending the remit of the advisory board. I accept what he says: our aim—and certainly his—is to get compensation to people as quickly as possible.

The elephant in the room that needs to be addressed is the continued obstructive role of the Post Office. I found it remarkable that yesterday on BBC radio, the chief executive, Nick Read, said that the “sheer scale” of the problem has

“gone above and beyond anything that anybody could realistically expect”.

That begs the question of what he has been doing for the last four years and why he has been accepting bonuses for his and his management's role in the inquiry.

The inquiry was stalled last week because again, the Post Office failed to disclose documents to it. When is this issue going to be dealt with? It either gets dealt with, or Nick Read and the entire board have to be sacked. The Minister knows, because he has met many of the people who are waiting for compensation, that they have gone through a lot. They need justice, and they need action. Ill-conceived comments from the present chief executive of the Post Office are rubbing salt in the wounds of the victims. Either he has to go, or something has to radically change at the Post Office.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his work. He is right to say that there are three schemes, which might be described as suboptimal. As Sir Wyn has said on this occasion and previous occasions, we are where we find ourselves, and we must push on. That is the easiest way and the best way to get compensation for those affected.

I referred in my initial remarks to the request that the right hon. Gentleman has made for an appeal mechanism. We are considering that carefully. I think he would acknowledge that whenever he has come to me with something that he thinks we should consider, we have always done that and are keen to deliver the mechanisms that the board requires.

The delays in disclosure were unacceptable, without question, and the Post Office has apologised for that. You are only as good as your last game, and the Post Office has to up its game; there is no doubt about it. We have a governance review into earlier issues around remuneration and the metrics regarding bonuses, which were found to be completely inappropriate. We are waiting for that report, which I should receive by the end of this month. We will take that under advisement, as we do any other evidence we receive about the operation of the board of the Post Office.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the update. Some 555 individuals have suffered incredible destitution and injustice for far too long. This has gone on for more than 20 years, and some people have died during this process. Will he ensure that

the Post Office owns up to what it has done and that the individuals who were responsible for covering this up 20 years ago are brought to justice, rather than this leaving a stain on the reputations of the postmasters and postmistresses, who are totally innocent of any crime?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work on this issue. He is right: 62 people have passed away while awaiting compensation. It is simply unacceptable. My Department is looking at creative ways of accelerating the process of providing compensation to the victims.

I agree with my hon. Friend about the need for people to be held to account, and I spoke about that on a number of occasions from the Back Benches. It is right that people are held to account. It is also right that due process is followed. Sir Wyn Williams's inquiry is there to identify what went wrong and why and who was responsible, and once that is done we should make a judgment about what happens to those people, but I am keen, like my hon. Friend, that people are held to account.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Nine hundred prosecutions—all the postmasters involved have their own stories of dreams crushed, careers ruined, families destroyed, reputations smashed and lives lost. Innocent people have been bankrupted and imprisoned. This may well be the largest miscarriage of justice in our country's history, and I pay tribute to Members on all sides of this House who have worked for justice, none more so than my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I also thank the advisory board and Sir Wyn for their work, as well as the Minister for the constructive approach he has taken on this issue to date.

However, as Sir Wyn's interim report makes clear, the compensation schemes for postmasters are a mess. The commitment to give fair compensation should apply to all postmasters. Sir Wyn specifically recommends that terms of reference should enable the monitoring of individual cases. Can the Minister say that he will act on that recommendation, and when can we expect him to respond in full to the report's recommendations, including maximising the use of the Horizon compensation advisory board and providing clarity about the tax status of compensation payments? Can he also provide a final figure for claims that have been made to the historical shortfall scheme and how much the Government anticipate the final compensation will cost?

I also ask the Minister what he is going to do about Post Office management. As the only shareholder in the Post Office, does his Department take responsibility for addressing those management issues? The leadership team accepted bonuses for their work on the inquiry, which is just unacceptable. When will the Minister deal with this? Sub-postmasters have had their lives ruined: they must be confident that lessons will be learned from those failures. Sadly, it seems that the Post Office has failed to do so.

Kevin Hollinrake: I add my thanks to the advisory board and the right hon. Member for North Durham, but also to Lord Arbuthnot—who is a tremendous campaigner in this area—and other individuals such as

Professor Moorhead, who we were keen to include on the advisory board. I also thank campaigners on both sides of this House who made sure that the issue came to light and that action was taken to address these horrendous situations.

On individual cases, as I said to the right hon. Member for North Durham, we are looking at Sir Wyn's recommendation. There is an appeals mechanism, and condition D of the terms of reference does not prevent us from looking to make sure that claims have been settled fairly and fully. That is something we are looking at and we will respond in due course. On the tax position, as I said earlier, we have provided an extra £26 million to address that. We are keen to make sure that not only all the settlements, but all the tax treatments of those settlements are fair across the board. On the totals for the historical shortfall scheme, we have made offers totalling over £100 million in value and £72.8 million has been accepted, so we have made good progress, but we are keen to make further progress on the remaining claims that are yet to be accepted.

On the Post Office management, there have been a number of unacceptable matters relating to what has happened in the governance of the Post Office. That is why we put in place a governance review, which is being conducted by a very competent legal firm. It is due to report by the end of this month. We will study that review carefully and respond accordingly.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): The Minister in place at the moment will realise that former colleagues have stood at the Dispatch Box and given excuses. The procrastination from his Department has been terrible and the effects are ongoing. Fulsome and full compensation is to be welcomed, but the word that was missing from the Minister's statement was "timely." Therefore, the first part of my question is this: why two years? Why not two months or two weeks? Pay the compensation to the postmasters affected.

The second part of my question is about the senior management team. So far, they have got away with it. They need to be held to account, as do their IT consultants. When will something positively be done to bring those people to book?

Kevin Hollinrake: Again, I know my hon. Friend was one of the key campaigners on this particular issue. I cannot speak for previous Ministers—although I have a great regard for my immediate predecessor certainly—who have dealt with this issue. I have not seen any procrastination and we are driving this as quickly as possible within the Department.

On why not two weeks, rather than two years, settling compensation claims is complicated. It is about specific instances of pecuniary losses and non-pecuniary losses; it is complicated. We are keen to get that money out the door as quickly as possible and, as I have said, we are looking at creative ways to do that. I am just as ambitious as my hon. Friend is to get that money into the hands of the people who need it. There have been interim payments of around £20 million on both outstanding schemes—the GLO and overturned convictions schemes. Nevertheless, full and fair compensation is what we desire.

On people being held to account, I refer my hon. Friend to what I said earlier. We need to see the results of the inquiry—that is what Sir Wyn Williams is there

[Kevin Hollinrake]

for and we need to see the outcome of his inquiry—and, where he can identify blame, we are very keen to make sure those people are held to account.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I do not know where to start—there is so much—but here I go. The SNP welcomes Sir Wyn Williams's interim report on compensation. His recommendations would go a huge way to ensuring that victims are fully and fairly compensated, and it is about time. The enhanced role for the Horizon compensation advisory board is welcome as well. But the question, as one hon. Member has already said, is: when is this all going to happen? I know the Minister cannot give us an answer to that today, but he updated something I had in my notes: it is now 62 claimants who have died without receiving full and fair compensation. We need to move this on.

Funnily enough, we had a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices this morning, at which the chief executive officer of Post Office Ltd appeared and answered some questions. The culture at Post Office Ltd has not changed since the new CEO took on his role in 2019. He promised to change the culture; he has not yet done so. We are mired in obfuscation still, and we cannot get to the truth of stuff because of the delay in providing evidence to Sir Wyn's inquiry. Will the Minister agree to put pressure on the CEO to get this done?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is one of the Members of Parliament I engage with more often than not in this place and she does a fantastic job, not least in chairing the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, so I thank her for her work. I agree with everything she said about the pace of delivery, the quality of delivery from the Post Office and making sure it meets its obligations. We have this constantly under review and we are driving this issue. We are determined to look at creative ways to accelerate compensation for all those affected by this, so we can finally draw a line under the matter. I accept we will not draw a line under it until we have held people to account for what has gone wrong, so that is something we are extremely keen to do.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Where there has been such a grave miscarriage of justice, it strikes me that we should be pulling out all the stops to ensure that justice is done and in a timely fashion, so perhaps the Government might consider bringing criminal charges against the Post Office and its IT advisers as a way of accelerating the process.

Kevin Hollinrake: On pulling out all the stops, I could not agree more, and that is definitely what we are doing in the Department. My days are never without one or other post office issue, which is not the situation we want. On bringing forward criminal charges, of course the Government do not do that, but when our enforcement agencies determine that there have been criminal actions, wherever those criminal actions have emanated from, we would of course expect them to take action.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): The victims of the Post Office Horizon scandal should be fully compensated, so that they are put back into the position they would have been in had they not been a victim of this miscarriage of justice in the first place. The Minister has agreed with that statement from the Dispatch Box before, but it is not happening. Can I say that it is not a complicated process to be able to quantify their losses and to be able to compensate them fully? My Committee, I understand the advisory board and the statutory inquiry have suggested that one way to try to improve this is to remove the Post Office entirely from this process and to make it an independent process, properly budgeted, with the requirement to fully compensate the victims in the way I have described. Why will the Government not just do that?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for his work in challenging us in this area. I would probably push back a bit. It is complicated to assess loss. Both I and the right hon. Member for North Durham sat in on a long call with the HSS panel recently and some eminent lawyers gave us a lot of confidence that this was being done right, on an inquisitorial basis, but it is complicated to assess those losses. I would refer to Sir Wyn Williams's comments. He basically says that we should carry on what we are doing. He would not necessarily have advised this route in the first place, but what he says now is that the best thing we can do is push on with the frameworks we have in place. There are three different schemes. We need to push them on more quickly of course and I am very keen to do that.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As a former post office counter clerk myself, I understand at first hand how the Horizon IT debacle had a devastating impact on postmasters, their families and their businesses. Will the Minister assure the House that lessons have been learned from this terrible case?

Kevin Hollinrake: Certainly, we have learned the lesson in this place to heed those warnings more quickly. I am sure the new management of the Post Office have seen what has gone wrong, and we are clearly keen to make sure it never happens again. I do not think we will be able to say we have learned the lessons and this will not happen again until we have received the final results of the inquiry and then decided what action can be taken against the individuals responsible, because that will be the ultimate deterrent in stopping these things happening again.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The significance of Sir Wyn bringing forward an interim report of this sort is something that should not be underestimated. I was with the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in the APPG meeting this morning and it was clear that, as far as the chief executive of the Post Office is concerned, in dealing with historical matters such as this, he sees it as a major barrier to changing the culture within the Post Office. Whether that is a reason or an excuse remains to be seen, but he has to ensure that that barrier is removed so that there can be no further excuses about changing the culture.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree, and we are determined to play our part in that of course. I was very grateful for the report and I have read the recommendations. Clearly,

there is a lot of detail in the report that I want to study and consider fully, but I thought it was very helpful. I did not see anything in the recommendations I immediately objected to. As I say, I want to make a good study of those things, but a number of different processes have to take place. We have to give due process the time to do its work in making sure that we establish exactly what has gone on, so that we can put those matters right.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I, like many others, have sub-postmasters who have suffered in this space. I would just like to thank Members across the House, most notably the Minister, his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones)—I was on the Select Committee when we were particularly looking at this issue, and thank him for his time on that—and obviously the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for his energy there. Could I just reiterate what so many have said and ask the Minister to accelerate, with all energy, the payments to the victims, and will he please follow through on the consequences for the Post Office leadership and its IT consultants?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for the points in his question, and we absolutely agree that we need to accelerate compensation payments. As I say, we have made significant progress on the HSS scheme. For the two other schemes—the GLO scheme and the overturned convictions scheme—we need to get those payments resolved as quickly as possible. There have been around £40 million of interim payments through those schemes, but the full and fair compensation—the final compensation—is where we need to get to. On holding people to account, he will have heard what I said earlier and I absolutely agree with him on that point.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The report states that there are “something like 230-250 *late applications* to be determined and that there may yet be significantly more”

late applications as well. Can the Minister confirm that those applications will be seriously considered and that those victims may be entitled to compensation? Can he provide an assessment as to whether the numbers I have quoted are accurate or are actually higher?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, as does Sir Wyn Williams, and we are looking at that recommendation carefully. It is our intention that everybody who has been affected by this is fully and fairly compensated, and we will look at any further issues that might get in the way of that. We are keen to resolve those kinds of issues.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I have been involved in the investigation into the Post Office Horizon scandal since my arrival in this House back in 2010, representing my constituents Mr and Mrs Rudkin. By 2014, following the investigation by Ron Warmington of forensic accountants Second Sight and his evidence, I knew that they had been wrongly convicted. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) knew and had evidence that they had been wrongly convicted. The Post Office had evidence that they had been wrongly convicted. Importantly, the

Government had evidence that they had been wrongly convicted. Will the Minister explain why, more than nine years after we all knew they were innocent, they are still waiting for full, fair compensation and closure on this issue? They are the real victims in all this—the sub-postmasters.

Kevin Hollinrake: We certainly agree with that, and we should leave it to the Williams inquiry to establish who knew what when, and what could have been done earlier, and hold those people to account. Getting wider compensation out to those affected is the No. 1 priority, and the why, who and when is a secondary point to ensuring that people are fairly compensated. That is the No. 1 thing on my agenda, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his work on this issue over a number of years.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Will the Minister explain why Fujitsu, whose IT software is at the heart of this scandal, continues to win Government contracts, including a recent extension to a Post Office contract worth £42 million?

Kevin Hollinrake: Those decisions are made by others, not by me, so I cannot comment on those specific cases. The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. To be fair, in this country people are still innocent until proven guilty, and it is right that due process is followed and guilt established before we make decisions on how we treat companies or individuals down the line. Like me, she would like to see the full results of the Williams inquiry as soon as possible, so that we can determine blame.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Decent, honest people—postmasters—have had their lives ruined and been put in prison, and they are now being made to wait years for justice and compensation. The public inquiry also exposed racism and discrimination at the Post Office’s Fujitsu-run IT help desk during the Horizon scandal. Will the Minister outline what the Government are doing with regard to the appropriateness of Fujitsu winning public contracts in future?

Kevin Hollinrake: I dealt with that question a second or two ago. It is right that the presumption of innocence is followed until proven otherwise, and the Williams inquiry is looking at Fujitsu’s role in this, as well as the roles of individuals in the Post Office and elsewhere. With regard to the document he refers to, clearly that is inappropriate, and the Post Office has apologised for it. That document, among others, forms part of the Horizon inquiry, which will need to establish the full facts before we decide what action to take.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and others who have assiduously pursued this matter and doggedly ensured a Government response. I know of postmasters who have lost their shirts because of the dreadful scandal. While it might be acceptable to push the date back on paper, in reality that could mean more defaults on payments and loans, and further humiliation for those people who have been tarred as dishonest, when we all know them to be decent and honourable. Can something be done to ensure that those who need it the most now have access to their reparations, as that will help them on the road to recovery from the trauma that they are feeling at this moment in time?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for speaking out about this matter on a number of occasions. One of my constituents—Sam Harrison of Nawton near Helmsley—passed away prior to receiving full and fair compensation, and that situation should never have been allowed to happen. Interim payments are available, so some compensation is available. In the terrible situation where somebody has passed away, that compensation will still be paid to their estate. That is slim comfort of course, and the hon. Gentleman's central point that we should get the money out the door as quickly as possible is one I totally agree with.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Some individuals who have already been compensated have been devastated to find that a significant portion of that money has gone straight to paying back creditors. They are then in the position of having to make a second compensation claim, suffering additional stress and anxiety. What talks have there been about ensuring that any payments made are sufficient to cover all expenses, as well as properly compensating individuals for their hardship and loss, without the need for additional claims?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, and I am happy to look at any specific cases. If she is talking about those who are bankruptcy claimants, Sir Wyn in his report agrees with our view that insolvency practitioners should not be able to take a share of group litigation order compensation. We have taken advice from specialist counsel on how best to deal with that issue, and we will look to take further action on that in due course.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

1.5 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if she will make a statement on the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): The Secretary of State for Business and Trade signed the accession protocol to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership on Sunday 16 July in Auckland. The UK will be the first new member since CPTPP was created. With the UK as a member, CPTPP will have a combined GDP of £12 trillion and will account for 15% of global GDP. Accession to the agreement sends a powerful signal that the UK is using our post-Brexit freedoms to boost our economy. It will secure our place as the second largest economy in a trade grouping dedicated to free and rules-based trade. It gives us a seat at the table in setting standards for the global economy.

The agreement is a gateway to the wider Indo-Pacific, which is set to account for the majority of global growth and around half of the world's middle-class consumers in the decades to come. That will bring new opportunities for British businesses abroad and will support jobs at home. More than 99% of current UK goods exports to CPTPP countries will be eligible for zero tariffs. The UK's world-leading services firms will benefit from modern rules, ensuring non-discriminatory treatment and greater transparency. That will make it easier for them to provide services to consumers in other CPTPP countries.

In an historic first, joining CPTPP will mean that the UK and Malaysia are in a free trade agreement together for the first time. That will give businesses better access to a market worth £330 billion. Manufacturers of key UK exports will be able to make the most of tariff reductions to that thriving market. Tariffs of around 80% on whisky will be eliminated within 10 years, and tariffs of 30% on cars will be eliminated within seven years. Joining CPTPP marks a key step in the development of the UK's independent trade policy. Our status as an independent trading nation is putting the UK in an enviable position. Membership of that agreement will be a welcome addition to our bilateral free-trade agreements with more than 70 countries. I pay tribute to the many officials and Ministers who have worked on this deal over the past two years, some of whom are in the Chamber today.

Helen Morgan: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The Government published a written statement yesterday that the CPTPP had been signed on 16 July. Unfortunately, Members have not had an opportunity to scrutinise the agreement, or to ask the Secretary of State questions about its impact. The CPTPP contains controversial provisions that will potentially undermine British health and safety standards, as well as those in place for the environment and animal welfare. Organisations from trade unions to the RSPCA have expressed their concern. It is apparent that clauses in the arrangement will allow

large companies to sue the UK Government behind closed doors if they believe that their profits have suffered from changes to laws or regulations.

Palm oil produced in Malaysia will have tariffs of 12% eliminated, including from areas that have been deforested. There is apparently no mechanism to ensure that imports of palm oil have been sustainably produced. On food standards, the agreement excludes eggs as a sensitive sector, meaning that egg products will be allowed to be imported from countries that are CPTPP members, but where egg production relies heavily on battery caged hens, which were outlawed in Britain in 2012.

For other animal products, sow stalls, the use of antibiotics, hormone treatments and pesticides that are outlawed here will all potentially be imported in greater numbers. Imports that have a lower production cost but a much higher animal welfare and environmental one, risk undermining our world-leading British farmers and food producers.

The Business and Trade Committee, which provides important scrutiny of the process for free trade agreements, produced a report last week that lamented its inability to scrutinise all elements of the trade agreement.

I have the following questions for the Minister. What steps are his Government taking to ensure that the British public can be sure that the food they buy has been produced to the food safety and animal welfare standards that they rightly expect, such as those of the British Lion code of practice? What estimate has he made of the long-term impact on British farming of this agreement, which will bring an increase to GDP of only 0.8% over a decade?

Nigel Huddleston: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady does not see the opportunities for farmers and for this country as a whole from CPTPP. If she shared the confidence in British producers and British services that we have on the Government Benches, she might be able to look at this deal with a glass half full, rather than a glass half empty, but I know that would be a fundamental change of attitude.

The hon. Lady is simply wrong in many areas. It is important that we stop peddling these myths about standards related to CPTPP or any trade deal we are doing. Let us be clear that this deal does not lower any UK product or quality safety requirements. The import standards and import rules that we had the day before we joined CPTPP will be exactly the same the day after. The deal does not alter safety standards, but gives us an opportunity to engage and talk with colleagues and friends around the world on how we would like to improve and work on important issues, such as the environment, which she mentioned, and there is indeed an environment chapter. For example, the UK is committed to tackling illegal deforestation within UK supply chains, and this deal will not change that. As part of concluding CPTPP, the UK and Malaysia have issued a joint statement to reaffirm and strengthen joint work to support sustainable production, particularly of palm oil, in our supply chains.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Despite what the naysayers on the Opposition Benches might say, is it not true that this deal benefits counties and nations across these isles and gives our farmers the opportunity to export to parts of the world that will pay a premium for their great products?

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, as always, and I thank him for his work in making this deal a reality too. He is absolutely correct that this deal creates opportunities across the whole range of food and beverages, including Scotch whisky, which I have already mentioned. This deal should be welcomed by Scotland for the opportunity it gives, but in many areas of food we are opening up markets, such as in dairy produce. He is absolutely right to point out that we estimate that CPTPP will bring benefits to every single nation and region of the UK. I would hope today that we hear about those positive strides on CPTPP from all those in the Chamber who represent different parts of the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this urgent question. We on the Opposition Benches are pro-trade, pro-business and pro-worker, and we welcome the opening up of new markets for UK exporters. I have met representatives from the CPTPP signatories and made clear to them our commitment to driving up trade. However, we now must scrutinise the full details of this agreement because, with this Government, the devil is always in the detail.

What provisions are in place to ensure the highest possible workers' rights and that UK workers are operating on a level playing field? The Minister mentioned the sustainability agreement with Malaysia. Can he tell us exactly how that will deal with the concerns raised on palm oil? Can he also tell us whether the Government have put in place any side-letters, as the Government of New Zealand have done, to exclude the operation of the investor-state dispute resolution mechanism? Can he confirm that the agreement will not undermine the Windsor framework? On China's application to join CPTPP, what approach will the Government take to safeguard British interests? We have raised the issue of the scrutiny process on free trade agreements many times. Can he set out what the scrutiny process will be?

The Government's own modelling suggests that this accession will add 0.08% to GDP. At the same time, the OBR predicts that exports will fall by 6.6% this year—a hit of more than £51 billion. Promised trade deals with the US and India are not even in sight. Is it not the reality today that we have a Government out of ideas and bad at negotiating, and it is the economy that suffers?

Nigel Huddleston: I am sorry to hear the Opposition yet again never miss an opportunity to talk Britain down. This is a great opportunity for businesses right across the UK. Already, CPTPP countries sustain about one in 100 jobs in the UK, and that will only go in one direction—it will increase because of the opportunities, including in investment, that open up. The shadow Secretary of State mentioned investor-state dispute settlement. There is coverage of ISDS. It is a good thing and it helps ensure confidence in international trading and international investment. He mentioned China. He will be well aware that we are not yet fully ratified members of CPTPP, so it would be inappropriate for us to comment on any individual application. However, what I can say is that we know after two years of negotiation what an incredibly high bar exists on membership of this fantastic organisation.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not only an important trade deal, but an important geopolitical event that allows Britain's shared values, which the Labour Prime Minister of New Zealand and the Labour Prime Minister of Australia say they share, to be brought to the partnership and to strengthen the partnership as it goes forward?

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and important point about the importance of pivoting to the Indo-Pacific, where there is so much global growth. We want to be part of that growth. I thank him for the incredible work he does as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys. As well as more trade, this deal will lead to further co-operation. When we trade with countries, we talk to them more, we have agreements and discussions on a whole range of issues, some of which go beyond the strict terms of a trade agreement. There are many opportunities to come out of this deal, and I am pleased that many Members on the Government Benches recognise them.

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

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It feels unnecessary to repeat this, but this Government seem willing to sign up to any trade deals. My party is in favour of good ones, and we are against poor ones, and that is why we oppose this deal. *[Interruption.]* The concerns that we have, despite the heckling from those on the Government Benches, about the lack of mechanisms to safeguard workers' rights and about the potential impacts on domestic standards, particularly in the agrifoods sectors, do not go away with blustery repetition and flat contradiction, which seems to be the stock-in-trade in all that Government Front Benchers have to say about this deal.

The Secretary of State gets aerated whenever it is pointed out that the Government's own figures show that GDP is estimated to increase by only 0.08% over the next 10 years as a result of the deal, at the same time as the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts a 4% hit to GDP through Brexit. Ministers have had an awful long time to find out what the figure actually is, if they do not believe that 0.08% figure. Without reference to vague opportunities, the number of middle-class consumers in the Pacific rim or the GDP of countries in the CPTPP, and without deviation, repetition or hesitation, what exactly will the impact be on UK GDP as a result of this deal?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I am disappointed to see the hon. Gentleman talk negatively about a deal that will benefit Scotland as well as all other parts of the United Kingdom. It will add significant amounts. We estimate that in the long run, at least £2 billion a year will be added to the UK economy, including in his constituency. Perhaps he would like to welcome that, rather than be negative about it. Also, this is a growing area of the world. There are likely to be new members, so we anticipate considerable opportunities going forward. In Scotland, 547 businesses are already owned by CPTPP countries, employing more than 20,000 people in Scotland. Perhaps he would like to welcome that.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): As someone who has served as the Prime Minister's trade envoy for the past seven years in Chile, Colombia, Peru and Argentina, I warmly welcome this announcement. I urge the Minister to make sure we are using the time between now and finally joining CPTPP to make sure that in the sectors that we think will be hugely beneficial to us, we are ramping up that British industry presence and are working with His Majesty's trade commissioner for the area to identify opportunities.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as a trade envoy as well as all the trade envoys for the important work they do. He makes an important point: signing the deal is one thing, but we need to ensure that it is used. The Secretary of State has said that again and again. We will be making sure that there is full benefit, using export support services and all the training, trade advisers and so on to promote the deal, as we have with the Australia and New Zealand deals, because it is important that we get the full benefit of the deal and maximise those benefits right across the country.

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

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): UK car manufacturers are currently changing their supply chains to buy components from either the EU or the UK so that they can continue to export their cars into the EU. However, under CPTPP, those same companies ought to be buying parts from Vietnam to export their cars to Mexico. That is quite confusing. Will the Department publish guidance for business that highlights the regulatory conflicts between trade with the European Union under the trade and co-operation agreement and trade with members of the CPTPP? Sorry—you know what I meant. *[Laughter.]*

Nigel Huddleston: It trips off the tongue eventually. The hon. Gentleman is underestimating the opportunities, but he has given me the chance to point out one of the key benefits of CPTPP, which is cumulation, with products and parts being used—of course, supply chains can be complex across CPTPP—and still benefiting from the lower tariffs. So there are huge opportunities with CPTPP for the reasons that he outlined.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate the Minister as well as all the Ministers who have contributed to this significant moment, with the UK striking a trade deal with some of the world's fastest-growing economies. Does he agree that this provides a great opportunity for all parts of the United Kingdom where we have significant strengths in terms of driving exports? What action is he planning to take to promote the trade deal all around the UK so that manufacturers, food producers and other suppliers take the opportunity that he has provided?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my right hon. Friend. Again, I really appreciate the recognition that the deal will benefit all nations and all regions of the UK. In Wales, for example, there are currently 281 CPTPP-owned businesses employing more than 16,500 people, and we expect that to go up. There are trade opportunities in so many areas covering both goods and services. That is a really important point: as we negotiate a lot of trade

deals around the world, one thing we notice about many of the deals done by the EU on our behalf is that they did not cover services, yet services are over 70% of our economy, so it is great that we are now negotiating deals that fit our modern economy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Even if the world was flat—for the benefit of the Minister's Back Benchers, it is not—the Pacific would still be very far away compared to Europe, so how does the deal benefit fresh seafood producers and shellfish producers on the west coast of Scotland who cannot get their fresh produce into the much-closer European market as a result of Brexit? How on earth are they supposed to get that fresh produce even more quickly halfway around the world?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I am sorry to hear hon. Members conflate different points. We have left the European Union—that was a democratic decision—and we have a good free trade agreement with the European Union that will continue. CPTPP creates opportunities in areas of the world with considerable growth where we did not previously have deals. Surely the hon. Member must recognise that that is a positive thing right across the country, including for his constituents?

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): This is good news. I am delighted that the Government have signed up to this huge trade partnership. We are the first non-founding member to have done so. While it may not be in the convenient party political interests of some Opposition Members, it is very much in the national interest and, dare I say it, in the interest of Shropshire businesses—small, medium and large—who will now be able to export tariff-free or towards tariff-free to places such as Malaysia and Vietnam. What progress, if any, has the Minister heard about the United States potentially joining the partnership as well? That, of course, would be a huge boon to everybody.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the role that small and medium-sized enterprises can play. We are working to encourage even more SMEs to export through export support services and the trade advisers network given the opportunities that this and other deals will present to them. He will be aware that the US is not entering into free trade agreements with anybody at the moment. I have spoken to congressmen and women in the US, and there are mixed views, but many have great enthusiasm for the CPTPP.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Despite all the Government fanfare, the CPTPP trade deal will contribute merely 0.08% to our country's GDP over the next decade. Laughably, the Secretary of State is now disputing her own Department's modelling. As part of the spring Budget, the OBR forecast said that in 2023, due to Government incompetence, the hard Brexit and failure to sign other free-trade deals, UK exports are set to fall by 6.6%. That is a staggering £51 billion hit to our economy. How exactly will the Minister compensate for that loss with respect to the signing of the new CPTPP deal?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I am so disappointed to hear Opposition Members never missing an opportunity to talk Britain down. CPTPP will benefit every nation

and region of the UK, to the tune of billions and billions of pounds—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member says that is tiny, but if we put it in his bank account tomorrow, he would probably be quite happy. We are talking about huge amounts of money and lots of jobs right across the United Kingdom. It would be great to see the Opposition support one of these deals, which will benefit their own constituents, at some point.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I join others in congratulating the Secretary of State, her predecessors and all the Ministers involved in delivering this excellent deal, which, as has been said, is really good news for the UK. It is depressing to hear Opposition Members' comments; they clearly have little confidence in British companies. Businesses in the Yorkshire and Humber region will certainly benefit from the new deal. Will the Minister elaborate a little more on how he sees those businesses being able to take advantage of it?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in championing international trade over many years. He is right that signing this deal and other deals is one thing, but we must ensure that businesses are aware of the opportunities. Therefore, we will be, and are already, working through export support services, trade advisers and other programmes to ensure that we take full advantage of the opportunities available. We want businesses large and small, some of whom have probably never exported before, to realise that there is a whole world of opportunities out there in the EU, but also way beyond that.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Great emphasis has been placed on the diplomatic benefits that the UK will see through joining the CPTPP. What further steps are Ministers taking to cultivate positive diplomatic relations in the Indo-Pacific region?

Nigel Huddleston: There are multiple ways in which we are doing so. In fact, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), is doing exactly that right around the Indo-Pacific on an ongoing basis. As well as advancing our trading opportunities, there are many opportunities to have discussions on a wide range of issues that concern us and our constituents, whether that is the environment, labour rights or a whole bunch of others. Some of those are part of trade deals, but many go beyond them. We have discussions across multiple Government Departments on those issues.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank the Government for this excellent announcement and congratulate all of those who have made it possible. It is beyond question that joining the CPTPP is absolutely the right thing to do. May I please ask the Minister what message he has for the doomsters who think that Britain should not have a global role, who think that Britain is in permanent decline and who think that we would be better off back in the European Union?

Nigel Huddleston: The message is quite simple: life is better with the Conservatives in charge.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Let us not be churlish—this is a good deal and the Government deserve some credit for it. I sometimes despair when I hear

[*Jim Shannon*]

those negative comments. When something is good, let us say that it is good. In the light of this tremendous deal secured by the Business and Trade Secretary, will the Minister further outline how his Department will work with FCDO Ministers to ensure that such deals further the aims and terms of our moral duty and international obligations? Again, I congratulate the Minister and the Government on their hard work well achieved and a deal done.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Member for his always gracious and considered comments. He is right that we are committed to ensuring that all nations and regions of the UK benefit from this deal, including Northern Ireland, which is doing great things with export opportunities. In fact, there is a Northern Ireland investment summit coming up and, therefore, many opportunities. We will work constantly with the Administrations to make sure we take full advantage of this and all deals.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and everyone involved in securing this deal. The impact of exporting services across the world is clearly vital. Will he outline the advantages for the services deals available, particularly to London and the digital economy, which can be reached from anywhere in the world?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes a sensible point that is pivotal to our future trading arrangements. We are the second biggest service exporter in the world. Those services are increasingly being transported, and therefore physical distance does not matter—they can be delivered at the press of a button. We have an excellent reputation on those. He makes the point about London; more than 3,000 businesses are owned by CPTPP members, and over 100,000 jobs are reliant on those businesses. That will only increase over time. It is

important to stress that London is benefiting from our relationship with CPTPP members, but more than 75% of the benefits are outside London.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): In contrast to the negativity from the Opposition Benches that oozes across the Chamber, I positively welcome my hon. Friend's update. Is there anything comparable in recent history or down the tracks as good as the agreement and partnership that has been entered into?

Nigel Huddleston: Let us bank this agreement for the positive benefits it will bring. My hon. Friend knows I am a yellowbelly, and Lincolnshire people always talk common sense, as does he. There are a lot of opportunities, but this is one of many deals we have already signed and inked—more than 70 since we left the European Union. We are in negotiations with many areas including India, Switzerland and others. Importantly, we are focusing on services as well as goods, because some of those deals do not cover services at the moment.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): In the 1975 European Economic Community referendum campaign, Barbara Castle asked:

“what kind of internationalism is it that says that henceforth this country must give priority to a Frenchman over an Indian, a German over an Australian, an Italian over a Malaysian? This isn't the language of internationalism... It is Euro-jingoism.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that, with the signing of the partnership, the era of Euro-jingoism is dead, and once more we are truly an international trading power?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend speaks eloquently and is absolutely right. Europe will continue to be an important trading partner of the United Kingdom, but there is a whole world out there that we have not yet taken full advantage of. The Government are committed to working on behalf of our constituents to recognise the benefits from around the world, through our relationships with Commonwealth countries and developing countries that can significantly benefit from international deals. The EU will continue to be important, but there is a whole new world out there and we want to be part of it.

Defence Command Paper Refresh

1.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

With permission, I would like to make a statement on the publication of our refreshed defence Command Paper. It is just over two years since we published the original Command Paper in March 2021. In those two years, our security has been challenged in so many ways. This is Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world.

In the last four years that I have been Defence Secretary, I have been consistent about the reform I have sought to implement. I want Defence to be threat-led—understanding and acting on the threats facing our nation as our sole mission; not protecting force structures, cap badges or much-loved equipment but ensuring that we are focused on challenging threats.

I want the Ministry of Defence to be a campaigning Department, adopting a more proactive posture, and our forces more forward and present in the world, with a return to campaigning assertively and constantly, pushing back those threats and our adversaries. I want Defence to be sustainable in every sense. For too long, Defence was hollowed out by both Labour and Conservative Governments, leaving our forces overstretched and underequipped. We must match our ambitions to our resources, our equipment plans to our budget, and take care of our people to sustain them in their duties. We must never forget the travesty of the Snatch Land Rovers in Afghanistan.

The 2021 defence Command Paper was true to those principles and, with some tough choices, presented an honest plan for what we can and will achieve: a credible force, capable of protecting the nation, ready to meet the threats of today but investing heavily to modernise for those of the future; a force in which every major platform would be renewed by 2035, from armoured vehicles to Dreadnought submarines, frigates to satellites.

We did not plan on issuing a new Command Paper just two years on. Many of the conclusions of that Command Paper remain right: Russia was and is the greatest threat to European security, and China's rapid military modernisation and growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and beyond do pose an increasing challenge to us all. However, I have always said that as the situation changes, we must change with it. Since the first DCP was released, the world has shifted once more, from a competitive age to a contested and volatile world. The technology advances we predicted materialised. The threats and challenges we feared have manifested.

There is no more immediate threat than Russia. Its full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not simply an assault on a proud and sovereign nation but an attack on all our values, European security and the open international order on which stability and prosperity have depended for over three quarters of a century. Right now, the people of Ukraine are suffering the tragic consequences of President Putin's illegal, unprovoked invasion. His naked aggression and imperial ambitions have played out in a tragedy of epic human suffering. The brave citizen soldiers of the armed forces of Ukraine are protecting their own nation and people, quite heroically taking on the once mighty Russian forces. The whole

House recognises that they fight not just for their freedom but for ours. They are not just liberating their homeland but defending the rules-based system.

As Defence Secretary it is important to import the lessons learned from the conflict to our own forces. While I wish such lessons were generated in a different way, the conflict has become an incubator of new ways of war. They are proving the way for warfare in the 2020s—whole of nation, internationally partnered, innovative, digitised, operating with a tempo, precision and range requirement and a recognition that there is a trade-off between assurance levels and operational impact.

I am proud, too, of the role the UK is playing in supporting Ukraine, whether providing equipment, training or political support, or galvanising European and international allies and industrial partners to do likewise. But the return of war to the continent of Europe, alongside growing threats elsewhere in the world, has meant that we must sharpen our approach. The integrated review refresh published in March outlined how we would do that. It would shape the global strategic environment, increase our focus on deterrence and defence, address vulnerabilities that leave our nation exposed and invest in the UK's unique strengths.

Defence is central to all those efforts. That is why, after three decades in which all parties have continued drawing the post cold-war peace dividend, this Prime Minister reversed that trend and provided Defence with an additional £24 billion over four years. He and the Chancellor have gone further since, in response to the war in Ukraine. Next year we will spend over £50 billion on defence for the first time in our history. That is nearly £12 billion a year more cash investment than when I became Defence Secretary in 2019—a real-terms increase of more than 10%. This Government have committed to increasing spending yet further over the longer term to 2.5% of GDP, as we improve the fiscal position and grow our economy.

Our defence plans, and the armed forces to deliver them, must be robust and credible—not fantasy force designs, unfunded gimmicks or top trump numbers. As Russia has so effectively proven, there is no point having parade ground armies and massed ranks of men and machines if they cannot be integrated as a single, full spectrum force, sustained in the field under all the demands of modern warfighting. That takes professional forces, well equipped and rapidly adaptable, supported by critical enablers and vast stockpiles of munitions. That is why in this document, hon. Members will not find shiny new announcements, comms-led policies driving unsustainable force designs or any major new platforms for military enthusiasts to put up on their charts on their bedroom wall. We stand by the Command Paper we published in 2021 but we must get there faster, doing defence differently and getting ourselves on to a campaign footing to protect the nation and help it prosper.

As I said standing here when DCP21 was announced, we owe it to the men and women of our armed forces to make policy reality. The work was just beginning. In this refresh, we have focused on how to drive the lessons of Ukraine into our core business and on how to recover the warfighting resilience needed to generate credible conventional deterrence. The great advantage of having served in Defence for some time is that my ministerial team and I have now taken a proper look

[Mr Ben Wallace]

under the bonnet. Consequently, we are clear that our strategic advantage derives from four key sources which require urgent prioritisation.

First and foremost are our first-class people. Our men and women are not just brave and committed, but talented and incredibly skilled. They are our real battle-winning capability. It is our duty to ensure they are as well supported, prepared and equipped as possible, so we are going to invest in them. Last year, I commissioned Richard Haythornthwaite to conduct the first review of workforce incentivisation for almost 30 years. It is such good work that we are incorporating the response into our Command Paper, and today I am unveiling a new employment model and skills framework for our armed forces. It will offer our people a spectrum of service that allows far greater career flexibility, making it easier for military personnel to zig-zag between different roles, whether regular or reserve, or between the civil service and industry.

We are transforming our forces' overall employment offer by adopting a total reward approach to provide a much more compelling and competitive incentivisation package. Since all our armed forces personnel deserve the best quality accommodation, we are injecting a further £400 million to improve our service accommodation in the next two years. Many of us over Christmas will have been frustrated by the poor support our service personnel and their families received from those tasked with looking after their accommodation. It is for that reason that I have withheld their profit and used the money to freeze for one year only the rent increases our personnel were due to pay. Taken together alongside such initiatives as wraparound childcare, they are intended to enrich careers and enhance the ability of our most talented people to keep protecting the British people, and to ensure they are rewarded and fulfilled while they do so.

Our second priority is further strengthening our scientific and technological base. We are already world leaders in specific areas, but to continue outmatching our adversaries we must stay ahead of the curve in digital, data and emerging scientific fields. In 2021, we said we would invest £6.6 billion in advanced research and development. In fact, we are now investing significantly more to stay ahead in the technologies proving themselves vital on the battlefields of Ukraine, such as AI, quantum and robotics. We are enabling a culture of innovation across Defence, pulling through those R&D breakthroughs to the frontline. Following in Ukraine's footsteps, we are increasingly sourcing the £100 solutions that can stop £100 million threats in their tracks, winning both the kinetic and economic exchanges of modern warfare.

Of course, our ability to do that depends on the quality of our relationship with the industry, which is our third priority. I am pushing the Ministry of Defence to form a closer alliance with our industrial partners. A genuine partnership to sustain our defence will mean doing things differently. Ukraine reminds us that time waits for no one. It is no good holding out for the 100% solution that is obsolete by the time it is launched. Often, 80% is good enough, especially if it means swiftly putting kit into the hands of our service personnel. Capabilities can be rapidly upgraded, spirally developed, for the relentless cycles of battlefield adaptation to win

the innovation battle. Instead of sticking to acquisition programmes that drag on for decades, we are setting maximum delivery periods of five years for hardware and three years for digital programmes.

Our fourth priority is productivity and campaigning. To face this increasingly contested and volatile world, we need to make major changes to the machinery of the Department and its methods. We are emphasising an ethos focused ruthlessly on the delivery of real-world effect, increasing the bang for buck in everything we do. This approach reaches into every part of the Defence enterprise, from the front line to the back office, and involves a major redesign of the Department. We must shift our whole organisational culture away from the previous peacetime mentality to one where we live and operate as we would fight, focusing more on outputs than inputs and achieving a better balance between risk and reward. That means empowering people to live and operate alongside partners, and sometimes to be enabled by them when in lower threat environments. That means ensuring our equipment, whether Type 31, Challenger 3, or Typhoons, has the infrastructure and supplies needed to sustain operations more of the time and to deliver real-world effect wherever and whenever it is needed. And it means working with the relevant regulatory authorities, for example the Military Aviation Authority, to accelerate the experimentation, testing and innovating of new technologies, while remaining within legal bounds.

I want to emphasise one final aspect of the Command Paper refresh, namely the development of a global campaigning approach. We started with a review of our head office, where we broke out campaign delivery from policy formation and established integrated campaign teams. They have adversary focuses, not geographic, and will drive our enduring campaigns in the same way operational commanders lead our forces on deployed operations. The indivisibility of operational theatres in today's world means Defence must be constantly ready to respond globally to safeguard our interests and those of our allies. Sometimes it will be to evacuate our citizens in moments of crisis, such as in Sudan. Other times it will be to deter an adversary or reassure a friend. As we have shown through our support for Ukraine, the UK Government have the political will, but that only matters if it is matched by our military agility. Today, we are establishing a defence global response force. Ready, integrated and lethal, it will better cohere existing forces from across land, sea, air, space and cyber, to get there first in response to unpredictable events around the world.

Crucially, today's paper also recognises that it is in the interconnected world and that the UK is unlikely to act alone. Partnerships are critical to our security and prosperity. In future, we will be allied by design and national by exception. Our support for NATO will remain iron-clad, but we will continue to prioritise our core relationships. We will invest in deepening relationships with our new partners. It is why we have invested to expand our global defence network, improving communications, and co-ordinating defence attachés within our intelligence functions. None of that is headline-grabbing stuff, but it is the fine details that make the difference to our national security.

To conclude, the paper is the result of having several years in the Department to understand where it needs most attention. That continuity in office is improving

and I am incredibly grateful to the long-serving Minister for Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), whose experience in uniform and public office provided the basis for this paper. We are grateful to the hundreds of individuals and groups who contributed to the first challenge phase of its drafting, from academics to serving personnel and industry representatives, not to mention the many Members of this House. Most of what we learned from them is encapsulated in the document.

This is likely to be one of my last appearances at the Dispatch Box. It has been the greatest privilege to serve as Secretary of State for Defence for the last four years. I thank my team, civil servants, special advisers and Members for their support and their challenge. All of us here have the common interest of defending this fine country, its values and its freedoms. Of all the many functions of Government, Defence is the most important and is more important than ever, as the next 10 years will be more unstable and insecure. The men and women of our armed forces are second to none and Britain's place in the world is anchored in their professionalism and sacrifice. I believe we will increasingly call on them in the years ahead. We must ensure that they are ready to answer that call. I wish them and whomever replaces me well. I commend the statement to the House.

1.48 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for the advance draft copy of his statement and welcome some elements he announced today that were not in that draft copy, such as the improved childcare package and the rent freeze for armed forces personnel.

Following the Defence Secretary's decision to stand down, I want to start by paying tribute to his time in this House. He is a political survivor. I remember that his first job in 2010 was as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Ken Clarke, and for the last four years he has been a dedicated Defence Secretary. In particular, I want to recognise his work on Ukraine, and that of the Minister for Armed Forces, the right hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). His decisions on sending military support to Ukraine, getting other nations to do more and declassifying intelligence have all been beneficial for Ukraine and for Britain.

Today, the Defence Secretary is presenting his plan for the future of the British armed forces at a time when, as he told the House this afternoon, we have

“the return of war to the continent of Europe, alongside growing threats elsewhere in the world”.

As his own future is now short, how long is the shelf-life of his plan? Industry and military leaders cannot be sure that his successor will agree with his decisions, will accept his cuts, will act on his approach; and they cannot be sure how the strategic defence review plan of both his party and mine after the next election will reboot defence planning.

It did not have to be this way. Labour wanted this to be the nation's defence plan, not the plan of current Conservative Defence Ministers. We offered to work with the Government on a plan to make Britain secure at home and strong abroad. This is not such a plan. It is not a good enough response to war in Europe. It is not enough to accelerate support for Ukraine, to fulfil in

full our NATO obligations, to halt the hollowing out of our forces, and to renew the nation's moral contract with those who serve and the families who support them.

Why has this defence plan been so delayed? It is 510 days since Putin shattered European security. Since then, 26 other NATO nations have rebooted defence plans and budgets. In the time it has taken the Defence Secretary to produce this long-trailed new defence strategy, Finland has carried out its own review, overturned decades of non-alignment, increased defence spending by 36%, applied to join NATO, and seen its application approved by 30 Parliaments before last week's NATO summit in Vilnius. That successful NATO summit has made the alliance stronger and support for Ukraine greater. We fully back NATO's new regional plans and the G7 long-term security commitments to Ukraine, and if UK military aid is accelerated in the coming days, that too will have Labour's fullest support.

There is a welcome “back to basics” element in this plan—a focus on stockpiles, training, service conditions and more combat-readiness—but it is clear that the plan is driven by costs, not by threats. It is driven by the real cut in day-to-day resource departmental expenditure limits spending that the Defence Secretary agreed in November 2020, and by the failure to secure the £8 billion extra that he said was needed in the spring Budget just to cover inflation. Where is the halt in further cuts in the Army, while NATO plans an eightfold increase in its high readiness forces? Where is the commitment to fulfil in full our NATO obligations? Where is the action plan for military support to Ukraine, first promised by the Defence Secretary in August last year? Where is the programme to reverse record low levels of satisfaction with service life? Where is the full-scale reform of a “broken” defence procurement system for which the Defence Committee called on the very day the Defence Secretary announced that he was stepping down? In fact, it is hard to tell from his announcement today what has changed. The £6.6 billion for defence research and development was promised in the 2021 integrated review, the “global response force” and force level cuts were announced in the Secretary of State's defence Command Paper 2021, and the “strategic reserve” was recommended by Lord Lancaster in 2021.

As the right hon. Gentleman steps down as the Conservatives' longest-serving Defence Secretary, will he accept that many of the biggest challenges are being left to the next Defence Secretary, and to the next Government? Finally, as we may not see him again at the Dispatch Box, may I, on behalf of Members in all parts of the House, wish him well in his post-parliamentary career?

Mr Wallace: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. Unfortunately for him, I will, however, be here again tomorrow, delivering my very last statement.

I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but this is the refresh of the defence Command Paper. It is not a complete redrawing of a strategic defence and security review. We have done those, periodically, so many times, and so many times they have been published under Governments of both parties, and so many times they have not had real funding attached to them. So many times we have reached the end of the SDSR period, under Labour and Conservative Governments,

[Mr Wallace]

with black holes, with unspent money and overspends. It has happened time and again. But this is a report to make us match-fit: to ensure that, whether we have 3%, 2.5%, 2% of GDP, we have the reforms that, in my view and, I hope, that of my successor, will help us to deal with the growing threats that we face in the decade ahead, and will also reflect the lessons that we have seen in Ukraine.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Finland's defence review. He will know that Finland and Sweden periodically conduct a fixed in-Parliament, in-schedule review. That is how it will always be. Those countries ask a parliamentary committee to carry out the review, and then hand it to their Defence Ministries to implement. That is their process. Finland's review was not triggered by anything specific, and the fact that it produced that review before I did this refresh is not a benchmark; it has been predicted and profiled. I will say, however, that long before Sweden and Finland joined NATO, I was the architect of last January's security pact between the UK and those countries. That was because I recognised that they were our friends and our allies, and while they were not in NATO, it was inconceivable that we, as Britain, would never come to their aid should a more aggressive Putin attack them. That was the beginning of the process of developing our strong relationship with them.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about defence procurement. I have read the report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), and I thank him for it. Many of the things in it we are now doing. I give credit to him, obviously, for his report, but some of its observations have also been mine—observations about SROs, about 75% and 50%, about a spiral development cost; observations that the House has heard from this Dispatch Box about gold-plating and the over-specing that has too often driven prices through the roof, and is a cumbersome thing. [Interruption.]

Let me say this to the Opposition Members who are heckling, and who have been Ministers in this Department. They will know that of all the Departments to serve in, this is not one that moves at the greatest speed of reform. The process of reform takes time, and Members need only look at the records of every single former Minister to know how hard it is. That does not undermine their contribution, and it does not make any of them less of a Minister, but this Department of 220,000 people, a Department that seeks every authority through a ministerial chair, is not—and I have served in a number of Departments—the quickest to change. No doubt the right hon. Gentleman, if he succeeds in his ambition to be the next Defence Secretary or the one after next, will learn that all too well. What I promise him, as I will promise my successor, is that I will not come to this House and pretend that the problems with which my successor is dealing were made the week before. They were made 20, 10, 15 years before. That is the truth of many of the policies and procurement challenges with which we deal in this Department.

I believe that the Command paper will stand the test of time because it is about facing the threat—and that is the answer to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey).

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con):

For the record, we are about to lose one of the best Defence Secretaries we have ever had. He will be sorely missed in this House, and in the Department. He knows that we have discussed what is wrong with defence procurement on many occasions, and he knows that the Public Accounts Committee and the Defence Committee have published a number of reports saying that it is broken. The most recent, entitled "It is broke—and it's time to fix it" was published only last Sunday, and on Tuesday we see the DCP refresh, whose acquisition strategy has effectively accepted some of the 22 recommendations in our report within 48 hours. I humbly submit that that is some kind of world record for a Select Committee report.

However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Let me, in all seriousness, encourage the Defence Secretary, when he does his handover to whoever succeeds him—accompanied by his excellent team of junior Ministers—to impress on his successor the fact that we really do need to bring about this reform, not just for industry and not just for our armed forces, but for the whole security and defence of the realm. And with that, we wish him well.

Mr Wallace: I thank my right hon. Friend for his work on the report and for his campaigning. Let me also say, however, that procurement has started to improve. In 2009-10, the average time delay on a project was 28%; it is now 15%. The average cost overrun was 15% on a project in 2009-10; it is now 4%. The direction of travel is improving. The number of civil servants at DE&S went from 24,000 to 11,000, so we are cutting away the bureaucracy and the direction of travel is improving.¹ In my time as Secretary of State for Defence, I was also determined to put to bed some of the problem projects that we were all inheriting. I am pleased to say that, as I speak, Ajax is back on track and starting to be delivered to the units. The units are starting to train in it now. We could all have a discussion about whether we would have chosen Ajax all those years ago, but fundamentally it has not cost the taxpayer any more money and it is being delivered to our frontline. I was determined to put that right, or take other steps to deal with it. That should always be the case.

The other thing that I have always tried to do, which is not in the document but which I recommend in defence procurement, is to never defer—either delete or deliver. If you defer, it costs hundreds of millions of pounds. Deferring the aircraft carrier cost £1 billion under the Labour Government. Deferring the F-35 cost £500 million. Deferrals create the black holes. Delete or deliver, but don't defer.

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

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I too thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of a draft statement, albeit that there were one or two additions on delivery. I also, perhaps pre-emptively, join in wishing him well in whatever comes next. Although I have not directly shadowed him, I certainly pass on those thoughts from my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), who has worked closely with him over a period now.

I will start on a positive note. I welcome a number of the points made. I very much welcome the fact that people are put front and centre. That is absolutely

1.[Official Report, 4 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 1MC.]

critical in anything we do in defence. People are what make it work, and if we are not supporting the men and women of the forces, what are we doing at all? There is probably that more we can do, even beyond this. While it will not surprise Ministers to hear me say that we need to support those serving, we also need to continue to look at what we are doing to support our veterans. I know that the Minister is working on that, but it is an area in which we need to try to do more.

I also welcome the recognition of some of the accommodation conditions. I welcome the fact that steps are being taken and matters looked at, but that needs to be moved forward at a greater pace.

I note that the Secretary of State says we are going to spend over £50 billion for the first time next year. I wonder whether he can tell us how much of that is simply down to inflation created by this Government. I am not trying to be awkward, but that is clearly quite a significant factor.

We have also heard of the ongoing and long-lasting issues around procurement, with reports showing that roughly £2 billion is wasted each year in failed equipment programmes and cancelled procurement contracts. Is the Ministry of Defence making the necessary reforms to make its procedures better, and will they deliver value for money?

Recruitment and retention issues have been flagged up; the Haythornthwaite review clearly highlighted those. Is the right hon. Gentleman confident that the steps being taken now on the skills agenda will be the necessary actions to address recruitment and retention issues?

Finally, the Haythornthwaite review highlighted cyber capability as a major issue. Is the right hon. Gentleman confident that the steps being taken and outlined today will do enough to deliver that capability in the way that we all want to see?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and grateful for his party's support on Ukraine.

On the Haythornthwaite review and skills, right across Europe and the west we are seeing recruitment challenges in the military. I was with my New Zealand counterpart recently, and my Canadian counterpart, and they too have a challenge. The skills shortage across society is big, and it is no different in the armed forces, which is why we have to adapt rapidly and tackle some of the challenges.

On procurement, as I said, the figures have started to improve. Yes, there are challenges, and we could spend a whole day debating the reasons for those challenges. Complex procurement is not as straightforward as many people think, and the hon. Gentleman will know from the Scottish Government's procurement issues that it is not straightforward to deal with. I certainly believe that if we invest in the people and are prepared to invest in continuity—if instead of having the senior responsible owners who help manage our projects here today and gone tomorrow, we ensure that they are there for the long term and link their incentives to success, and help them manage our projects—we will have a better chance of delivering better value for money.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I express my admiration for my right hon. Friend's dedicated and distinguished service as Defence Secretary? It is a sad

commentary on the state of the special relationship that our American ally did not recognise his suitability to be the next Secretary-General of NATO.

My right hon. Friend will remember that successive Defence Committees, well before the invasion of Ukraine, argued that defence expenditure should never have been allowed to fall below 3% of GDP. The present Chancellor of the Exchequer, when he was standing for the leadership in 2019, even expressed the wish that it should be at 4% of GDP, which would have taken us back to the cold war percentage of between 4% and 5.1% of GDP spent on defence. In what way does this refresh allow defence the potential to expand quickly if that extra money is belatedly made available?

Mr Wallace: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. Long before I was doing this job, he was campaigning for defence to be properly apportioned the funding it deserved to keep this country safe, and I pay tribute to him for that. He has fought for that for many years.

Should there be an increase in funding for defence—and I seriously hope that there will be, based on our Prime Minister's 2.5% pledge—and if we invest in our specialties and our skills, we can expand our armed forces when the threat increases. Finding a way to hold those skills on the books even if they are rarely used, is why it is important to develop a single armed forces Act. Currently we have legislation that says that if you want to join the reserves from the regulars, you have to leave the regulars and join a separate legal entity—the reserves. That prevents soldiers from going backwards and forwards and people from being mobilised in the way we want. We want to introduce a single armed forces Act. We think this will help us do that. Skills are at the core.

The second thing is the investment in rapid procurement—the ability to keep headroom in the budget to respond to the latest threat as the adversary changes. The third is making sure that we invest in sustainability and enablers, because there is no point in having all the frontline vehicles if you cannot get anywhere.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I know it is considered bad form to speak ill of the dead, even the politically dead, but frankly the Secretary of State's contribution was pretty thin and full of clichés, and fundamentally an admission of failure—of 13 years of continual cuts by this Government.

Let me take just one example, which is touched on in the report. It was clear from allied exercises that in any major conflict we would run out of artillery munitions within a week, and the Ukraine invasion reinforced that. So why has it taken until this month for the Secretary of State to sign the contract to replace those artillery shells?

Mr Wallace: It is very clear. First, the right hon. Gentleman might actually understand that sometimes the supply chain has to be reinvigorated. When we placed an order for the NLAW—the next generation light anti-tank weapon—it turned out that the optics had stopped being made 10 years before. You can ring up all you like and try to place an order the next day, but until the manufacturers source the supply chain, it is not going to happen. But what I did was ensure that I placed the order in the United Kingdom—in the north of England and in Wales. That factory will start producing

[Mr Wallace]

155 mm shells. I have given it a long-term contract of half a billion pounds to start supplying our forces. By the way, the stockpiles of our ammunition started depleting around about 1997.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his clarity, his calmness, his wisdom and his fortitude. We will miss him.

It is clear that the tectonic plates of geopolitics have shifted and made the world a much more dangerous place for countries such as the United Kingdom and others that believe in freedom and democracy. How will his new global response force help us and our allies be able to react more quickly and nimbly when crises arise? Because we know that they will.

Mr Wallace: An important lesson from Ukraine is to make sure it is digitally glued together, and to make sure its command and control is not as vulnerable as it used to be. It should have a lot in the rear, a long way away—perhaps thousands of miles away—with only its headquarters forward. We should make sure we invest in the enablers to move it around the world, the continent or wherever it needs to be. That will help. At the moment, the provisional layout of the global response force is a light brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade, supported by a logistical support brigade. This will give us a whole range of opportunities, including meeting our NATO commitments. Should we wish to do something else with it, we will be able to deliver.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As defence spokesperson and deputy leader of the DUP, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his honourable and gallant service to our armed forces. As the Member of Parliament for Belfast East, I thank him for reinvigorating shipbuilding in our country and for supporting Harland & Wolff. I thank him for his commitment to Thales and NLA, and to the utility it has proven in Ukraine.

As a member of the Defence Committee, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for using our Sub-Committee's report on soft power and for the benefits I see in his statement on engaging defence attachés more thoroughly and appropriately with the intelligence network.

We can see that the document before us builds on and augments the refresh. In recognising the right hon. Gentleman's four years well served, may I ask him whether he believes this document will not only give our armed forces the best chance to embrace the future but will ensure that his positive contribution leaves a lasting legacy?

Mr Wallace: This is about making sure the framework is match fit for any expansion and for the future. It is also about investing in holes such as re-stockpiling, and making sure that, over time, we spend £2 billion, and then another £2 billion, to make sure our stockpiles are back where they should be—in fact, even more money to do that. That will be good news for the likes of Thales and NLA in Belfast, for the 155 mm shell factories in Washington and north Wales, and for our industrial base such as MBDA in Stevenage and Bolton. It will all be about investing in our sovereign supply chain while, at the same time, making sure we sometimes make a difference not in the obvious things but in the behind-the-scenes that makes our armed forces so ready.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his service and dedication as Secretary of State, and I wish him well for the future. As a fellow infantryman, he will know there is sometimes no substitute for boots on the ground if one wants to command that ground. Given that the 1922 defence committee submitted a paper to the defence Command Paper refresh expressing concern about hollowing out, can he assure us that this hollowing out will stop and that cuts to the Army, in particular, will stop? What assurance can he give that not only will it stop but we will have scope to build on those numbers? Ultimately, an Army of 72,000 and falling is simply not large enough, given our commitments.

Mr Wallace: We can argue about size, but we have to make sure that whatever we put in the field is properly equipped and enabled, and is effectively 360°. That is really important. We therefore have to be honest about the size of our defence budget envelope. There is no point pretending that we can have huge numbers without a defence budget to match. I have been determined throughout my tenure that this is not purely a numbers game, and I know my hon. Friend gets that. Many of his suggestions were incorporated into this Command Paper, because the lessons of Ukraine show that, yes, we need infantry and tanks, but also that we can sometimes dominate the ground without even being there.

The proliferation of cheap drones and the use of highly accurate artillery allow fewer people to cover or dominate more area. I went to see a frontline corps commander in Ukraine, and he had nearly 1,000 cheap unmanned aircraft systems at his disposal every day. At any one time, he might have 80 or 90 up in the air, which gives him the ability to dominate ground without necessarily having mass. I get that, ultimately, the ground has to be taken, but let us make sure the people who take the ground are properly protected and equipped so they can hold it, otherwise Russian forces will take the ground and kill them.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I first thank the Secretary of State for his service? We have known each other for 20-plus years, and he has always been a strong advocate for defence. He said in his statement that in 2019 he got a 10% increase for the defence budget. He failed to tell the House that one of the problems he faces is the 16% cut, from 2010 to 2019, in the defence budget. The Command Paper says that the first priority is homeland defence and our NATO commitments. It also announces a new global response force. How can we commit to doing both well without substantially increasing the defence budget?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's comments. We both went to Washington in 2006 to lobby for a waiver from the International Traffic in Arms Regulations and we are very close to getting it. That is my point, if you think this Department is quick and easy. I had hair back then. If we get the ITAR waiver over the line, it will be one of the things I will be proud of.

It is possible to have a global response force and to dedicate it to NATO. We allocate our NATO forces by giving them to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, but those forces are able to be used elsewhere, unless he calls on them. That is often how we do it, so it is

perfectly possible to have a global response force, with elements of it elsewhere if it is not called upon by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Of course, if NATO calls on the force under article 5 or something else, that will be the priority. Our forces, more often than not, are absolutely dedicated to NATO and the security of Europe.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his impressive, no-nonsense leadership. It is always great to see a Minister who knows his brief so well.

It has been 12 years since the Levene report gave greater powers to single services, but we are now moving in the opposite direction, with greater integration, full-spectrum effects, hybrid war, joint effects—call it what you will—linking up the military but also the military and other tools of state power. Does the Secretary of State think Levene is still fit for purpose? What would he recommend that this House and his Department do about it?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important observation about Levene. I do not think Levene is fit for today. Parts of Levene have not worked. I do not see the TLBs, or the Army, Navy and Air Force take the responsibility we hoped they would take when their programmes do not work. Examining whether joint force design should move back to the centre, where these things will be at the core of the MOD, will be important. On other parts of Levene, it is important to make sure that the centre has a role in holding our armed forces to account. The Command Paper has a commitment to start reviewing that process.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his service. Where I have agreed with him, I have said so, not least on his work to support Ukraine, but perhaps his biggest legacy is that he agreed to and oversaw a huge cut of 10,000 in the Army, which I believe seriously weakens our armed forces.

I want to test whether this document is more than warm words. Page 89 says

“we will step up our efforts to deliver an Integrated Air and Missile Defence approach.”

When will that happen?

Mr Wallace: I am just looking up page 89, which says that, to counter these threats,

“we will step up our efforts to deliver an Integrated Air and Missile Defence approach.”

We are doing that across NATO, integrated with NATO, and working with the Germans and the French. We are already starting that. We have signed up to the process. *[Interruption.]* We are starting it now. Last month, we started to examine what Europe and NATO need to have the right integrated air defence to protect its territory. The starting point is to find out what we need. There is no point in us rushing out and buying long-range air defence missiles if the long range can be done from a ship in the channel. There is no point rushing out and buying very short range if we are not deploying from our bases in Tidworth.

So, first, we have already started doing the overall survey of what needs to be done. Secondly, we have started investing in our next generation of GBAD—ground-based air defence—our medium-range air defence capability. And we have recognised that we are short of

our long-range air defence capability by investing—*[Interruption.]* We are already doing it. I do not know where the hon. Gentleman has been for the past two years. If he actually paid attention to this, he would realise that we have started investing in the extended-range missile for the Type 45; we have started increasing the number of batteries of our GBAD; and we have managed to export our GBAD to Poland in a £2 billion export deal. So we have started this, but the first thing to do is recognise that we put together the right profile of air defence because, as he will know, it is layered, so we have to get the right layers. If we do not get the right layers, we look like some of those countries such as Russia, which just buy big profile things that cannot talk to each other and then they get whacked.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I begin by thanking my right hon. Friend for his service and leadership? Does anything in this Command Paper address the barriers and bureaucracy that are hindering Ukrainian defence manufacturers and British defence manufacturers from collaborating effectively together? Such collaboration would help the Ukrainians to liberate their country and enhance our own capability and supply chain.

Mr Wallace: There is certainly an odd thing that I observe in the Department: I cannot understand why the procurement speed and delivery in our Kindred, our operation to gift and support Ukraine, cannot be normal for us. I see our procurement in parallel. Some of that is about assurances. If we are going to fly drones over people in this country, we require much higher levels of assurances; the Civil Aviation Authority and so on absolutely require that. When you are in war, some of those levels can drop. Some of it is simply about that, but in other areas it is one lesson we are looking at through Defence Equipment and Support to understand how we can bring that into our main procurement and delivery.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows that I am not a defence expert, although I have a great interest in it. I was born in the same week as the worst bombing of London, which took place not far from here, close to the day on which this place was bombed, and my father served in the last war. I have watched the Secretary of State over the years he has been in this House and I have a lot of regard for him. We have become quite good friends, which we are still allowed to be across parties in this House. He is not perfect. I have been a consistent critic of our going below 100,000 men in our Army—I have a long track record on that—but he is a better Secretary of State for Defence than many I have seen on those Benches. Does he realise that we are not daft on this issue? How could a Prime Minister and a Government allow a man of his stature as Defence Secretary to go at the critical time, when there is a war in Europe? All hell is breaking out on our planet and we lose a good Defence Secretary. What has happened with the Prime Minister and the little clique around him?

Mr Wallace: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. I have always liked both sparring and discussing defence with him. Importantly, many of us across the House understand that defence is a core function of a Government. It is not a discretionary spend stuck on

[Mr Wallace]

the end; it is ultimately the core responsibility of a Government. I know that come the next election the battleground between these two Front-Bench teams will probably not see defence in it. We all know that. Many of us around this House who have campaigned for more defence will know that the election will come down to schools, hospitals, transport and everything else. The casualty of that is often defence, and we stop making the case to our citizens and our constituents as to why it is important. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who always reminds people on this side of the House and, certainly under the previous leadership, in his party of the importance of defence.

I have a fantastic team and there are plenty of amazing civil servants, military leaders and everyone else who will do just fine without me in this job. I believe it was President Lincoln who said, "The cemetery is full of indispensable men."

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to my right hon. Friend. I am extremely disappointed that he is stepping down because he has been an excellent Defence Secretary. As he says, people are at the centre of our armed forces, so this refresh, with its focus on people, is welcome. Rick Haythornthwaite's report makes some excellent recommendations, so I am pleased that the defence Command Paper reflects that. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that accommodation is an absolute priority because that is the biggest thing that every member of the armed forces brings up when we go to visit?

Mr Wallace: It absolutely is. The House has heard me say that I have taken the profit from those companies; I have nationalised more things than any previous Defence Secretary, so perhaps I am putting up a job interview for the opposite side—[*Laughter.*] This is absolutely about looking after our people. I was determined to do so: if these companies could not provide the service, why should our people take the hit? There is an extra £400 million to go into that. Some of us will have seen the legal test we have tried on Annington Homes to make sure that we re-enfranchise this. It is all very important. If we cannot give the people who work for us the skills, future and lifestyle they deserve, they will not be joining us.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I want to start by recognising the Secretary of State's leadership on Ukraine and the wider threat from Russia. He made reference to the growing range of threats across the globe and how the UK often has to respond to those. May I invite him to go a step further, reflect on how the MOD can work with other Departments in Whitehall and how the UK can work with its international partners on early intervention and prevention, understand the drivers of conflicts—for example, gross human rights abuses, climate change and lack of international aid—and see how we can get ahead of the curve in some situations?

Mr Wallace: The original defence Command Paper absolutely built on that. On the resilience building of nations such as, sadly, Mali, if we can get in early enough and help those countries with security, complement aid and complement work on counter-radicalisation,

education and poverty prevention, we can help prevent those conflicts. One message I give the Treasury is, "That small amount of investment saves us a lot of money further along." The conflict, stability and security fund—the Foreign Office and MOD funding—is a really good piece of work, where we often fund a range of issues that deal with that. I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman to give him details of that fund.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his regular visits to David Brown Santasalo Gears in Huddersfield, in my constituency, which is in the supply chain for the Type 26 frigates and for our submarines. It also provides world-leading gearboxes for our armoured vehicles and tanks. Does he agree that it is important to have resilient regional supply chains to deliver the equipment we need to tackle changing global threats?

Mr Wallace: Yes, absolutely. I was delighted to visit David Brown—it is the famous David Brown of the Aston Martin David Brown in Huddersfield. When one goes there, one realises the importance of not only keeping the skill base going, but making sure that we have a clear pipeline of orders and pathways to incentivise those companies to invest in the next generation of machinery. If they do not feel incentivised, they will not invest and when we need them at a time of war, there simply will not be anything there. As I said about some of the rearming of our stockpiles, restimulating the supply chain takes years and it is incredibly important. It is also important to recognise that the aerospace industry is pan-United Kingdom; it goes across the UK and is everywhere. People do not often realise that it is not just in Lancashire, part of which I represent; it is in mill towns, in Scotland and in Wales—it is all over the place. The defence pound really does help the British economy and secures British jobs across the UK, including in Northern Ireland.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Secretary of State is a thoughtful man, and today he has announced that we are going to be spending £50 billion on defence, at a time when every other Government Department is under financial pressure. He has also said that he predicts that this country will be at war within seven years. Does he have any idea or process to bring about more peace and rapprochement in the world, and less military threat? Or are we going to go on, year by year, increasing expenditure on defence and potentially being involved in more and more military conflicts? Does he have any idea different from that?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman knows me fairly well. We once spent a nice week in Iran together, with the then Member for Blackburn—I was the most pro-European of the three, I remember.

I am not out looking for war. We are all out here trying to defend our nation by avoiding war, but we do not avoid war by not investing in deterrence. Sometimes we have to invest in hard power, to complement soft power. We do not want to use it and we do not go looking for it. I know the right hon. Gentleman mixes with some people who always think this is about warmongering; it is not. But if countries are not taken seriously by their adversaries, that is one of the quickest ways to provoke a war.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on an extraordinary four years as Secretary of State for Defence, in which he has done his duty above and beyond. He will be sorely missed. I welcome this refresh, particularly the points he makes about the global campaign and how it might complement aid. With regard to our service personnel, who do so much for us in the field of conflict, how might we recognise them in terms of campaigning, when they are away for extended periods of time? What is the Ministry of Defence going to do to ensure that they are recognised for the extraordinary service that they provide?

Mr Wallace: Our men and women are motivated by lots of things. The state often shows its appreciation, not only when they are serving, by the x-factor—the wraparound—but also by medallic recognition. One of the things that has taken quite a long time in my tenure is the creation of the wider campaign medal. I am still waiting for the final approval by those medal committees, but it will recognise people's contribution to a campaign that keeps us safe. A good example of that could be the continuous at-sea deterrent, which is an enduring campaign. Campaigns that reflect modern war mean that not everyone is on the frontline. People hundreds of miles away are contributing to keeping us safe, and they sometimes need to be recognised, not just the person pulling the trigger or storming the bunker; it goes all the way back. In today's military, the pyramid is very big and very deep, and hopefully a wider campaign medal will recognise that.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pay my own tribute to the Secretary of State for his service and thank him for the personal courtesies that he and his officials have shown me on a number of occasions. He has rightly been focused on the major geopolitical threats and risks to our own security and that of our allies, but he will also know the importance of watching the flanks and rears. Whether it is the western Balkans, the Sahel, which he mentioned, space, the polar regions or the non-geographical domains—in cyber, artificial intelligence and those issues—he knows that the range and diversity of threats is increasing. Given that, is he convinced that we have the number of personnel right? I have no doubt about the commitment of our troops in all those areas and capacities, but the numbers are simply not there to deliver on that diversity and range of threats.

Mr Wallace: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as the threat rises, we should respond and design our forces to meet whatever is the threat of the day. Do I think 73,000 is enough to meet today's threats? I do. Do I think defence needs a greater share of public spending? Yes, and that is what the Chancellor said in the autumn statement. Do I think we need 2.5% of GDP? Yes, that is what I have campaigned for and what I have achieved. I do not have a timeline, but I know that is the direction. Should we get the extra money, what is important about it is that it will prepare us to have a range of choices, depending on the threat of the moment.

The Army will still be over 100,000 people. My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) raised the challenge. I have instructed that the Army's modernisation requires us to protect its budget until it is modernised. It is behind the other two services and we

will continue to modernise it. I think the Army has currently configured a size, but do I never say never about making it bigger? We should always be prepared to change our courses if the threat changes.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary for his statement and for his fantastic service over many years. Given the current tempo of commitments faced by HM forces worldwide, I am clear, as a former capability planner, that quantity has a quality of its own. It is also incumbent upon the MOD to fulfil all the expectations placed upon it, both by our NATO allies and our own defence tasks. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, post refresh, the MOD remains committed to a fully deployable, scalable and sustainable armoured division at readiness?

Mr Wallace: Yes, we are committed to that, but we have also been honest about the time needed to get to being able to do that.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Our forces families are made to live in damp, mouldy service accommodation, with broken boilers. In his statement, the Secretary of State spoke about rent freezes, but well over 4,300 troops already do not pay rent because their accommodation is so bad. He said that there would be no unfunded gimmicks, so is the £400 million in two years for service accommodation new money or is it from existing budgets and commitments?

Mr Wallace: Having listened to the hon. Lady, for example, we have taken money that was allocated elsewhere and decided that making sure those houses are in a better state is more of a priority. We have housing stock that goes back many years and is a challenge. One of the challenges I have is that I unfortunately have to pay almost £20,000 a house to a private finance initiative that Gordon Brown signed us up to, even when those houses are empty.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I commend the leadership of the Secretary of State over the last four years, not just in our response to the war in Ukraine, but in securing a record financial settlement from the Treasury. I welcome the new employment model and skills framework. Will he outline how that will further facilitate collaboration with employers, such as BAE Systems on the Fylde coast, and offer new opportunities for recruitment and retention?

Mr Wallace: The Ministry of Defence recognises, as does the defence industry, that skills are important. About two weeks ago, I spent a great afternoon at the National Cyber Force, up at Samlesbury, with further education colleges from around Lancashire, including Blackburn and Bolton, and Greater Manchester, which came to bring young people amazing opportunities. We recognise that if we invest young, we will get the skills we need. It is absolutely the case that without the skills, defence will be starved of the oxygen we need to do our jobs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, wish the Secretary of State well and thank him for all that he has done. While I welcome the £2.5 billion additional investment in stockpiles and the improvements to readiness, he will know that unless we have highly trained service personnel in place to use them, then they are useless.

[Jim Shannon]

The refresh document says:

“People: our most important asset.”

In relation to people, the UK now has the lowest number of soldiers since the Napoleonic wars, which I think is quite dramatic. Will the Secretary of State strategise to increase our strength in numbers, to recruit young and capable people who want to defend this great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? On the plane, I sat next to a guy from Belfast who is 20 years old. He has signed up to the Army for 25 years. He wants a future—can we give him that?

Mr Wallace: That young man will have an excellent future in the armed forces, for as long as he wishes to stay. The Army is still recruiting; we have not all stopped everything. It is important to remember that we need to embrace our reserves. We have talked about that for a long time, but we have not done it. A single armed forces Act would help us do that. The Army will be over 100,000 people, of whom 73,000 will be regulars, but I believe the reforms in today’s refresh will make sure we are scalable should we wish to increase it. Whatever we do and whatever parties in this House come with pledges in the next election, we must ask ourselves whether it is just about funding people or will we be funding their equipment, vehicles, houses and barracks to go along with them. We cannot just have people without any of that, or we condemn them to a pretty miserable time, unprotected on the battlefield.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He has been an outstanding Defence Secretary and I wish him all the best for the future.

I am aware that, under the new defence Command Paper, soldiers should soon be able easily to transfer between each of the three services as well as into the civil service. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that the civil service is a more attractive option than the private sector for talented personnel?

Mr Wallace: The military could definitely take a leaf out of the civil service’s book. I look at how senior civil servants can flex, do step-ups and step-downs, take breaks or sabbaticals, and I think, “Why can’t we do that for our military?” Why can people, if their life circumstances change, not step up or step down? That is what we are trying to do with these changes in the Haythornthwaite regime. If we do that, we will match the demands of generation Z. The younger generation want more and more different things. It is not just whether they work in defence, but whether they work in the civil service or in the private sector. All employers face the challenge of how they will do that and keep people longer, so that they get investment both ways—into their businesses or whatever.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I believe that he said he might be returning here tomorrow. As I have a number of Ministers here, I wish to take the opportunity to say how important it is that no announcements are made in statements that have not previously been given to the Opposition.

Just in case I am not in the Chair tomorrow, I will take this opportunity to wish the Secretary of State well in whatever he decides to do next.

Afghan Resettlement Update

2.40 pm

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):

In March, I updated Members of this House on Afghan resettlement and relocation. To date, around 24,600 individuals have been brought to safety in the UK from Afghanistan, including some British nationals and their families, as well as Afghans who loyally served the United Kingdom, and others identified as vulnerable and at risk. I am proud that our generous offer has ensured that all those relocated through safe and legal routes have been able to access the vital health, education and employment support that they need to integrate into our society, including English language training for those who need it. On top of that, we have also ensured that all arrivals have had the immediate right to work, as well as access to the benefits system.

In my last update, I made it clear that this Government do not consider it acceptable that, at the time, around 8,000 Afghans were still living in temporary bridging accommodation, preventing them from putting down roots in communities and building self-sufficient lives in this country. Around half of this number had been living in a hotel for more than one year. It was time to ask our Afghan friends to find their own accommodation, with the support of this Government, and to integrate into British society. The status quo is not fair to taxpayers and, crucially, it is not fair to Afghans.

Since March, we have issued legal notices to quit and individualised communications to households living in hotels and serviced apartments, setting out when their access to taxpayer-funded bridging accommodation will end. Residents have received at least three months' notice to make arrangements to leave their hotel or serviced apartment and clear guidance on the support that they can access to help them find their own accommodation.

Alongside that, we have significantly stepped up our support for those in bridging accommodation and to local authorities, backed by £285 million of funding, to speed up moves into settled homes. We have ensured that enhanced, multi-disciplinary case working teams have been present in every bridging hotel and serviced apartment, working closely with households to help them navigate the pathway to find their own private rented accommodation. For local authorities, this funding includes more than £7,000 per Afghan individual to enable them to support move-ons. We recognise that local authorities will be best placed to understand the specific needs of individual families and the local housing market. That is why we have ensured that this funding can be used flexibly and pragmatically, in line with local circumstances.

Over the past three months I have met local government leaders and home builders, and personally visited bridging hotels, up and down the country. I have been heartened to see at first hand the many individuals, families and local authorities who have heard this message and stepped up their efforts to make use of central Government's generous offer and identify suitable non-hotel accommodation. Some councils are very effectively using this funding to offer significant support packages, including deposits, furniture, rental top-ups and rent advances, among many other things. I encourage local authorities to share this best practice throughout their networks.

As I have said before, this is a national effort, and we all need to play our part. That is why I am also urging landlords to make offers of accommodation by either speaking to their local council or making an offer via the online Afghanistan housing portal that we have set up. This online form has been developed so that landlords and private individuals can make offers of accommodation directly, which are then shared with potential tenants. We are interested in properties of all sizes and currently have a particular need for one-bedroom properties and larger properties to help accommodate families across the UK.

Since my last update, we have seen many hundreds of individuals leave their hotels and move into settled housing across the UK. Although progress has been made, there is more to do. I have outlined the generous support package that this Government have put in place—and examples of the commitment and resourcefulness that I have seen from both Afghans and local authorities to rise to this challenge. In return for this generous offer, we expect families to help themselves. As far as possible, we want to empower Afghans to secure their own accommodation and determine where they settle, working with the caseworkers available in every bridging property to do it within the limits of individual affordability. I see no reason why anybody living in a hotel today should not be able to make use of their right to work and access to benefits and the flexible funding available to local authorities to find suitable, settled accommodation and live independently of central Government support.

I wish to make it clear today that the Government remain committed to ending access to costly hotels at the end of the notice periods that we have issued to Afghan individuals and families. For some, this will be at the end of this month. Everyone will be expected to have left bridging accommodation by the time their notice period expires. There will, however, be a small number for whom time-limited contingency accommodation will be provided, including where there is a need to bridge a short gap between the end of notice periods and settled accommodation being ready for them to move into, and in cases of medical need where a family member requires continued attendance at a specific hospital. Everyone else should be finalising their plans for moving on from bridging accommodation. I repeat my call to our Afghan friends and local authorities: they must access the support that the Government have made available before the expiry of their notice period to leave bridging accommodation.

I am writing again to all local authorities, reminding them of the funding streams available to help find settled housing solutions for Afghans who remain in bridging accommodation, as well as the new streams of accommodation becoming available shortly. I implore them to draw on this support and match as many households into settled accommodation as possible. Central Government are doing their part, and local government must do its. This is the right thing to do, both for the taxpayer and for those Afghans who risked their lives on our behalf and deserve the opportunity to live self-sufficiently here in the UK.

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

2.47 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. None the less, I have to say to him that this statement is not up to the quality that this House expects from a Minister on such an important issue.

The Minister has been sent here to update the House, but in his statement he has given us no precise numbers of Afghans who are currently in bridging accommodation, no numbers of those he expects to stay in the time-limited contingency offer, and no estimates or details. Madam Deputy Speaker, this is really poor. This House deserves better than a statement that is light on delivery on such an important programme. We need to understand the detail of what the Minister is trying to explain. He is a Cabinet Office Minister coming to update the House when Defence Ministers should be here explaining why the Afghan relocations and assistance policy is failing to deliver, when Home Office Ministers should be here explaining why the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is failing to deliver, and when Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Ministers should be here explaining why we do not have sufficient homes for those who are being moved out of bridging accommodation in the middle of a housing crisis. The Cabinet Office Minister in the Chamber is the bailiff serving the eviction notices. This is not good enough. I fear that he is a human shield for the failures across Government.

The statement today confirms what we already know: the Government are failing to support those people who served alongside our forces in Afghanistan. In a few weeks' time, it will be two years since Operation Pitting began, but there is still a backlog of 60,000 ARAP applications. Operation Warm Welcome has become operation cold shoulder, with 8,000 Afghans being told that they will be forced out of temporary accommodation by the end of the summer. Can the Minister tell us on what date the notice period expires? What day will Afghans no longer be able to stay in bridging accommodation? We owe a debt of gratitude to all those Afghans who were loyal to Britain and who served British aims in Afghanistan, and failing to find them appropriate accommodation and then kicking them out on to the street is no way to repay that debt.

The reality is that the Government have failed to keep the promises made to our Afghan friends, and that is shameful. Since 1 December last year, just four ARAP eligible principals, along with 31 dependants, have been processed and arrived in the UK out of the thousands who are waiting. That leaves thousands of Afghans fleeing the Taliban stuck in hotels in Pakistan without hope or proper support. Can the Minister clarify the exact number of Afghans who have been rehoused into settled housing in the UK? How many homes are available for Afghans to move into? How many does he expect will be made homeless by the eviction notices that he has served on these Afghans?

I know that the Minister's personal experience in Afghanistan must weigh heavily upon him as the Government evict so many Afghans from hotels, but we owe the people who are being evicted a debt of gratitude, and we owe it to them to keep the promises that we have made. Ministers must fix the broken ARAP scheme, which along with the ACRS has been plagued by failures. People in fear of their lives have been left in Afghanistan, housing promises have been broken, and processing

staff have been cut. From the ballooning backlogs to the breaches of personal data, and even the Ministry of Defence telling applicants that they should get the Taliban to verify their ARAP application documents, the record is shameful.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs is being used as a human shield to deflect failures from the Ministry of Defence and across Government. How many ARAP eligible principals remain in Pakistan, and how many hotels are still being used as temporary bridging accommodation for Afghan families? Will he publish constituency data so that all Members can understand whether he is evicting people in their communities? He mentioned the Afghan housing portal. How many landlords have signed up to it, how many have used it to house Afghans, and what promises by the Ministry of Defence have been kept in speeding up and processing ARAP cases?

I do not doubt the Minister's commitment to the people of Afghanistan, but this is not good enough. The promises that we made as a country were serious and solemn. Those who have fled from Afghanistan deserve our support and gratitude. Eviction notices are not good enough if there is nowhere for them to go, so can the Minister give us his solemn promise that not a single Afghan who is currently in bridging accommodation will be homeless when the date of the eviction notices that he has served upon them expires?

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Member for his remarks. Clearly, I do not think that I am a human shield for the Government. This is a particularly difficult issue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who grappled with this extraordinarily difficult and complex problem before me. I have to say to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that this is one of the most generous offerings that this country has ever made to resettle nationals from a foreign country in the United Kingdom. Since 2015, under consecutive Conservative Governments, we have welcomed more than half a million people on country-specific and humanitarian safe and legal routes, so I just do not recognise his portrayal of the Government's attitude towards those who are resettling here.

We have worked with around 350 local authorities across the United Kingdom to meet the demand for housing. As of data published on 25 May, around 10,500 people have been supported into settled accommodation—around 10,000 had moved into homes, with an additional 500 matched but not yet moved. The hon. Member is right that, from the end of April, families started to receive legal notices to move. That was accompanied by £35 million-worth of new funding to enable local authorities to provide the increased support for Afghan households to move from hotels into settled accommodation.

The hon. Member had many questions for me, and I will write to him on the ones that I have missed, but the truth is that this is an incredibly complex issue that the entire nation has a duty to fulfil. We can sling political remarks across the Dispatch Box on this issue, but we need all local authorities and political leaders in this country to pull together to challenge what is a very difficult situation and to try to encourage these Afghans to move, in what is an extremely generous offer from central Government, into private rented accommodation.

We all have a duty not to use these individuals as political pawns, but to provide them with a life in the UK that we can be truly proud of. If we all work together, we can achieve that.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. I want to ask one simple question: will no Afghans, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude and honour, be made homeless during the course of this process? I also want to ask, peculiarly, whether he has seen the remarks of our right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) in Afghanistan, in which he referred to Afghanistan as peaceful and stable, and said that we should welcome that. I saw that an Afghan woman who will remain nameless promptly wrote on his Twitter: “Shocked. Afghan women have been thrown to the wolves, and that is referred to as peace.” Does the Minister agree that it is not a very welcome statement to have made given the terrible time that those women have had and the persecutions that have taken place in Afghanistan?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can I just check that the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has been informed?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I cannot find him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Well, really it is discourteous—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: With respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, this statement was made in Afghanistan and it was relevant to this Chamber. It has been impossible to contact my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East, but I hope, respectfully, that I have the right to reference his statement, because it has a bearing on today’s ministerial statement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): If the right hon. Gentleman intends to refer to another Member, he should be courteous and inform them of that, even by email, which I am sure is not impossible. He is a very experienced Member of this House, and he knows that.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will email him immediately.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

Johnny Mercer: As I have said many times from the Dispatch Box, there is no reason why any of these individuals should be homeless at the end of the process given what is on offer. Clearly, we cannot march people into accommodation if they choose to present themselves as homeless in an attempt to secure themselves some sort of other accommodation. It is very difficult to affect that. There is no tangible reason why any Afghan family should present as homeless at the end of this process.

On my right hon. Friend’s remarks on Afghanistan and our right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), I am clear, as are the Government, that the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban was a tragedy of epic human proportions. I fought the Taliban myself. The Taliban murdered my friends. It is clear that the Taliban represent a serious threat to human rights, the

treatment of women, and all the things that we fought for. That is the Government’s position. That remains unchanged, and I know that colleagues from across the House will join me in those sentiments.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me first clearly associate myself with the words of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I am sure that the former Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), would never have gone online and made the public statements that were made earlier today. I was dumbfounded by them. I see the former Chair of the Defence Committee present on the Government Benches.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I know from our time together on the Defence Committee that this subject is close to his heart, and that he has gone the extra mile to ensure that we do well by those who risked so much alongside the UK armed forces—he served in Afghanistan, as did my brother—and Government personnel. I am afraid, though, that while the Minister speaks warm words with good intentions, he has come up rather awkwardly against the fact, which he has studiously avoided, that according to Office for National Statistics figures, as I think was mentioned previously, only 54 people have been able to apply through his Government’s flagship Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Perhaps he could come back on that.

The scheme was meant to provide safe haven to the many thousands of Afghans who were eligible to come to the UK but had not been able to do so at the time of Operation Pitting. With the unacceptable backlog of Afghans currently in the country, along with the demonstrably obstructive barriers to those still suffering under the Taliban rule from coming here, does the Minister not agree that it is time for a “Homes for Afghans” scheme similar to the “Homes for Ukraine” scheme, which would give central Government and local authorities the impetus to ensure that permanent accommodation is found for all the Afghans whom he seeks to remove from hotels?

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. On the issue of ACRS and ARAP, I need to be transparent with him: my responsibility, which this statement is about, is for Afghans in bridging accommodation in the UK and getting them into accommodation. The Ministry of Defence still owns that ARAP pathway and I am sure will have heard his questions. There are many more than 54 recipients of the ACRS in this country and I am more than happy to write to him to outline where they are at the moment. His last point has slipped my mind—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Homes for Afghans.

Johnny Mercer: Yes. We are looking at a similar proposal on homes for Afghans as we had for Ukrainians, but they are a fundamentally different cohort. Ukrainians traditionally, and in our experience, tend to want to go back to Ukraine in the future. That is not the case with the Afghan population. We are certainly looking at all options; we have set up an Afghan housing portal where landlords can offer their properties and we can accept offers, but all those options are in play. It is a fundamentally different cohort, but we can get there in the end.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): [My right hon. Friend focused on what central Government have done and what local government needs to do, but there was no mention of third sector organisations. What scrutiny has he given to the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, to the community sponsorship scheme and to how the charitable sector might be able to step in and assist? I point in particular to the Southampton & Winchester visitors group, which is very active in my constituency, but it is crucial that the Government are prepared to look at all models to try to find solutions so that Afghan women and children in particular, who certainly would not find Afghanistan peaceful and stable, can find peace, stability and a home here.

Johnny Mercer: My right hon. Friend is right. If we are to be successful in this space, we will have to harness the entire estate—not only Government, local and national, but third sector provision. To be honest with her, the best practice I have seen when I have visited the hotels is where the third sector is deeply embedded with the Home Office liaison teams, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities officials. Each of those teams is now in those hotels every day and, if there are charities out there who are willing to help and get involved, I ask them to contact their local Home Office liaison officers running each of the hotels. There is a lot of goodwill out there for the Afghan community, and we need to harness it. Third sector organisations and charities are a hugely important part of that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I recently met an 18-year-old constituent who is looking after her 17-year-old brother and her 10-year-old sister. They have been separated from their parents for the past two years because, in the scrum of the evacuation, they made it on to the plane and their parents did not. What can I tell her and her siblings about the efforts the Government will be prepared to make to reunite them with their mum and dad?

Johnny Mercer: The chaos of Operation Pitting means that that situation is all too familiar for different families. We are committed to reuniting families where appropriate. If the right hon. Gentleman writes to me about that specific case, I will look at it. To restart the professional pipeline of ARAP applicants out of Pakistan and back to the United Kingdom, it is incumbent on all of us to get Afghans out of hotels. If we can do that, we can reunite families such as theirs and they can live good, fulfilling lives, integrated into UK society.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In May, I referred to the remarkable programme “Women at War: Afghanistan” by the courageous journalist Alex Crawford. I recommend that any Member of this House who has doubts about the enslavement of women in Afghanistan take a look at it. Referring to the resettlement within Britain, can the Minister give us a rough idea how many of the people concerned are translators and thus have an adequate command of English? I suspect the vast majority do not and, as a third-generation member of an immigrant family myself, I know that the key to successful integration is mastering the English language. Is there anything the Minister can do to point those people in the direction of services that might be available to help them to do that?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his long-standing advocacy in this space. ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—courses are available to every single person who came forward from Operation Pitting. I will be honest with him, however: the grasp of English is not where I would like it to be. Some of these individuals have been in hotels for two years; those who have really thrown themselves into the process of integration into the United Kingdom have a good grasp of English and are out working, while some, unfortunately, have not matched that effort and consequently cannot speak English at this time. There are clear measures built into the funding package to ensure that learning English and helping this cohort to integrate into society are priorities. I urge Afghan families to take up that offer, because it will make their lives in the United Kingdom and getting a job here so much easier.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I start by thanking the Minister for his recent engagement and reiterating, as one of the co-chairs in the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, that he would be welcome to attend one of our meetings and speak directly to the women and girls who join us. Many of the family units in accommodation will be headed by women. That is the reality of the devastating consequences of the conflict in Afghanistan and the brutal Taliban regime. The Minister mentioned in his remarks support for those with medical requirements, but, given that those women will have elder and childcare responsibilities and their ability to exercise their right to work will be limited, can he provide reassurance about what additional support is being given to them by the multidisciplinary teams?

Johnny Mercer: Each individual Afghan—not each family—is entitled to £7,100 additional funding as they move into their receiving local authorities. There is an ongoing programme of support for those individuals. The idea that this cohort can simply be abandoned when we move them out of the hotel is clearly misguided. I have visited most of the hotels now and I have not come across a lot of female-only-led families. I have met one or two, but where we see them, we will do everything we can to support them.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I hardly need remind the Minister, as he fought in Afghanistan, but I will take the liberty of reminding the House that we lost 450 personnel killed in that theatre, and thousands more, unfortunately, sustained life-changing injuries. The right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) is abroad on a Select Committee trip, but I have communicated with him by text to give him notice that I intended to mention him in the Chamber, so I have observed the courtesies of the House. Last night, following a visit to Afghanistan, he posted an utterly bizarre video lauding the Taliban management of the country—something a fellow member of the Defence Committee described to me barely an hour ago as a “wish you were here” video—in which he made no mention of the fact that the Taliban is still attempting to identify and kill Afghan citizens who helped our armed forces, or of the fact that young girls in Afghanistan do not even have the right to go to school under that Government. I wish to make plain, on behalf of the

Committee, that he was speaking for himself, even though he used the title of Chairman of our Committee in a number of associated articles. Not in our name. He is entitled to have whatever bizarre opinions he wants, but does the Minister agree that any Select Committee Chairman who wants to remain a Select Committee Chairman should be careful to make clear that he speaks only for himself and not imply that he speaks for a number of other people who barely agreed with a word that he said?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his moral clarity in this space. Members must be extremely careful to identify when they are speaking for themselves and when they are representing a group of individuals and elected Members of this House. As I said previously, the Government position remains unchanged. The fall of Afghanistan was a tragedy. We fought the Taliban for many years, and 457 British service personnel lost their lives in Afghanistan in pursuit of freedom, peace and women's rights, none of which are found in Afghanistan today. Whenever we speak about that country, we should bear that sacrifice in mind, because it is an everyday occurrence for families up and down the country.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, I feel that I had better be very careful in how I put this question, but I think that I speak on behalf of the Committee.

In November 2021, the then Minister for Afghan Resettlement, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who I see is in her place, told the Home Affairs Committee, in relation to the resettlement scheme for Afghan refugees, that the Government

“want to ensure that any scheme we set up is future-proofed for the people of Afghanistan”.

Since then, the post of Minister for Afghan Resettlement has been scrapped, and its successor post—Minister for Refugees—is currently vacant. About 2,000 Afghan refugees have been stranded in third countries because they were told that there was no suitable accommodation for them here, and between January and March of this year, Afghan nationals constituted the majority of those making dangerous channel crossings in small boats, up from 5% in 2021. Are there plans to fill the post of Minister for Refugees, and will the Minister confirm that, after the enactment of the Illegal Migration Bill, Afghans who come across in small boats, including women and children, face detention and removal to a third country, possibly Rwanda?

Johnny Mercer: I completely refute the characterisation of the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). Getting those Afghans into communities is incredibly complex and it requires many Government agencies to pull together and deliver. That is exactly what the Prime Minister appointed me to do. We are all well aware of what has happened under previous Governments, but the issue now is that individuals are in hotels, which are not the right place for them to be—the right hon. Lady is well aware of the issues that have come about because of prolonged hotel stays. The offer that those individuals have through the ARAP pathway is still open. There is no requirement to take illegal routes to this country. The ARAP pathway can be applied to from third countries. The Illegal Migration

Bill was passed last night, and we had numerous debates on that. I am clear that this is a good offer for Afghans who served with British forces in Afghanistan, and we all need to ensure that that offer is taken up and that we integrate those people properly into our society.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): May I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for coming to Chelmsford and meeting the Afghan families who are still in the Atlantic hotel? Staying in a hotel indefinitely does not give stability or security to any of those families, and the Government are right to give a generous offer to help those families find themselves a home. Nevertheless, my Chelmsford local authority says that the very generous £7,100 per person is not enough to find rental accommodation in Chelmsford, but it is enough to find rental accommodation elsewhere in the country. Can he confirm that that amount of money can be transferred with the family should they want to go and rent elsewhere, and ensure that that process is working for those families in Chelmsford?

Johnny Mercer: First, I believe that I misunderstood the premise of what the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), said. I thought that she was giving my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) a hard time, but she was not—I apologise for misunderstanding.

When it comes to Chelmsford and various local authorities, I have to be honest: I have seen a wildly differing spread in the application of the policy. The truth is that in some local authorities, it is an extraordinary package that is having huge success. We are seeing up-front payments for six to 12 months, deposits paid, and £4,000 loaded on to credit cards for people to go out and furnish their accommodation. On top of that, the £7,100 per Afghan—not per family—moves with them to that local authority. That is why there is no reason that any Afghan should remain in hotels beyond 31 August. As I said, I have not always seen good application of the policy by local authorities—my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) will be well aware of what I am speaking about. When I took over this brief, I was very clear with the Prime Minister that we needed to resource the policy correctly, and he has resourced it correctly. We now need to be honest, recognise that it is a good offer and get those Afghans out of hotels and properly integrated into the United Kingdom, which was the original promise of Operation Pitting.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Let there be no doubt: the situation of women in Afghanistan is dire. I know that I do not have to tell the Minister that; he knows it. Since the fall of Afghanistan, I and others have been campaigning for one particular group of women: former Afghan judges and prosecutors who were left behind and are living in fear of their lives, hiding from the Taliban. Last summer, I met those at the FCDO, who were very sympathetic to the idea of a humanitarian visa for those women, and on 3 May, I met the Prime Minister, who I think seemed very sympathetic to the idea. On 23 May, I was promised a meeting by junior Minister at the Home Office, but that has not yet happened. Is there anything that the Minister can do—bearing in mind his knowledge of the country

[Joanna Cherry]

and his appreciation of the issues—to assist me in putting pressure on the Home Office to deliver a humanitarian visa for at least some of those women?

Johnny Mercer: Let me take that away. I recognise the hon. and learned Lady's concerns, and she makes very valid points. My responsibility in this area is clear: to get Afghans out of hotels and embedded and integrated properly into UK society. Once that is done, I want to establish a professional pathway out of Afghanistan to ensure that we fulfil our duties to those we have made promises to. That is a sequential operation—I need to move the families I referred to first—but I hear what she says and will take it away.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that those who cannot move because of ongoing and acute medical treatment are not left homeless when the access to hotels ceases? Is that something on which local authorities need to do a lot more?

Johnny Mercer: On local authorities, the truth is that, as I said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), there is a disparity in the application of the policy across the country. I have seen it done extremely well. I was in Bristol, near my hon. Friend's constituency, at the beginning of the week, and I pay tribute to Anne James, who has an extraordinary record of rehousing vulnerable people coming to Bristol from across the world—that has proven to be really successful.

A small number of individuals receive specialist healthcare at hospitals close to where they are currently housed, and there will be contingencies for them, but that is a very small number. For the vast majority, there is no clear reason why they should not move out of hotels. Although we have an extremely generous offer, we also need to be firm—firm for the British taxpayer and for Afghans and their families—and ensure that we do this integration job properly.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for visiting my constituency last week and meeting Afghans and local officials with me. He will have seen clearly the commitment of the Welsh Government, Cardiff Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council to working with his officials to find a solution to this. The reality, as he heard clearly in that meeting and as I heard afterwards, is that there have been wildly different experiences across the UK of engagement and delivery on the offer that he has promised. That is why some people will sadly end up needing contingency accommodation, as he set out. I hope that that is a small number of people, and I know that the Minister wants to do his best to get those people out. Is that contingency accommodation in hotels, will there be a time limit on it, will there be a financial limit on it, and will it be in the location where those Afghans are currently housed?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his engagement in the process. We had a useful—although very short, I am afraid—visit to his constituency to see the challenge there. He is absolutely right: the disparity in provision is obvious where he is. We need to

work harder in central Government, as well as at local government level, to ensure that all the benefits of the scheme are playing out for the families we are trying to serve.

I will have more to say in due course about contingency accommodation, but clearly, where individuals are getting specialist help at local hospitals, it will be in that area. We are yet to make a decision on precisely what that contingency accommodation will look like, but as I have said from the very start of the process, I do not want to see anybody going homeless at the end of the process—nobody should be homeless. I cannot march people to private accommodation and give them all the money in the world if they still do not want to live there, but there is no reason why Afghans should present as homeless at the end of this process.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): While there are clear concerns about what the Minister has announced today, it is important to recognise that there is a two-tier system, in that many tens of thousands of Afghans are currently stuck in the UK's asylum system. Many of them have been stuck there for over two years. They, too, want to move on with their lives and are prevented from doing so. On the approach across Government, what representations can the Minister make to his colleagues in the Home Office to try to get those Afghans out of the asylum system, bearing in mind that many of them will have served with UK forces in Afghanistan or otherwise helped our forces?

Johnny Mercer: Applications to the ARAP scheme by those who served alongside British forces and so on can be made from a third country and at any stage. The Home Office is dealing with the asylum system at the moment, and we have heard a lot about that in the last couple of days. My responsibility in this area is very clear, and that is to get Afghans who are already in hotels into their accommodation, but I am sure the Home Office will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

We are aware that this is a hugely challenging space, but I hope that with this scheme, the way we have worked with local authorities and the third sector, and the fact that we have built an Afghan taskforce for those who have already settled here and have charities working for the Government, we can set down a really clear blueprint for how we do migration that could see us properly integrate people from these vulnerable situations into British society.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Minister makes it sound ever so easy, expecting refugees to find their own accommodation with three months' notice when they have been languishing in hotels for nearly two years and this Government have done nothing. Can the Minister confirm that no Afghan who served alongside British troops in Afghanistan will be made homeless as a result of his decision to evict them from bridging hotels? In Liverpool, we have 227 families likely to be put on the street. I have made requests on the Floor of the House and in writing to the Minister to meet me to talk about what is happening in Liverpool, and I have not had a response.

Johnny Mercer: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has not had a response; I will look into that directly after this session. I am more than happy to meet at her earliest

convenience to talk about these issues. I do not think I have ever said that this is easy or will be a simple project to achieve. It is incredibly complex. We have taken around 24,500 Afghans out of Afghanistan since Op Pitting. That is a huge number of people to push into an already overcrowded housing market. They now have the most generous offer this country has ever made in the private rented sector, and they get an extraordinary amount of assistance.

I pay tribute to all the Home Office liaison officers and those working at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities who are on the frontline every day, trying to house Afghan families in United Kingdom society. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady to go over those details with her. Where local authorities engage with central Government and my team, we are having huge success, and I encourage her to do the same.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): This is a difficult process, so it is inevitable that there will be significant numbers of Afghans who struggle to find accommodation in time. How will they be supported to make homelessness applications or to present as homeless? Will there be somebody physically evicting people from hotels when the time comes, and if so, who, and what will then happen to the Afghans and their belongings?

Johnny Mercer: Central Government will stop paying for these hotels when the eviction notice runs out. There will then be extra homelessness funding for those who wish to present as homeless. There is £7,100 per family to help local authorities look after them and get them out of hotels or homeless accommodation and into the private rented sector.

I come back to this point. I have been to see some local authorities, and the No. 1 thing they have said to me is, “Can we keep the hotels open?” despite how bad that is for the Afghan families and the kids who are not going to school, and the challenges it poses in the community. We have to move these Afghans on. We have to get them into private rented accommodation. There is no reason why we cannot do that, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman in the months ahead to achieve that.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The Minister’s officials recently visited my constituency, and they will be aware that there are grave concerns regarding the wellbeing and emotional welfare of the families involved. What additional support are the Government putting in place to help with needs that are not simply accommodation-related? Furthermore, it has been suggested that some of the same hotels will be stood up as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers. Can the Minister respond? Is that the case?

Johnny Mercer: I am not in the Home Office, so I do not know which hotels will be stood up as contingency options for asylum seekers. There is some really good practice going on in Chester, but there are also some extremely difficult situations. The truth is that, while some Afghans have done an extraordinary job of trying to integrate into and relocate to the United Kingdom, I have met some individuals who have properties here but choose to live in hotels and are sending money back

to Pakistan and Afghanistan, while getting food and accommodation in this country. That is the reality of the situation. While the number of those cases is small, we need to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get Afghans into sustainable accommodation. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to achieve that objective.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I think the Minister for his statement. Five days ago, the Government published their 2022 “Human Rights and Democracy” report, in which they refer to pathway 3 and the commitment that was given. It is nearly two years since the fall of Kabul and 18 months since the opening of pathway 3. In that time, few applicants have arrived in the UK. Many Members of this House, including the Minister, fought hard for the establishment of the pathway, which was originally intended to support vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities. It was promised that 20,000 people would be resettled in the UK under the scheme, yet it appears that the number brought to the UK so far is minimal, and applications have not opened for the original groups. Given the findings of the Hazara inquiry, detailing the escalating atrocity crimes and warning of a possible genocide, why has the scheme been so slow to open and process people?

Johnny Mercer: The ACRS and ARAP processes do not lie with the piece of work we are discussing today, but I am more than happy to take those points away. In context, this has been an extremely generous scheme. I recognise that there is an appetite to relocate everyone who served in the Afghan armed forces, for example. We simply cannot do that—that is half a million people. We have a special duty to those who served alongside us and those in units 333 and 444 who worked with the UK special forces community. We are doing everything we can to fulfil that, but we have to be honest and realistic about what we can do in this space.

All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that the Prime Minister is absolutely determined to fulfil our commitments to these people. That is what he said to me when I was asked to take this over, and that is what he has demonstrated with the amount of money and resource he has directed at this. If we all pull together and work together in local government, national Government and the third sector, there is no reason why we cannot successfully integrate this generation of Afghans into British society today.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Just last week, a constituent of mine who is a British citizen of Afghan descent was told that after waiting years for a resolution to his family’s case due to absurd delays at the Home Office, his five young children and wife would all be prevented from entering the UK. He was told that the documents he held were insufficient, despite having provided DNA evidence to the Home Office. The reason his required documents were not in the form they should have been in is that they were damaged in a devastating bomb blast at Kabul airport—something that my parliamentary staff can attest to because they were on the phone at the time of the bomb blast happening and have dealt with this case from that awful day. My question to the Minister is quite simple: what is my constituent able to do about that situation? How can he work with our Government to rightfully bring his family to this country without delay?

Johnny Mercer: If that individual is eligible under ARAP or ACRS and is approved, the hon. Gentleman should write to me about the case, and I will look into it. The status of these individuals is determined by the Home Office, so that is a question for that Department, but I am more than happy to look into individual cases. As I have said a number of times, this is an extraordinarily complex situation; he alluded to what happened at Kabul airfield two years ago. We are determined to ensure that those we owe a duty to are brought back to this country, and I urge him to write to me about that case today.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his statement. The British Red Cross is delivering information sessions to Afghan refugees on life in the UK, digital safety, and protection and women's healthcare. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that they, too, provide Afghan refugees with the tools they require for successful assimilation in the UK?

Johnny Mercer: There has been a huge amount of work to make sure that Afghans have absolutely everything at their disposal in order to integrate into the United Kingdom, including funding that is flexible enough to, for example, knock through houses that are built together but not sized for the bigger families that we see in this cohort; English courses and training; replicating the qualifications they had in Afghanistan; and trying to get them into the NHS. There is a wealth of opportunity out there for Afghan families in the United Kingdom today. We must present that alongside a compassionate but firm outlook that hotels are not the place for Afghan families to reside in the long term. That is why we have put so much money and effort into this. We are determined to see through our commitments to this cohort and we will get there in the end.

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

BILL PRESENTED

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (OIL AND GAS COMPANIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Burgo presented a Bill to require the Leader of the House of Commons to move a Motion prohibiting Members of Parliament from receiving any financial or other benefit from oil and gas companies; to require the Leader of the House to publish proposals for divestment of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund from oil and gas companies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 355).

High Income Child Benefit Charge (Report to Parliament)

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

3.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to report to Parliament on the likely effects of increasing in line with inflation the income threshold for the High Income Child Benefit Charge and of determining that threshold by reference to household income instead of individual income.

I thank the House for allowing me to present this ten-minute rule Bill. Given the timescale, I will attempt to be succinct: most Members of the House will have an understanding of why I, the Democratic Unionist party, and others seek to present this Bill today. It is in the interest of fairness, something that is always critical—always key—to everything I do.

The high income child benefit charge is equal to 1% of a family's child benefit for every £100 of income that is over £50,000 each year. If an individual's income is over £60,000, the charge will equal the total amount of the child benefit. That is how it is worked out—indeed, that is how it has been worked out since its introduction in January 2013, with not one single change. The fact that the threshold for the charge has remained unchanged for 10 years is incredible, and not usual when it comes to Government thresholds. Even the standard personal allowance for tax has risen by almost a third during the same period. In the interests of fairness, I should note that income tax thresholds have been frozen in cash terms since 2021-22 and it is Government policy that they will remain frozen up to and including 2027-28, but in tandem with the child benefit freeze, that means that working families find themselves even harder pressed to pay the bills.

The question of why we are now faced with an immovable child benefit threshold is difficult to answer when we consider that literally every other rate has fluctuated over that timespan. The cost of the diesel that people need to get to work is up by 30p a litre since 2013—well over 20%—while those who invested in electric cars have seen the price of electricity consumption increase from an average of £577 in 2013 to the current price cap of £2,500. Increases are not limited to those essentials: using the consumer prices index measure of inflation, the tremendous staff of the Library have worked out that average prices in the UK rose by 25.9% from tax year 2013-14 to 2022-23. Let us take a moment to take that in—an increase of 25%. That is substantial, and wages have not increased at the same rate. A family's wages may well have increased, yet they are worse off because the bills they are paying cost 25% more. That wage increase may in turn preclude a child benefit claim, yet it is clear that, for working families, child benefit is more necessary than ever before.

The question that the Treasury will be working out is this: what would the thresholds be if they were uprated with inflation? As Treasury Ministers are aware, the usual practice is that income tax thresholds are uprated based on the annual inflation rate of CPI in the September prior to the start of the coming tax year: for example, the threshold in tax year 2023-24 is determined by CPI inflation in September 2022. Based on that practice, if the thresholds had been uprated in line with CPI inflation,

the lower threshold of £50,000 in 2013-14 would be £62,644 in 2023-24, and the upper threshold of £60,000 in 2013-14 would be £75,173 in 2023-24. That is what the thresholds should be, but they are not—we find ourselves in a substantially different position. That is one of the reasons why I have tabled this ten-minute rule Bill.

The Government are aware of the issue; indeed, the Minister and I have spoken about it before. She is always very generous in her replies, although not always with the answers I was hoping for, hence why I have tabled the Bill. I have raised the issue during Budget debates and other debates in Westminster Hall, and the Minister was quick to highlight that the charge affects a small proportion of child benefit claimants, namely those who have relatively high incomes. I think we have established that the threshold is nowhere near the same rate that people were allowed to earn when the charge was designed in 2013, so the Government must answer the question of whether it is a stealth tax on the working middle class—who cannot be classified as rich by any stretch of the imagination—or to ensure that those who do not need help do not get it. The rationale behind applying a child benefit threshold has been terribly blurred by the refusal to uplift that threshold in line with inflation, or indeed with common sense.

The Minister has previously said that, in 2019-20, only about 373,000 individuals in the UK declared a HICBC liability, and the vast majority of those individuals had incomes above the UK higher-rate income tax threshold of £50,270. The inference is that those people are rich and do not need help, which is quite untrue. With a CPI increase of 25%, that argument does not carry weight for the family who paid £98.15 per week for 25 hours of childcare in 2013, but who now pay £285.31. That is the inflation—that is the CPI—that is the problem. If that family earn £50,000, they certainly do not get child tax credit to help them. Those people are in ordinary jobs, trying their best to make their mortgage payments, heat their home and educate their children, without one penny from Government over their child benefit.

Since HICBC was introduced, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has also carried out compliance checks on those who either did not register for self-assessment to pay the charge, or paid the incorrect amount on their self-assessment tax return. We started off with a few thousand people being over the threshold, but the number has escalated to 61,881 checks on those not registered for self-assessment and 63,713 checks on those who returned the incorrect amount in 2019, before the pandemic. That is not a few families. The scale of those compliance checks illustrates the difference between the time when the charge was introduced, in 2013, and the number of people who are now expected to fill out a self-assessment form without training or guidance. They may even be paying an accountant to get it right for them, due to their fear of getting a fine or a black mark.

The Bill also highlights the inconsistency of the fact that a single-income home has a threshold of around £50,000, yet a couple in a dual-income household could be earning £49,000 each—that is £98,000 in total—and still receive their entitlement. Again, this shows the inconsistency of the Government approach, and the reason that this House must, I believe, take the time to review the matter and get it right.

Our middle classes are struggling. They are the ones—in every one of our constituencies, including the Minister's, represented in this place—working hard, raising their children and trying to give them opportunities in their life, while all around them prices have sky-rocketed. They are the ones who are discovering how difficult it is to make ends meet, and who realise that, if they gather their courage to ask for a reasonable pay rise of a couple of thousand pounds, most of it will be lost in tax and that, with the missing child benefit, the struggle will continue and they will be no further ahead. They are the ones that our party's ten-minute rule Bill is advocating for—for help and for change. We have determined that there is a minimum amount that people must have to live and to fill the gaps. I cannot for the life of me fathom why the only group of people we do not seek to give a hand up to are the working backbone of this country—and the backbone, by the way, of every one of the parties here as well.

The sum of £50,000 is not what it used to be. Some people will say, "Well, actually, if only we had that", but it is the threshold I am referring to. We know that the value of money has changed. That is why everyone who would have earned £65,738 in January 2013, when the charge was introduced, now earns almost a third more, which is still not embraced by the Minister and by the Department. Times have changed, and so too must the child benefit threshold. I today lay this Bill before the House for consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Jim Shannon, Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson, Gavin Robinson, Sammy Wilson, Carla Lockhart, Mr Gregory Campbell, Paul Girvan, Ian Paisley, Margaret Ferrier and Tim Farron present the Bill.

Jim Shannon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 356).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As the House knows, the House of Lords has accepted all of the Commons amendments and disagreements to Lords amendments that this House sent to the Lords on Monday evening and, accordingly, there are no more proceedings on the Illegal Migration Bill.

We now come to motion 3 relating to Business of the House (Today). I call the Whip to move the motion in an amended form, leaving out paragraph (2).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered.

That, at this day's sitting—

Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to (a) the Motions in the name of Secretary Thérèse Coffey relating to Environmental Protection and (b) the Motion in the name of Secretary Chloe Smith relating to the Online Safety Bill: Carry-Over (No. 2).—(Steve Double.)

NORTHERN IRELAND TROUBLES (LEGACY AND RECONCILIATION) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 24 May 2022 (Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill: Programme) and 29 June 2022 (Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill: Programme (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: 20, 44, 1 to 19, 21 to 43, 45 to 118, 120 to 129 and 119.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 13

CONDUCT OF REVIEWS

3.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 20.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 20.

Lords amendment 44, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (c) to the words so restored to the Bill.

Lords amendments 1 to 19, 21 to 43, 45 to 118 and 120 to 129.

Lords amendment 119, and Government consequential amendment (a) to Lords amendment 119.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am delighted to speak to this Bill following its year-long passage through the other place. I pay tribute to Lord Caine for his expert stewardship of the Bill in that place, as well as to all the Opposition spokespeople for their patience and engagement on the Bill.

Hon. and right hon. Members will know all too well that the legacy of the troubles remains one of the outstanding issues since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was reached in 1998. As a Government, we have sought to make a realistic assessment of what we can do to best deliver for those affected by the troubles over a quarter of a century after that agreement and well over 50 years since the troubles began. I recognise, and I know the House recognises, that this is a hugely difficult task. That is reflected in the many valiant attempts made to address this issue since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement all those years ago. It is also incumbent on us to ensure that any process for dealing with the past focuses on measures that can deliver positive outcomes for as many of those directly affected by the troubles as possible, as well as for society in Northern Ireland as a whole. We maintain that the Bill before us is the best way of doing that.

The Bill contains finely balanced political and moral choices that are uncomfortable for many, but we should be honest about what we can realistically deliver for people in Northern Ireland, in circumstances where the prospects of achieving justice in the traditional sense are so vanishingly small. The Bill seeks to deliver an approach that focuses on what can practically be achieved to deliver better outcomes for all those who suffered, including those who served, and it aims to help society look forward together to a more shared future.

The Bill left the House of Commons over a year ago. In that time, my ministerial colleagues and I have held more than 100 meetings with victims groups, veterans groups, Northern Ireland political parties, the Opposition, the Irish Government, academics, US interlocutors and Members of both Houses, in an effort to make meaningful

changes to improve the Bill. As a result of that extensive engagement, the Government have brought forward a significant package of amendments that provide greater assurance regarding compliance with our international obligations; enhance the independence of the new Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery—I will call that by its catchy nickname, ICRIR, from here on—provide a much greater focus on the interests of victims and families; and strengthen provisions related to the process of granting immunity from prosecution to those who engage meaningfully with the commission, while keeping open the possibility of prosecution for those who fail to do so.

Let me run through the Government's Lord amendments thematically, as well as our responses to Lords amendments 20 and 44. First there is conditional immunity and incentives to co-operate with the ICRIR. As I said from the outset, the aim of the Bill is to provide more information to more people than is possible under current mechanisms, and we will do that by creating an effective information recovery process. The commission will conduct reviews with the primary purpose of providing answers to those who want them, and will grant immunity from prosecution only if individuals provide an account that is true to the best of their knowledge and belief.

I know that is challenging for many, but conditional immunity is a crucial aspect of the information recovery process. The Government believe it is the best mechanism by which we can generate the greatest volume of information in the quickest possible time, to pass on to families and victims who have been waiting for so long. That is why the Government cannot accept Lords amendment 44, which seeks to remove clause 18 and conditional immunity from the Bill.

As many Members of the House will know, there is a significant precedent regarding limited immunities and amnesties in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, following periods of violence. That includes, following the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, an amnesty for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and limited immunity for individuals who share information about the location of victims' remains. If we look back further, the newly created Irish state legislated three times between 1923 and 1924 for amnesties, dispensing with civil and criminal liability for violence for UK state forces, republicans and Free State forces.

Through Government amendments, we are making the conditional immunity process more robust. That includes amendments to clause 18 in my name, which were agreed in the other place but fell when the clause was removed from the Bill. The commission is already required to consider all relevant information that it holds when forming a view on the truth of a person's account, as part of their application for immunity, including information obtained through a related review. Through Lords amendment 49, we are strengthening that provision by placing the commission under a positive duty, requiring it to take "reasonable steps" to secure information relevant to that assessment.

The Government are further strengthening the immunity provisions by introducing circumstances under which immunity may be revoked, or may not be granted. I have restored Lords amendment 60, which makes it clear that where a person applying for immunity is subject to an ongoing prosecution, immunity may not

be granted if there is a risk that it might prejudice that ongoing prosecution. Through Lords amendment 63 we are creating a new criminal offence for those who wilfully or recklessly choose to mislead the commission when providing information. Individuals who are granted immunity will automatically lose it if they are convicted of such an offence.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Can the Secretary of State confirm to the House how many ongoing IRA trials are taking place vis-à-vis how many ongoing trials against members of the security services are taking place?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do not have those figures with me, but I will get them from my officials and give them to the hon. Gentleman when, with the leave of the House, I reply to the debate later.

Building on what I was just outlining, Lords amendment 62 ensures that a grant of immunity must be revoked if an individual is subsequently convicted of terrorism offences or offences connected to terrorism committed after the immunity has been granted. That includes offences relating to fundraising, involvement in terrorist fundraising arrangements and the encouragement of terrorism and dissemination of terrorist publications. The offender will also be precluded from obtaining immunity for offences within the scope of the revoked grant.

We are also disapplying the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 for future convictions. That means that individuals who choose not to engage fully with the commission and are not granted immunity, but who are subsequently convicted of an offence, will not be able to apply for early release and will be liable to serve a full sentence. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for raising that issue before the Bill left the Commons this time last year. Alongside that, having listened to suggestions in the debates in this House, we are increasing the financial penalty for non-compliance with the commission from up to £1,000 to up to £5,000, which is in line with the asks during this Bill's passage.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Secretary of State said that it has taken a year for the Bill to go through the House of Lords—I and others campaigned for four years for the Bill even to be introduced in the first place. I fear that some of the Government's own amendments introduced in the other place have had the effect of swinging the pendulum too far—I admit it is a delicate balance—against our veterans who served in Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the Bill now gives the independent commission extremely wide and latitudinal powers to decide whether a veteran should still be investigated, even despite the Bill's so-called double-jeopardy provisions. The decision still ultimately lies with the commission. It also has great latitude in deciding whether a veteran has complied with an investigation, which would then allow them immunity. They would not get it if the commission ruled they had not complied. Can the Secretary of State absolutely assure me in his heart of hearts that we are not institutionalising the mechanism for a republican lawyer fest, which would be totally contrary to the whole point of bringing in the Bill in the first place?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am a great believer in short and honest answers to such questions, and the answer is yes.

I now turn to the conduct of reviews by the commission and, in particular, Lords amendment 20, which establishes minimum standards for reviews conducted by the ICRIR to ensure that conduct is investigated to criminal justice standards, along the lines of Operation Kenova.

Mr Francois: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The right hon. Gentleman really does have to be pithier than he was in his last intervention. By their very nature, interventions should be short.

Mr Francois: I thank the Secretary of State for that clear answer, but could he just with a couple of sentences pithily explain why he is so confident that he is right?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will turn to elements of this later in my speech, but I referred earlier to the importance of the conditional immunity clause. I think what my right hon. Friend will hear in the course of this debate is how many people think the pendulum has swung in this delicate balance, as he has put it, too far in the opposite direction to the way he believes it has swung.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that it was back in April 2017 that the then Defence Committee first recommended drawing a line with a statute of limitations coupled with a truth recovery process. We recognised that the process had to be for everyone or for no one. Does he accept that there is a risk of having overcomplicated the process, and is any remedy likely to be available if, in putting this into practice, it is found that service personnel are not being sufficiently protected for ongoing prosecutions?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is obviously no statute of limitations. The Bill has moved on and, as I said, I would like to think it has been improved a great deal. But it will be an independent body that allows for these things to happen. That is vital both in dealing with the issues of the past, as my right hon. Friend outlined, and in helping all victims perhaps to get some information about the circumstances by which they lost loved ones or others.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): We recently held the memorial concert for the Deal marine musicians who were murdered by the IRA bomb in Deal in 1989. No one has ever been brought to justice for that. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the process will apply across the whole of the United Kingdom? What information can we hope might come forward that has not already done so in more than 30 years?

Chris Heaton-Harris: In answer to my hon. Friend's first question, I confirm the geographical jurisdiction. On her second question, it rather depends on the evidence that might be held by individuals or organisations. I know that the case she raised has been subject to a number of past investigations, and there is limited information in the public domain.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State mentioned the issue of all the victims. The justice that many victims want is quite clear to me and to others on the Opposition side of the Chamber. I think my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) has said that even if there was only a candle of light of a possibility for justice some day, we would all want to see that—I want to see that for all the people I know. The Secretary of State will remember how, last time we spoke on this, I named every one of those people who we really feel justice is not there for. Whenever he talks about justice for all, I do not see it, and my people do not see it. Where is it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is contained within the Bill and within the independence of the commission, which will be able to conduct criminal investigations when the families ask it to do so. I have met numerous families in my time as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and there is a complete range of views as to what people want when it comes to seeking information about what happened to their loved ones. I know, as I mentioned at the top of my speech, that the Bill will not satisfy everybody. However, lots of time has passed—the hon. Gentleman will know that better than most—and there is now a dwindling opportunity for investigations leading to criminal prosecutions. People do need to have information, if it can possibly be found.

Jim Shannon: Fifty-one years ago, my cousin Kenneth Smyth was murdered—[*Interruption.*] Kenneth Smyth was murdered. His friend Daniel McCormick, a Roman Catholic, was also murdered. Fifty-one years later, there is no justice for my family and no justice for Daniel McCormick's family. And there is no justice for the four Ulster Defence Regiment men murdered in Ballydugan, or for the young lad Stuart Montgomery, also murdered. Our pain is still here; our pain is still raw. Our people grieve; my constituents grieve. The Secretary of State says that they will have justice, but we cannot see justice.

The people who killed my cousin—three of them—ran across the border and got sanctuary in the Republic of Ireland. Two of them are dead and one is still living. There was no justice. Nine people were involved in the murder of those four UDR men, and one of them is dead today—it was in the paper this week—Colum Marks, an IRA commander. He is in hell, burning—the best place for him. Where is the justice for my family and for my constituents? I do not see it. The Secretary of State says we are going to have it. No, we are not. I do not see it at all.

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, I completely recognise the emotion with which the hon. Gentleman has expressed his views. He knows that I have met a huge number of people who have reflected with passion on the people they have lost. I cannot put myself in the hon. Gentleman's shoes—I would not try to—and nor can I right the wrongs of something that happened 51 years ago. The hon. Gentleman's family have gone without justice or much information for 51 years. He knows that, unlike him, there are families across the piece, some of whom are his constituents, who have not had any information about the circumstances in which they lost loved ones during the course of the troubles.

This Bill is definitely not perfect. But after 51 years, should people choose to use the powers of the independent commission in this legislation, they might just be able to get some information that allows them to remember their loved ones in the appropriate way. My heart goes out to the hon. Gentleman. I know that this is an imperfect Bill for him, but it might just work for some others. This piece of legislation is a difficult balancing act.

I was talking about Lords amendment 20, which raises a number of important issues that have been addressed by Government amendments tabled in the other place and for Commons consideration. We cannot accept any amendment that seeks to make every review a criminal investigation. The legislation rightly ensures that the independent commission, via the commissioner for investigations, has the flexibility to determine if and when it is appropriate to utilise police powers during the course of its review.

A one-size-fits-all approach requiring criminal investigation in all cases would remove such flexibility and significantly increase the likely time to complete reviews, further delaying the provision of information for many families. I point to a case raised with me in oral questions only a few weeks ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), should anyone not believe that such investigation is useful. Further, in cases where the investigative duty under article 2 or 3 of the convention applies, a criminal investigation may not be sufficient means of discharging that duty. That is because there may have been failings by the state that contributed to a death, but which were not themselves criminal in nature.

Lords amendment 20 also seeks to introduce a reference to compliance with the European convention on human rights. As a public authority, for the purposes of section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, the ICIR and its commissioners are required to be compatible with convention rights within the meaning of the Act when exercising their functions under the Bill. Government Lords amendments 19 and 22 expressly confirm that the commissioner for investigations must comply with obligations imposed by the Human Rights Act when exercising operational control over the conduct of reviews and others functions.

Lords amendment 20 references gathering as much information as possible and exploring all evidential opportunities. The commissioner for investigations is required to ensure not only that a review is carried out when a valid request is received, but that each review looks into all the circumstances of the death or incident - in question, including but not limited to criminal activity. Furthermore, as I set out, Lords amendment 49 will place the commission under a positive duty to take reasonable steps to secure information for that assessment.

To strengthen further our commitment around the conducting of reviews, I have tabled amendments in lieu of Lords amendment 20, which seek to clarify that the duties of the commissioner for investigations when looking into the circumstances of a death or serious injury apply regardless of whether a criminal investigation forms part of the review. They also place a duty on the chief commissioner to provide, where possible, answers to questions posed as part of a request for a review.

Mr Francois: Sinn Féin has always argued that, because in the early years of the troubles fatal shootings by armed forces personnel were investigated by the Royal Military Police, and only after a few years was that transferred to the RUC, those investigations were not article 2 compliant. As the Government have deliberately strengthened the role of article 2, via their own amendments, does that mean in practice that every single fatality prior to 1972 is likely to be reinvestigated in order to be article 2 compliant?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No.

Turning now to the role of victims and families—

Mr Francois: Sorry, does the Minister want to explain that?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will happily explain a bit later, when I have finished what I am saying.

Turning now to the role of victims and families, through our extensive engagement with stakeholders we have sought to make the Bill more victims-centred. To achieve that, I am placing the commission, when exercising its functions, under a duty to have regard to the general interests of persons affected by troubles-related deaths and serious injury. The Bill will also make it clear that in exercising its functions, the commission's principal objective is to promote reconciliation. That is a crucial overarching principle that will embed the need to promote reconciliation in everything the ICIR does when carrying out its work.

The commission will also be placed under a new duty to offer victims and their families the opportunity to submit personal impact statements, setting out how they have been affected by a troubles-related death or serious injury. The statements must be published if the person making the statement so wishes, subject to limited exceptions that ensure no individuals are put at risk and that the Government's duty to keep people safe and secure is upheld. We tabled the amendment as a direct result of engagement with the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland, who maintained it was crucial that victims had a voice in this process. We agree.

The Government fully recognise the need for the commission to have credibility, expertise and legitimacy so that effective investigations can be carried out and information provided to families as soon as possible. On 11 May, I announced the intended appointment of the former Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, Sir Declan Morgan KC, as chief commissioner-designate, having obtained input from the Lord Chief Justices of Northern Ireland, and England and Wales, and the Lord President of the Court of Session in Scotland, all of whom I would like to thank publicly. To allay further concerns around the integrity and independence of the immunity process, the Government's Lords amendments place a duty on the commission to produce guidance that is related to determining a request for immunity. That will replace the power that previously rested with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

There are also amendments relating to oral history and memorialisation. We are, I am afraid, never going to agree in Northern Ireland on a common narrative about the past, but we can aim to put in place structures to help all in society, including future generations, have a better understanding of the past, with the overarching

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

aim of enabling people to move forwards. Therefore, our memorialisation strategy will seek to build consensus around inclusive new initiatives to commemorate those lost in the troubles and seek to ensure that lessons of the past are not forgotten. I fully understand concerns raised regarding the need to prevent the glorification of terrorism in relation to the memorialisation strategy and other measures in part 4. As a result, we have added an overarching requirement to clause 48 so that designated persons must have regard to the need to ensure that the way in which the troubles-related work programme is carried out promotes reconciliation, anti-sectarianism and non-recurrence.

We also amended the Bill to broaden the requirement to consult the First Minister and Deputy First Minister with a duty to consult organisations that are experienced in reconciliation and anti-sectarianism, and to consult relevant Northern Ireland Departments before deciding on a response to each recommendation in the memorialisation strategy. We added an additional requirement in clause 50 that the Secretary of State must consult organisations that have an expertise in reconciliation and anti-sectarianism before designating persons for the purposes of this part of the Bill.

There are also Government amendments relating to interim custody orders. We have made the amendments in response to concerns raised by Members of both Houses over the 2020 Supreme Court ruling concerning the validity of the interim custody orders made under the troubles-era internment legislation. To be clear, it has always been the Government's understanding that interim custody orders made by Ministers of the Crown under powers conferred on the Secretary of State were perfectly valid. In order to restore clarity around the legal position and to make sure that no one is inappropriately advantaged by a different interpretation of the law on a technicality, the Government tabled amendments that retrospectively validate all interim custody orders made under article 4 of the Detention of Terrorists (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, as well as paragraph 11 of section 1 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1973. That has the effect of confirming that a person's detention under an ICO was not unlawful simply because it had been authorised by a junior Minister rather than by the Secretary of State personally.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State has made an important point about the *R v. Adams* case and the disregarding of the Carltona principle by the Supreme Court in 2020, and he is right to affirm the Government's view that the signing of warrants by a Minister of the Crown was always a lawful act, but why has this taken three years, and why did the amendments originate from the Back Benches rather than the Government? Is the Secretary of State right to describe them as Government amendments? For a great many people in Northern Ireland who thought that this was a welcome step during Bill's passage, it came rather late.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Well, perhaps it is a case of better late than never. These are Government amendments, but I am the first to admit that amazingly good ideas sometimes emerge from the Back Benches of both Houses of Parliament.

The amendments could also prohibit certain types of legal proceedings—including civil cases, applications for compensation as a result of miscarriages of justice and appeals against conviction, which rely on the 2020 ruling—from being brought or continued. To align with the other prohibitions in the Bill, the continuation of pending claims and appeals in scope would be prohibited immediately from commencement. There is a specific exemption in the Bill for certain types of ongoing criminal appeals, where leave to appeal has already been granted or where there has been a referral by the Criminal Cases Review Commission by the time of the Bill's commencement. The exception would not allow for the payment of compensation flowing from the reversal of such convictions, and I want to make it clear that the amendment would not lead to the reinstatement of convictions that had already been reversed.

There are other amendments relating to criminal justice outcomes. The Government's primary focus has always been on establishing one effective legacy body seeking to provide better outcomes for families. We also want to ensure that organisations such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the judiciary are able to concentrate their capabilities on more present-day issues.

It remains our view that the independent commission, when established, should be the sole body responsible for troubles-related cases, but we are also mindful of the concerns raised about the ending of the ongoing processes, especially given the current legislative timetable and the expected timeframe for the commission's becoming fully operational. Our amendments would therefore ensure that ongoing criminal investigations, ombudsman investigations, the consideration of prosecution decisions, coronial inquests, and the publication of reports will continue until 1 May 2024, when the commission will become fully operational. We hope that the additional time provided will allow such cases to conclude their work, while ensuring a smooth transition between the ending of the current mechanisms and the commission's taking on full responsibility for outstanding legacy cases.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Does the Secretary of State recognise the huge concern felt by families who do not think it is practical to expect all inquests to be completed by next spring? Some have not even begun, and it is feared that a two-tier approach will emerge. Owing to a number of factors, some cases scheduled by the former Lord Chief Justice will have started and may well finish, while others have not even had a chance to start. Notwithstanding what the Secretary of State has said, people do not believe that the new process will have the rigour of an inquest.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Our amendment provides until 1 May 2024 for inquests to conclude. Since the Bill's introduction, expeditious case management of inquests in order to reach "an advanced stage" has resulted in the overloading of a system that was already struggling under incredible pressure, causing delay and frustration. We hope that the amendment will ensure that resources will now be focused on completing those inquests that have a realistic prospect of conclusion in the next year. The Government expect troubles-related cases that do not conclude via the coronial process by 1 May 2024 to be transferred to the fully operational ICRIR, led by

Sir Declan Morgan as chief commissioner-designate, through the use of provisions already contained in the Bill, and I believe that those provisions will allow him to maintain the relevant level of investigation.

Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State is very kind and generous to give way. Before he concludes, would he care to mention any response to the Irish Government threat that they intend to take His Majesty's Government to court on these matters? How does he view that threat, and what has been the response back to the Irish Government, given their own dire record of dealing with legacy?

4.15 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. There have been a number of quite forthright conversations between the Taoiseach, the Tanaiste and myself on this matter. Obviously anything could be tested in legal action as we move forward, but I believe that the Bill is article 2-compliant. I do not see that as negative, because there are five elements to article 2 compliance—independence, capability of leading to the identification and punishment of perpetrators, prompt and reasonably expeditious, involvement of next of kin, and a degree of public scrutiny, which I think are all included in this. So I think we are in a strong place to resist any such potential charges, and I would like to think that means that we can happily move on together.

Mr Francois: I have been waiting patiently for the Secretary of State to answer the question that I asked him earlier about the interrelationship between article 2 and pre-1972 investigations. I am sure he meant to answer the question before he sat down. He has very few bits of paper left. Could he now please give a direct answer to my question about the interrelationship between the two?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think my hon. Friend will remember that I gave him a direct answer and he wanted something that was a bit longer. I have just given him something that is a bit longer that identified why there is article 2 compliance, and we believe—*[Interruption.]* I did directly, which I think is the best way of dealing with this.

Mr Francois: It does not answer my question.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The ICRIR has always, as a public body, needed to comply with all its duties under the Human Rights Act. We have made it clearer, on the face of the Bill, that the commissioner for investigations must comply with those duties when carrying out their reviews. It is a very straightforward—it generally is a straightforward—answer to a straightforward question, and I hope that my hon. Friend, when he reads *Hansard*, will see that his questions have been answered threefold in what I have said.

Mr Francois: No they have not.

Chris Heaton-Harris: There you go; we beg to differ.

Finally, through these amendments the term “the relevant day” has been removed from the Bill, so a consequential amendment (a) to Lords amendment 119 in my name simply seeks to remove the power to define the relevant date.

I am very confident that the Government's legacy Bill provides the framework that will enable the independent commission, established by the Bill, to deliver effective legacy mechanisms for families and victims, whilst complying with our international obligations. When the Bill becomes law the delivery of those mechanisms will be led by Sir Declan Morgan KC, currently chief commissioner-designate of the independent commission. Sir Declan is also an individual of the highest calibre, with a track record of delivery on legacy issues, and I know that he will approach the task with the rigour, integrity and professionalism required.

The challenge before us is immensely difficult, but it is also clear. If we are to place the legacy of the troubles in the rear-view mirror and to help all in society to move forward in a spirit of reconciliation, we must try to do things differently.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Bill has managed to unite all Northern Ireland parties in opposition to it. The word “reconciliation” may be in its title, but victims say that it is traumatising. Both the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Law Society of Northern Ireland have criticised it. The Labour party has voted against it at every stage. That is because it benefits terrorists more than their victims.

Anyone doubting that should read the BBC front page today, and the story about Louie Johnston, who was just seven years old when his Royal Ulster Constabulary officer father David Johnston was shot by the IRA. Louie has asked MPs to show empathy with his family today and not force through this Bill.

Lords amendment 44 addresses the flaw at the centre of this Bill, by removing the immunity clause. The Government must not put immunity back in. It is not a wrecking amendment, as the independent commission would have a better chance of winning people over without it.

I listened with interest to the Secretary of State's recent speech to the Institute for Government. He told a story about meeting three RUC widows, and how all three wanted different things in relation to their husband's death. He said that, if he were a member of the public, he would side with the widow who wanted justice above all else. He suggested that conditional immunity in exchange for information would satisfy two of the three widows, and he said this is progress on legacy.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I was intrigued to hear the Leader of the Opposition publicly state last week that, if he were to become Prime Minister, he would repeal this Act. This surprised me for a variety of reasons, and I wonder if the shadow Minister might indulge me for a second. Am I right in thinking that public protestation means Labour has no intention of drawing a line under legacy issues in Northern Ireland and moving on? And does it mean that Labour has no wish to stop vexatious complaints being made against British servicemen?

Peter Kyle: Labour believes in a more consensual way forward. We believe that, in the past, there has been agreement that drew more consensus. This Government published a Bill that had broad agreement in Northern Ireland and was deemed human rights compliant, yet they jettisoned the Bill after gaining all that consensus and chose a different way forward. We believe the way

[Peter Kyle]

forward lies in the origins of that draft legislation, and we believe there is a way forward that takes into account the learning since.

The hon. Gentleman mentions vexatious litigation against former servicepeople in the Northern Ireland context. Perhaps he could give an example of vexatious litigation where someone is currently being prosecuted or pursued as a result?

Ian Paisley: Officer B.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Dennis Hutchings.

Peter Kyle: Okay. I will move on.

The Secretary of State has clearly been trying to do his best with a Bill he inherited from one of his predecessors, but this Bill will slam shut the doors to justice. It is now well over a year since the Bill was published. In that time, Ministers have had ample opportunity to consult. The Secretary of State outlined dozens of meetings, and he has had the chance to consult and listen to victims, their representatives and local Northern Irish politicians. That is ample opportunity to win the people over to the Government's approach, yet nobody has been won over—no politician, no victim, no international partner, no one.

Immunity from prosecution for murder would work only if it had popular support in Northern Ireland. It does not. The Government have underestimated the strength of feeling among victims. I have been asked by some victims to put their views on the record. On 10 August 1996, John Molloy had nearly reached his home in north Belfast when he was confronted by a group of young men and women. John was Catholic. He was repeatedly stabbed in a frenzied attack and was left to bleed to death on the pavement. He was just 18 years old. John's still-grieving parents, Pat and Linda, want to know how offering his killers immunity will aid them in reconciliation? We are trying to heal divisions but this Bill is damaging.

Take the case of Cecil Caldwell, a 37-year-old construction worker who was travelling in a minibus from Omagh, where he and his colleagues had been repairing an Army base. A roadside bomb was detonated, killing eight of the 14 people on the bus. As the dead and dying lay on the road, their pay packets were stolen. A simple, dignified monument was erected at the site, and it is regularly vandalised. Cecil's wife, Jean, does not want this legislation. She has asked whether the Government have any idea of what victims have gone through. If the Bill is not an aid to victims such as her, what is the point?

Clearly, the Government are also conflicted. In the other place, amendments were introduced to stop Gerry Adams receiving compensation, following a Supreme Court ruling in 2020. We support the upholding of the Carltona principle and that amendment. However, there is a disconnect between the horror the Government feel at the idea of giving Gerry Adams compensation and the potential implication of the immunity clause we are debating. I want to explore that in a hypothetical.

Gerry Adams has, of course, always denied being a member of the IRA, but he is currently being sued in the High Court by victims of the IRA in a civil case.

Not only will this Bill halt any similar cases, but the immunity provisions remain open to Gerry Adams if he were ever to need them. Immunity is worth a lot more than compensation. In this hypothetical, should Gerry Adams seek to avail himself of immunity, nothing in this Bill could prevent it, and the people supporting the Bill would be the very first ones on their feet screaming for emergency measures to prevent it from happening.

Even if we choose to ignore the moral problems of this policy, there is also doubt about it on the Government's own terms. Members need not take my word for it, because this is the view that Sir Declan Morgan gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee last year. The House will know that Sir Declan has been named as the chief commissioner of the independent body. He said:

"The only group who will go for immunity are those who have been the subject of investigations, brought in for questioning and it looks like there is a viable case. It seems to me like that is a vanishingly small number of people."

Again, the question then arises of why you would put immunity in place for such a small number of people in the circumstances. You must be able to justify that. That presents a challenge."

I do not have reason to believe that Sir Declan's views on the number of people who will go for immunity have changed since his appointment.

Immunity cannot be justified when the rest of the Bill shuts processes down which have worked for some victims.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Peter Kyle: Shadow Minister, for the time being.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I was going to make that clear in my comments. I thank the shadow Secretary of State for what he is saying. I understand entirely what motivates my colleagues on the other side of the House who served in the armed forces; I had the honour of serving in the Ulster Defence Regiment. But here is the problem for me: for all those whom we are seeking to protect from prosecution, there are countless others who put on a uniform of the Crown, in the armed forces and in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and were murdered in cold blood by terrorists and whose families will not now have the opportunity of justice. I cannot look those people in the eye. Louie Johnston is one of my constituents, and the shadow Secretary of State referred to him. I recall having just been elected a Member of Parliament in 1997 and the news coming through about the murder of his father, Constable David Johnston, and of Constable John Graham in Lurgan. Louie was in my office recently and the current system is not delivering for him—we do need change. We need a system that can deliver, but surely it is the victims who should have the choice. Surely it should be down to the families to choose whether they want to pursue justice or information. When we deny them that route and we take away the access to justice, we diminish the prospect of achieving the second objective of this Bill, which is reconciliation.

Peter Kyle: The right hon. Member makes his point passionately, with great erudition and personal experience as the representative of the Lagan Valley. There is very little I can add to the insight that he has just given the House. We in this place have striven in recent years to give extra rights to victims. Indeed, the Victims and

Prisoners Bill is passing through the House—I believe it has just passed Committee stage. In England and Wales, we are passing legislation that gives more rights to victims. Only in Northern Ireland are we doing something that disempowers victims and puts in place a set of institutions that will make it immeasurably more difficult for victims to get the reconciliation that they so desperately deserve, so I have complete sympathy with the right hon. Member.

4.30 pm

Let me address an intervention from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who asked about the number of prosecutions currently under way regarding veterans and terrorists in the times of the troubles. To the best of my knowledge, two cases are outstanding and ongoing relating to veterans—soldier B and soldier F—but there are 32 case files currently with prosecutors in Northern Ireland relating to acts of terror. Those 32 cases are not being pushed forward because prosecutors lack the resources, which they have repeatedly asked Government for, to pursue those prosecutions. Those resources are not forthcoming, but there are a lot of cases that could be moved forward that we are not resourced to progress right now.

Ian Paisley: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for emphasising that point, because it highlights the folly of the decision taken by some people in this House to support this legislation because it will protect “our boys”. The fact of the matter is that the only ongoing cases that have any likely prospect of getting to trial are cases against “our boys”. None of the cases against terrorists will ever be able to get to court and, more importantly, the immunity provisions will exclude former security personnel from benefiting from them. Members should think again about why they are supporting those measures.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. These are very difficult issues and of course I understand why people want to speak in support of people who have served in our armed forces. I feel this intensely and strongly myself, coming from a family where one of my parents—my father—served in our armed forces.

I will come to the issue again later in my speech, but I will go into it in some detail now. The only recent case against a member of our armed forces is that of David Holden, a member of the Grenadier Guards, and it is worth reflecting on the judge’s summing up in that particular case. Paragraph 105 of the judgment says:

“Instead, according to his frankly incoherent evidence, he put his right hand on the pistol grip which somehow resulted in his finger slipping onto the trigger and doing so with the significant pressure required to fire the weapon. I do not believe that evidence. I conclude that it is a deliberately false account of what happened.”

Paragraph 120 says:

“To summarise the conclusions above I find that it is proved beyond a reasonable doubt that...the defendant lied repeatedly to the police.”

If this case had come to light after the Bill had passed, prosecution would not have been possible. I do not believe for a second that this case and the person responsible—David Holden—reflect the values that we expect from those who serve in our armed forces, and that the vast majority of people who serve in our armed forces expect from their fellow members.

After five years, the Bill provides a general amnesty for anyone and everyone, as the independent body will wind up. All other investigations, inquests and civil cases will be shut down. It is clear that the Government have chosen immunity to satisfy some on their own Benches. They say veterans face “a witch hunt” in Northern Ireland; that is the phrase used by the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis). I do not believe that that is the way that we should frame or explain the reconciliation challenge of Northern Ireland. The vast majority of our soldiers served with distinction in the most difficult of circumstances. There can be no equivalence drawn between their actions and those of terrorists, but that is precisely what this Bill does. Where standards were not upheld, it is important that there is accountability. There have been a total of six military personnel charged with offences related to the troubles, two of which cases are currently ongoing. What has changed since this Bill’s inception is that there has now been a conviction of the former Grenadier Guardsman, David Holden, for the manslaughter of Aidan McAnespie. We cannot ignore the fact that this Bill is designed to stop the outcome that the McAnespie family finally achieved.

I also wish to put it on the record that veterans are victims too. The IRA shot Private Tony Harrison five times in the back while he was sitting on the sofa at his fiancée’s home in east Belfast in 1991. His family have been clear that they do not want immunity for his killers. I would be a lot more sympathetic with the Government if their approach had been to try to secure justice for more, not fewer, people.

This Bill will affect the entire United Kingdom and our reputation abroad. The families of the 21 victims of the IRA Birmingham pub bombing have been clear that they do not want immunity to be on offer. In November, the chief constable of West Midlands police confirmed that files had been passed on to the Crown Prosecution Service. Immunity will be open to that suspect if this Bill passes before a decision is made. Voting down Lords amendment 44 could shut off justice for families who have waited 50 years, right at their moment of greatest hope. There is still time for the Government to pause and reconsider this approach, just as the Irish Government have formally requested. The 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement is the moment to reflect on the power of consensus. To pass this Bill with immunity would be to fly in the face of everything that we know about progress in Northern Ireland; it should not happen.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I do not intend to spend long on my feet, as I have made all the points that I would seek to make on this Bill at previous stages. It is also important that we get to hear as many voices as possible from Northern Ireland.

I will make just two points: first, that reconciliation is something that is achieved, not imposed; and, secondly, to hold fast the principle that, where there is a sufficiency of evidence and an independent prosecutor decides that it is in the public interest, a prosecution should be able to go ahead. That is why the SNP continues to oppose the Bill, notwithstanding the amendments that are on the table today. I echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) that, without that ability to pursue justice, reconciliation becomes less likely.

[Richard Thomson]

I appreciate very much the steps that the ministerial team—this iteration of it—have made in seeking to address the concerns that have been raised, but that fundamental point of principle about denying prosecutions, and therefore in our view justice, remains. That is why my party will support Lords amendment 44 this afternoon.

We also support Lords amendment 20. We think that Operation Kenova sets the gold standard for the investigative processes that should be carried out, and particularly the commitment by the Government to pursue all evidential opportunities. The Secretary of State has been keen to stress that he is offering great assurances on ECHR compliance. I have to say that we remain without the assurances that we need, and if Lords amendment 20 were to be put to the vote tonight, the SNP would certainly support it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We have seven Members who wish to speak. I will impose a seven-minute time limit to make sure that everybody gets in.

Gavin Robinson: I appreciate the brevity with which the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) spoke, and the fact that Members from all parties representing Northern Ireland will have the opportunity to speak. I thank the Secretary of State for at least engaging in the debate in a way that is constructive, non-combative and as compassionate as possible, as I believe he has this afternoon. That has been markedly absent from some previous debates on the Bill that were not led by him.

The Secretary of State was right that different victims have different approaches. Victims are frustrated with the continuous obnoxious attitude that it is information that they need. For some that is undoubtedly true, but many others know exactly who perpetrated acts of violence against their family. They know exactly which neighbours in their community are responsible for taking the lives of their loved ones. It is not an answer that they seek; it is justice.

I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for accepting many of the amendments that we tabled last year. He mentioned the repeal of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 provisions, and wrongly credited one of his colleagues; that was an amendment tabled by my colleagues and me. The increase in fines is also beneficial to the Bill. The ability to revoke immunity should somebody obtain it through deception, deceit and lies is good—that provision was tabled in the House of Commons. The Government committed to deliver it in the House of Lords, and we are grateful that they did so. The Government also made a commitment on the amendment to clause 21(4) that we tabled in the Commons, and they delivered on it in the Lords.

All those amendments are beneficial, but none of them removes the irredeemable quality of the Bill. I have heard people, particularly in the other place, describe our position as populist, and refer, as the Secretary of State did, to previous efforts. Let me be clear: colleagues who predate my time in this House—colleagues in my party and in other parties represented here—stood against on-the-run legislation as something that was immoral under the Labour Government, and

actively opposed the Conservative Government when it was shown that they had been providing letters of comfort to terrorists. We did so because the Government's position was immoral.

Today, we say that the Bill is irredeemable not because we are populist on this issue, but because we are principled on it. The quest for justice, be it from last week, last year or 50 years ago, is as important for those affected by the vagaries of terrorism today as it was at the time of their loss. We do not believe that the Government have gone far enough on the provisions regarding the glorification of terrorism. The Bill is about bringing communities together and resolving the issues of the past, not absolving individuals of their crimes and ignoring the memory and hurt of victims.

As I mentioned, I was pleased that the Government resolved the compensation issue related to the Adams case. I am sorry to say that, although they have taken steps to consider some of the aspects of investigations that touch on criminality, and have moved some way in their position in response to Lords amendment 20, for us they have not moved far enough. Whether the Bill and the Government's actions are compatible with their obligations under the European convention on human rights will ultimately be a matter for the courts, but it does not pass our smell test for what we believe is righteous or just.

That is why we will vote against the Government when it comes to Lords amendment 44. We will vote against the ability to offer immunity to terrorists and to ensure that they never face justice for their crimes, and subsequently to give them the ability to talk openly and freely about their exploits, as those who have already been convicted do. We do not need a crystal ball to guess that people who are unencumbered by the justice system will have the freedom not only to share their experience, but to torment their victims and their victims' loved ones further. That is the true reality of what will happen, because glorification of terrorism has not been satisfactorily addressed in the Government's amendments.

4.45 pm

The Government continually chide Northern Ireland parties for not reaching agreement on issues that have plagued our society for decades, yet in 2016 we had agreement on Stormont House arrangements. That was not easy. It was fraught with difficulty and there were many compromises by all parties contained within those proposals. Yet it was an agreement that we reached and that the Government disregarded. Seven years later, we are still struggling to comprehend and understand the approach that the Government are taking.

For the victims in my community and the victims throughout Northern Ireland, who know exactly what happened but want the Government to stand with them in their pursuit of the rule of law and of consequences for criminal acts and for removing life, this Bill and these amendments do not go far enough to satisfy their very human and very just quest, in which we continue to support them.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Unlike some of the people who have been involved in this debate more recently, who have left the Chamber of course, we care about the victims and we want to put the victims at the heart of all this.

I have been working on this issue for about 20 years. I know many of those victims. They are not people who want to live in the past; they are people who want a better future. But unless we deal with this issue, they will never be able to have the reconciled future that they crave. The Bill is a licence for impunity and a signal to other countries that they can murder their own citizens and get away with it, but mostly it is legislation written in very dark corners of the British establishment to ensure that light is not shone into those corners.

The Secretary of State tells us he has had a lot of meetings and I am sure he has. He has met victims' groups, human rights groups, the United States Administration and European politicians, and he has met all of us. I would love to know whether he came away from any one of those meetings with the impression that people actually wanted this Bill. As the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) said, we do have an agreement: not only are we agreed that we are opposed to the Bill, but we are agreed that Stormont House is the way to carry out this process. To pretend that we have all been fighting over this issue for the last seven or eight years is just nonsense.

Moreover, the pretence that the Bill is about allowing people to get to the truth is quite easily debunked. I remember the Bloody Sunday inquiry. The soldiers were offered immunity within that inquiry and they lied through their teeth; if hon. Members do not believe me, they should read the Saville report. One after another, they lied through their teeth. The notion that, if we give people immunity, they will all of a sudden come and tell us all they know is just not practical or realistic. I do not believe victims will engage in that process.

I also want to say something about the nonsense that we have all these vexatious prosecutions. Nobody has ever pointed one out to me. There are no vexatious prosecutions. I would love someone to tell me exactly how many British soldiers served time as a result of what they did in Northern Ireland. It would not take very long to count them.

We are disappointed that Lords amendment 20 is being opposed by the Government. Operation Kenova, run by Jon Boutcher, has been lauded around the world and is internationally respected as a good approach to dealing with these issues. It has family approval. Families are bought into the investigation and the outcomes they desire. It proves the point that, if we want to get to the truth, we have to investigate. Time after time, whether it is the Government or paramilitary organisations, they have proven to us that they will not give the truth just because we ask nicely.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: To support the hon. Member's point about the work of Jon Boutcher and his team in Op Kenova, he will be aware that, as a result of their rigorous investigative process, a number of files have now been passed to the Public Prosecution Service, including—I am careful about what I say here, Mr Deputy Speaker—potential prosecutions against members of illegal, proscribed terrorist organisations, yet we have had no outcome to that process from the PPS. Given that this legislation is coming down the road, one wonders why there does not appear to be sufficient progress being made in following through on the work of Jon Boutcher's team and moving on those potential prosecutions.

Colum Eastwood: The right hon. Member is absolutely right. The families involved—we do have to be careful—in those investigations are largely very happy about the way in which Jon Boutcher's team have dealt with them. But, of course, some people—a lot of people—do not want the truth to get out: people in the British Government, people in paramilitary organisations, and some people who were in both of those things at the same time. They do not want the truth to come out because they are very worried that the glorified version of their history actually turns out to be a dirty little war.

Stephen McConomy was 11 years old when he was shot in the back of the head at very close range by a British soldier firing a plastic bullet in Derry in 1982. His brother Emmet, who has been fighting for justice ever since, says that the “real winners” of this legislation are the perpetrators of violence, and he is absolutely right. Some of the files in Stephen's case will not be opened until 2071, almost 100 years after Stephen's murder.

James Miller, whose grandfather David Miller was killed by the IRA's horrific bomb in Claudy in 1972, said:

“I describe it as the family having a sore, and that sore is there all the time—it's open and we just want that sore to heal.”

James went on:

“They are just closing the whole process down...for a reason.... A lot of stuff may come out that will make the government look bad.”

That is what this is about. I have been dealing with this for 20 years. Although we work tirelessly on this—lots of people did in political parties in Northern Ireland—I have always believed that the dark forces within the state will do all they can to prevent the full truth of what happened from coming out. Some people say that they oppose the Bill because it creates a moral equivalence between the British Army and paramilitary organisations. That is not why I oppose it. I oppose it because it benefits murderers, whether or not they were wearing a uniform. That is a fairly simple principle to stand by.

What we are talking about here is much more important than has been mentioned. We are talking about how we can build a future together—a reconciled future for our people. Some of my colleagues here want that to be within the United Kingdom; I want it to be within a new united Ireland. But I know that, to get to that place, we cannot keep glorifying the ugliness and horribleness of the past.

Whatever the future brings, we still have to come together as a community, but the Bill gives cover to those who are putting Ulster Volunteer Force flags up lampposts or singing “Up the ‘Ra” in pubs. I appeal to anybody who thinks that that is a good way to bring society back together again to talk to some of the victims I speak to regularly, many of whom I know very well. All those things hurt them. Although the rest of us have been allowed to move on and build a life as a result of the peace process, they are still stuck, and not because they want to be. They are more future-focused than anybody I have ever met, because they do not want their grandchildren to stay stuck having to deal with the mess that they have been left.

I wish that we did not have to be in this Chamber. I am glad that the Labour party has committed to repealing the Bill once it is law but, in reality, between

[Colum Eastwood]

now and the new Labour Government, a lot of people could have little letters that they can bandy about because they will have got away with destroying lives and families, and this British Government are giving them a blank cheque to do it.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood). I want to speak in favour of the Lords amendments, particularly amendment 44, relating to immunity.

Towns and villages in St Helens—like those in your constituency, Mr Deputy Speaker—have strong and historic links to the Army, particularly the Cheshire and Lancashire Regiments. I have a significant, active and very supportive armed forces community locally, and I hope that veterans and their families would say in return that I have always respected, represented and worked hard for them. But I am also honest with them when we talk about the issues in this Bill or about Northern Ireland more generally, because there are not legions of veterans being paraded before the courts. There are no vexatious complaints. There is no witch hunt. It is a myth, and it is a dangerous and disingenuous one.

I want to be honest with the House and with myself too. I sometimes think we should just draw a line under this whole thing—that it would be the easiest thing to do—and then I realise how selfish of me that is. I say to myself, “How dare you be so selfish?” and I ask myself, “Easy for who?” I remind myself that I have no authority, politically, legally and, most of all, morally, to tell anybody to forget, to move on and to put it all behind them—none of us do. What I have learned is that, while legacy is spoken of as something historical, it is not just history; it is something lived by the victims and their families in the present, every day.

I have spoken before in this House of things that were done where I grew up in South Armagh, the place I love and am so proud to be from: Kingsmills and the Reaveys—too much and too many. There is the realisation for me that, even now, as Christy Moore sang in “North and South”,

“There is no feeling so alone

As when the one you’re hurting is your own.”

We can all point to those cases that are beyond tears because of their awfulness, their brutality and the sheer human cost, but it is those that we do not often recall and that are only remembered by those who knew and loved them that are affected by the Bill—like Martin Rowland, who was 26 when he was shot dead on 5 October 1979, his body left on the Quarter Road in Camlough. He is remembered by locals as a quiet, inoffensive fella. His family said at the time,

“He was an enemy to no man.”

No one ever got any answers about why he was murdered, never mind who killed him, although it is widely suspected that there was a strong element of collusion between loyalists and Crown forces. Martin’s sister and brothers are dead now. Does that mean he should be forgotten or that he does not deserve the truth?

I told my father, Pat, who knew Martin, that I intended to mention him, and he was pleased, but he—a lifelong Republican and former Sinn Féin councillor—said,

“there was also a UDR man from Bessbrook shot dead... that morning. It would be disrespectful to mention one neighbour without mentioning another.”

So I rang my friend Danny Kennedy, a former Minister and deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist party, who told me about George Hawthorne, a 37-year-old father of three who had left the UDR the year before and was murdered on his way to work as a forklift driver at the timber yard in Newry. His wife, sadly deceased, worked with my mother in the furniture shop in the village. They were quiet, civil people. Should that be forgotten or dismissed? I do not tell these tales together to be self-righteous or to tick the dreaded what-aboutery box. I tell them to illustrate that this stuff is complicated, it is personal, and it still affects us all, because it happened to all of us or to people we know and people we love.

When I take my kids to South Armagh now from St Helens, they take great joy in winding up their uncle and their granda as we travel from the airport in Belfast by cheering when they see a Union flag flying in some of my hon. Friends’ constituencies. You do not have to look very hard at this time of year—there is constant noise all the way down the motorway. They say, “Look, dad, there’s our flag. They’re welcoming us home,” because kids are great.

When we pop in for a cupán tae—a cup of tea—in McCooey’s in Newry, or I see my friend Michael O’Hare in Whitecross, the conversation often turns to Majella O’Hare and what a great girl she was. They talk about her as if she were here today—playing out the front, happy and without a care in the world, like my two—but she was 12 years old when she was shot by a soldier of the Parachute Regiment in 1976. In 2011, the Government apologised for her unjustifiable killing. That was welcome, but what is it worth if this Bill becomes law, and how can there be any justice or peace for her family when the files relating to her death have been closed until 2065? The O’Hare family—like almost every family, survivor and victims group—oppose the Bill. That speaks more about it than I ever could.

5 pm

When I was a cub doing my A-levels, I worked the late shift doing the taxi radios in Camlough. One night, after we finished, me and one of the aul-timers—one of the drivers—had a late drink in the Lough Inn. He started to talk about when the village had high walls and gates around the pubs, because it had been blown up so often, and about all the various altercations and disturbances, about the policemen and the soldiers, about the Gaelic Athletic Association members and the locals who had been shot or killed, and about Raymond McCreesh and the hunger strike. As little more than a schoolboy at the time—and as Richard Moore from Derry said on the telly recently—I thought he was talking about a film, or that it was like cowboys and Indians. I said to him, “It must have been dead exciting.” He gently put his glass down, looked me dead in the eye and said, “You’re lucky you weren’t about.” It was as simple as that.

I am lucky that I was not about then. But I am about now, and we are about now. We owe it to the people who were about then to ensure that they get to remember their loved ones and find out the truth about what happened to them, and have the justice and the peace that they deserve and that we, in this place of all places, should demand.

Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State said that immunity will be blocked if there is an ongoing process. Of course, in all likelihood, the only trials that will actually

take place—that are in process at the minute and could take place—are those against members or former members of the security services. No IRA alleged terrorists are about to face trial or are up for trial, and at present it is unlikely that they will be. Therefore, Government Members who think that, by supporting the Bill, they are supporting the security personnel and protecting them from prosecution are wildly mistaken.

Some republicans will not let this issue go. There have been a couple of comments tonight, from Members on both the Front Bench and the Back Benches, suggesting that no vexatious cases are ongoing. Actually, vindictive and vexatious cases are ongoing, and I want to put one before the House tonight. Colum Marks was lawfully shot dead by an RUC officer in an action justified by the police, the Army and those involved because he was about to murder and maim in Downpatrick. It is very unfortunate that that was the action that had to be taken.

The officer who took part in that operation has now faced three trials. He was most recently cleared by the Director of Public Prosecutions with the words that this was a lawful killing, not only in his self-defence but in the defence of the state and the people living in Downpatrick. Was that the end of it? No, there is now going to be another trial—another attempt to drag that officer, known as Officer B, before the courts. That is vindictive. That officer has long since retired. He has another family and is trying to live his life, yet this continues to hang over him. We have a certain shameful snake-oil salesman of a legal practitioner saying that he is going to take this person—this “RUC murderer”—back to court on behalf of the Marks family. That is vindictive and it is ongoing, and those matters do offend.

Colum Eastwood: Can I ask the hon. Gentleman to be very careful in his language? The last time that solicitors were named in this House, we ended up in a very bad and dangerous place. I would just ask him to be very careful about his language, because we can never go back to those days, and people in this House should not be giving licence for that.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Member for that, but he should be very clear that I did not actually mention solicitors. I said a legal practitioner, because they are not a solicitor. He wants to draw that out, as he has done by his comment, but he will now see that it is someone very specific. People will be able to look up the website of that person, who makes snake-oil sales in this case in that particular way, and it is wrong because such a person should recognise the outcome of the justice process.

In the Republic of Ireland there is no legacy equivalent. In the Republic of Ireland there is no equivalent for the right to access historical legal papers. There is no equivalent in the Republic of Ireland for ombudsman inquiries into Garda Síochána activity. In the Republic of Ireland there were requests by this state for 116 warrants for extradition to bring known terrorists back over the border to face prosecution in our courts, but only eight of those warrants were ever pursued and delivered on. More importantly, in the Republic of Ireland the possession of weapons in Northern Ireland is not regarded as a criminal offence and is not regarded as a terrorist offence. The possession of weapons in Northern Ireland, according to the Republic of Ireland, is a political offence, and people cannot face prosecution for a political offence.

I think Members can see some of the problems. The idea that we have a view from another state that all that is happening here should be dragged to court somewhere else by us on some sort of high moral ground is absolutely shameful. The Republic of Ireland has threatened His Majesty's Government to take them to court on this issue, and they should have a good, hard, long look at themselves, because if this issue of legacy is going to be resolved, it will have to be resolved by both the north and the south, as well as by the United Kingdom Government, properly looking at this issue and resolving it.

I would go so far as to say that the Republic of Ireland actually has a duty to address these issues. Do Members want to know how many murders have a cross-border element to them? Of the 3,700-odd terrorist offences, or the almost 3,700 dead, almost 600 have a cross-border element. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned his own personal circumstances and the cases involving his family, where the terrorists fled back over the border. That is where weapon hoards were stored, and where the Republic of Ireland gave sanctuary to those people who were involved in almost 600 murders—of Roman Catholics and Protestants—in Northern Ireland. Remember that there were more Roman Catholics murdered by the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland than there were Roman Catholics who were done to death by any other organisation, including the state. It is important to remember that the biggest group of people who get off the hook here is the Provisional IRA, and we should be guarding strongly against that.

I want to put on the record the comments of Senator Michael McDowell, the former Justice Minister of the Republic of Ireland. Once again, the Senator has made it clear that, in the Republic of Ireland—he wrote this in *The Irish Times*—

“the Irish Government of which I was a member took the decision that further investigation and prosecution by An Garda Síochána of such historic offences was no longer warranted or justified by reason of the greater interest in ending the Provisional campaign and all other political violence in Northern Ireland.”

Of the Irish Government, he concludes:

“And so, as far as this state was concerned, a line was drawn across the page of historic Provisional IRA criminality in Northern Ireland.”

If Members want to look for immunity from justice, look no further than 60 or 70 miles from where I live, which is across the border in the Republic of Ireland, where they granted immunity.

Of course, in relation to the Government here, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made comments about the on-the-run letters and about the decision by those who support the Belfast agreement to let the prisoners out of jail, and all of those things turned justice on its head. I think we have to recognise that this is not going to be an easy fix. But I can tell you one thing, Mr Deputy Speaker: what the Government are proposing today will not satisfy people on the Government Back Benches and it will not satisfy the victims in Northern Ireland. I would appeal to the Government to think again.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I will start by putting on the record my appreciation for the efforts of the Government, in particular Lord Caine, over the past year, in trying to improve the Bill with the amendments that were tabled in the House of Lords. It is, however, a

[Stephen Farry]

matter of regret—this will probably be a common theme across the Northern Ireland parties—that the Bill remains fundamentally flawed and not fit for purpose. Even at this eleventh hour, it is important that we say to the Government—that is what we hear from most stakeholders in Northern Ireland—that they should withdraw the Bill. It is not wanted, and it is not going to work and achieve what the Government think it will. Even at this stage, I urge a rethink. Do not take the Bill over the line and end up with a situation where we have something that will not deliver for anybody in that regard.

The Bill is not fit for purpose in the sense that it is not compliant with article 2 of the European convention on human rights. It does not have the support and confidence of stakeholders in Northern Ireland, whether that is the political parties—it is rare that we are so united, but we are on this point—the different victims groups, whose voices are particularly to be listened to; or the views of virtually every independent expert, such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which has a statutory role to give its views on such matters. They are all deeply concerned about the Bill and do not believe it will deliver or that it is legally competent.

I want particularly to focus on immunity, as that is one of the core areas of debate, and on the Government amendments, which I will shortly be opposing. The concept of immunity is seen as being fundamentally unjust by victims. Most victims appreciate that they are unlikely to see their day in court and a successful prosecution of the culprits who took away their loved ones, but they do not want to have that hope extinguished. As long as there is hope, people are clinging on to that. That is the real fear, and it is on that pivot that people become particularly emotional. That is at the heart of the comments that the Government are hearing from victims across the political spectrum.

The concept of immunity is also seen as a *de facto* amnesty, which has its own implications. First, it goes against emerging caselaw at European level, but it also carries certain connotations that will weigh heavy on certain people. Let me frame this for a moment from the point of view of some people who have worked in the police, the Army and other security services over the past decades. I want to start by reflecting that the vast majority of people who served did so with honour, and with the intent of upholding the rule of law and protecting the entire community. There is a clear distinction between them and the terrorist, in that the former did not set out to do harm but rather to protect the community, whereas every day the mission of the terrorist was to do harm. That is a clear distinction.

The concept of immunity, particularly for those who were based in Northern Ireland, almost reinvents the whole nature of their service. They say, “We don’t need immunity because we didn’t do anything wrong. Why are we given this abstract concept? Where our colleagues did wrong, they should face justice because that is the rule of law, and the justice system is among many other values that they were serving.” This process turns that entirely on its head, and almost puts them at the level of the terrorist. That said, justice should be blind, and where there are issues to be followed through, whatever legacy mechanisms we have in place, that should proceed without favour to anyone.

That brings me to a wider point about the genesis of the Bill, and this is a fundamental reason why there is this lack of confidence. The Government cannot escape from the rationale set out at the beginning and the need to protect certain elements who are clamouring for protection against vexatious claims, who I think were generally more GB-based than in Northern Ireland as such. We have the comments from the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis) when he was introducing the Bill and its pretext of giving protection to veterans who had served, in particular in the Army. Again, I stress that many other veterans do not want that protection.

5.15 pm

I am also concerned that the concept of immunity will not work, because we may find that few people apply for it, whether that is perpetrators seeking it or families having the confidence to come forward and bring cases to the commission. We need to reflect heavily on the concept of immunity. It has poisoned the approach to legacy, above and beyond the broader concern around article 2 compliance.

I stress again to the Government that, even at the eleventh hour, they should please rethink this Bill. There is a different way of doing it. We have not had a chance to consider properly the Stormont House agreement. The Northern Ireland Office did a consultation on it many years ago, and there was a basis for taking it forward, but the Government did a handbrake turn back in 2021 and looked at doing things entirely differently. I ask please that that process be given a chance. It holds the confidence not just of the political parties, but of the vast majority of the victims in Northern Ireland.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I rise to oppose this legislation in the strongest possible terms and to speak on behalf of the many innocent victims of terror in Northern Ireland, for whom this Bill has caused great distress and anguish. As I was leaving Northern Ireland this morning, the real-life story—it has already been mentioned in this place—of Louie Johnston was booming out on the radio. Louie was the son of a police officer murdered in my constituency. Louie was seven years old when his daddy was killed by IRA criminals because he wore the uniform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I encourage all Members to google Louie’s news article today and see the picture of him walking behind his dad’s coffin, a broken child. It was one of the most powerful pictures of the troubles. His dad, David Johnston, along with his RUC colleague, John Graham, were shot dead while on foot patrol in Lurgan. When he was told of his father’s death, he said, “Why would anyone want to kill my daddy?” He asked today for us to show some empathy, and he asked whether we believe it is morally right to take away his avenue to justice. It is on those comments that I make my remarks today.

It speaks volumes that not one victims’ group endorses this legislation. It is a sad reflection that this Government today choose to ignore Louie’s call and the calls of the many who represent innocent victims. This House, I trust, will forgive me for labouring the point about the hurt and the lasting legacy of the troubles on their lives. They have physical and emotional scars that will never heal, and those are made worse when people sound out or imply that it is time to move on and draw a line in the sand. They feel that is code for, “Forget about the victims, and forget about what happened.”

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend also think that we are talking not just about the legacy of the past and the hurt that that has caused, but about the impression left on young people today when they see that the state will grant immunity to people who have carried out some of the most horrible crimes, deeming that to be okay? In other words, someone can commit a crime, and if the political circumstances or whatever are right, there can be no consequences. Does that not eat at the very moral core of society?

Carla Lockhart: My right hon. Friend makes such a valid point on the impact the Bill will have on young people and their outlook on these issues. It is unacceptable and does not sit well in our society. Victims in Northern Ireland have already suffered and have to endure the fact that, because of the Belfast agreement, they can meet the perpetrators of some of these acts walking down the street or in the supermarket. They live with the continual flaunting and glorification of terrorism by someone who claims to be the First Minister for all and who has said there was no alternative. Indeed, the Member for Belfast North (John Finucane)—a Member of this House—recently showed his true colours in that regard as well. In the face of all the sickening actions, the taunting and the re-traumatising, I applaud the fortitude, dedication and determination of innocent victims to fight for such basic concepts as truth and justice. Sadly, those concepts are lost in the Bill.

The other place has sought to make this imperfect Bill less imperfect. I welcome some of the amendments. It is of deep regret that the Government propose to disagree with Lords amendment 44 in relation to immunity. The amendment would have removed from the Bill provisions allowing immunity from trouble-related crimes, which the Democratic Unionist party, and I believe the majority of people in Northern Ireland, support. In my discussions about the Bill with victims' groups in recent months, I have heard how immunity is what causes the most grievous hurt. Why? It is because it closes the door, erodes victims' access to redress and draws a moral—or should I say immoral—equivalence between blood-thirsty terrorists and public servants. Quite frankly, it weakens our entire criminal justice system throughout the world. I find it most remarkable that the Government should endorse such a move. The decision is repugnant not just for its perversion of justice, which we in the UK claim to value, but for the trauma and hurt that it inflicts on innocent victims.

I turn to the motion to disagree with Lords amendment 20. Every family deserves the ultimate hope of a full and fair investigation into the circumstances of a loved one's death. Such an investigation should be subject to the highest standards. The amendment would have established minimum criminal justice standards for a review along the lines of Operation Kenova following expressed fears of watered-down investigations. The commissioner should be under a duty to ensure that an article 2-compliant investigation either has been carried out or will be carried out. Is that too much to ask? It is difficult to come to any conclusions other than that the commissioner for investigations will be able only to comply with obligations imposed by the Human Rights Act 1998 to the extent dictated by the authority and resources granted to that office holder under the Act. The restriction of criminal enforcement actions is such that even if the independent commission for reconciliation

and information recovery refers all conduct to the Public Prosecution Service, much of that material will be admissible. Compliance with fundamental rights needs to be a cross-cutting safeguard in how troubles cases are dealt with. Irrespective of whether an investigation is at least partially the granting of immunity to perpetrators, its value is diminished.

The Government, by erasing the other place's amendment to the Bill, simply fail to acknowledge the rights of victims in terms of the standards of an investigation. However, that is only one part of the jigsaw. For victims, it is equally important to have their day in court and the prospect of conviction and custodial sentences to grant some form of closure as it is to have a proper investigation. The Bill fails in those respects.

The Government's objection to Lords amendment 20 will remove the requirement for a Kenova-standard investigation from the Bill. The Government, through their amendment, seem to want to provide an assurance, irrespective of whether a commissioner decides a criminal investigation is to take place as part of a review, that all the circumstances of a death, including potential offences, will be looked into. I am sorry, but there would appear to be a huge gulf between carrying out a historical investigation that gathers and explores as much information as possible in relation to a death or harmful conduct and the Government's suggestion simply to look into that.

We oppose the Bill because we believe in justice and in holding fast to hope for those who paid the biggest price for our troubled past. The Bill will lead not to reconciliation but to greater distress, distrust and disillusionment among victims that they matter to this Government. We stand with those victims.

Jim Shannon: I am pleased to speak in this debate and to put forward the desires of the people of Strangford in this place, and also my own family. *[Interruption.]* Sometimes when you are at the end your emotions get you, and they have got me today. Fifty years ago, my cousin was murdered. He was the light of our family, a good man with a good heart who loved his family and his community. My aunt was robbed of the opportunity to see him have the joy of his own children and grandchildren, and I was robbed of my childhood hero and friend. *[Interruption.]* The perpetrators were never brought to justice—all three of them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I invite the hon. Gentleman to have a glass of water and compose himself. When you are ready, Mr Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Kenneth took us shooting when we were small. I remember him well; he instilled a love of the countryside in me. I named my first son Jamie Kenneth after him. Jamie is 35 years old, and he has that same love of the countryside. My cousin Kenneth lives through him. Three people were responsible for his murder. Two of them are dead. One of them was never made accountable. Where is the justice for Kenneth and our family?

Where is the justice for Lexie Cummings, murdered by the IRA in Strabane? His murderer escaped across the border, a prominent member of Sinn Féin and a former mayor of a council in Donegal. Where is the justice for the four UDR men murdered in Ballydugan—John Birch, Michael Adams, Steven Smart and John Bradley? I knew three of those boys—lovely young boys who

[Jim Shannon]

loved their country and their families. Where is the justice for those four young men? Where is the justice for Louis Robinson, a detective kidnapped at the border at South Armagh, tortured, beaten up and murdered by the IRA? No one was ever made accountable. There is no justice for Louis Robinson and his family.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): My hon. Friend has just highlighted a number of individuals who potentially will never see justice. If the Bill goes through, the perpetrators can go out and glorify some of the actions they have been involved in. Unfortunately, this is a process of rewriting history.

Jim Shannon: When I think of my cousin Kenneth Smyth, I think of Daniel McCormick, a Roman Catholic. They were best friends and both served in the UDR, but Daniel left. He was murdered by the IRA. No one was ever made accountable. Stuart Montgomery was a young boy of 18 years old who joined the RUC. His daddy was so proud of him. He went to Pomeroy—three weeks in uniform—and was blown up by the IRA. No one was ever made accountable. Where is the justice for Stuart Montgomery and his family?

Where is the justice for Winston Donnell, the first UDR man murdered by the IRA up in County Tyrone? No one was ever made accountable. They left his family with broken hearts, bereft of a son. Where is the justice for Raymond McCord? Every one of us here knows Raymond. He will be watching on TV. His son was murdered by the UVF. Where is the justice for Raymond McCord? I mention all those people because I think it is important that we have them on the record. Senator Barnhill was murdered by the IRA in County Tyrone on the same day as my cousin Kenneth and Daniel McCormick. Again, where is the justice? I have named some of the people involved over the period of time. Those investigations and that quest for justice—we do not see it.

5.30 pm

I understand the Government's aim. I see how almost all the cases, investigations and money spent appear to be on less than 10% of the murders, while the 90% are left as a part of history. My party grasps well the rationale behind that. The DUP has been clear and remains clear that the vilification of our serving soldiers, UDR members and RUC members must stop. The rewriting of history to make it acceptable for the IRA and UVF to carry out their atrocities must end. There was never and will never be an excuse for the slaughter and maiming of anyone who wore a uniform.

The DUP is clear on that, but we are also clear on the fact that for the families—all the families I have named and all the families everyone else here has named—their loss means so much. It is for that reason that I cannot accept the Government's proposals and that my party is unable to accept them either. The DUP MPs and all the MPs from Northern Ireland voted against the Bill in the House of Commons. In the Lords, our Members tabled amendments that were not selected. We do so not to be obstructive, but to fully honour the commitments we gave to the innocents—those who seek justice and those whom we have all spoken of. Our hearts break when we think of them.

For this reason, we cannot vote with the Government in their refusal of Lords amendment 20, which seeks to require that the reviews carried out by the new body, the independent commission for reconciliation and information recovery, should be thorough, of an adequate standard, and in line with our international obligations. It is hard to see how such a prospect could be argued against, yet the Government are not accepting that. My party leader has been very clear and I reiterate it again: only criminal trials can bring murderers to justice. Every one of us wants justice: justice for our people, justice for all those who have lost their lives. That is why we strongly oppose an amnesty and have voted against it at every turn. Lords amendment 44 should be accepted by the Government. Without it, the Bill fails to deliver justice, the very justice we yearn for. The DUP still believes that all innocent victims—all innocent victims—of the troubles have the right to justice.

DUP Members find themselves in a situation where we agree that the politicisation of the troubles must end, but we cannot see that the Bill will achieve that in the form it is in. Therefore, with a heavy heart, we cannot stand with the Government on the Bill. I ask that those who vote do so understanding the reasoning behind our stance. We do we oppose the ideal—we welcome the end to the victimisation of soldiers—but that must be done through proper handling, which this Bill is not. This is sweeping legislation that changes the definition of justice—the very justice that all of us in this House uphold when we swear our oath: justice for our people, justice for our families. The Bill prevents families having any hope of justice should investigations cease to be political and begin to be about hard facts alone.

We oppose what the Government are putting forward today. I do it for all the victims I have named, I do it for my constituents and I do it because it is the right thing to do. I am really, really disappointed—I really am. I am very sore and my people are sore about where we are. I think the Secretary of State grasps some of the pain we have—I think he does—but the Bill hurts us deeply, and I must register that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: With the leave of the House, I would like to answer a few of the points that have been raised.

First, I recognise the passion, the emotion and the very personal nature of many of the contributions today, including those from the hon. Members for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), for North Down (Stephen Farry), for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As I said, I can never put myself in the shoes of the hon. Member for Strangford and nor would I want to. The question was raised by his party leader, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) about the choice in the Bill between justice and information. I believe the Bill delivers opportunities for both. The ICRIR allows for criminal investigations to take place, but it also allows for information to be gathered for those families who would be happy with just that. One reason for rejecting the amendment about the Kenova-style investigations is the fact that it rules out allowing for the full remit of reviews through to criminal investigations, which I would like to see.

I thank the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for acknowledging that the Bill has been improved on its journey. The one thing of which I have no doubt is the principled position taken by him and by his party on the provisions relating to amnesties and immunities. That position has been well stated and has been constant throughout my political lifetime and before, and I completely understand it.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) talked about Stormont House. I am not quite as sure as he was that the search for consensus on this subject came together in Stormont House; in fact, I think that that consensus has eluded successive Governments. I seem to recall that one political party in Northern Ireland did not agree with Stormont House from the very start, namely the Ulster Unionists, and I am not entirely sure that all political parties on the Unionist side do so now. There may have been consensus on the principle of the idea, but I am led to believe that when it came to trying to deliver on the agreement, the First and Deputy First Ministers came to what was then Her Majesty's Government and said, "This is all too difficult to do in Stormont: please do it in Westminster."

Colum Eastwood: That is an interesting take on the matter, given what I remember happening at the time. Yes, the Ulster Unionists had some reservations about the agreement, but all the other parties supported it. It was up to the British Government, along with the Irish Government, to implement it, and it is only because the British Government went off on their own—without the Irish Government—and undermined it by ignoring rather than implementing it that the Bill has ended up in this place. In my strong view, this is where the British Government have always wanted to take things.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman, with the greatest respect, that he has his particular view of what happened following Stormont House, but I believe that history says something a bit different.

Herein lies the issue for us all. It is a question for the party opposite, and it is a question for all Members in this place: if not the Bill, then what? There is no agreement following Stormont House. Families have gone for years, for decades, without answers to what happened to their loved ones, and I believe that the Bill is the right way forward at this point. History has been revisited in many different ways when it comes to how agreements might have worked in the past.

Stephen Farry: May I just point out that "New Decade, New Approach", which was authored by this Government through one of the Secretary of State's predecessors, contains a specific commitment to implementing Stormont House? As recently as January 2020, it was the explicit policy of the Government to deliver it. It is there, in black and white, in "New Decade, New Approach".

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is right, but that became unworkable and impractical because the political consensus simply was not there when it came to legislation.

The hon. Member for Foyle asked what would happen if someone lied to the ICRIR. Well, that person simply would not be granted immunity: he would lose that immunity as a result of the new offence in the Bill.

Colum Eastwood: Can the Secretary of State think of any time in history when a murderer lied?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concise argument, but I can also think of no part of Northern Ireland's history when we have managed to reach a point at which there is consensus on this issue. I believe that the ICRIR will have the ability both to carry out criminal investigations and to conduct reviews and get information for families, and that must be a step forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) asked about article 2. Let me make it clear that the Government amendments go no further than existing obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998, and that, specifically, they do not alter the material or temporal scope of those obligations as they apply to troubles-related cases, including those that he mentioned. I think I answered that in a slightly more concise way when he picked it up.

The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) mentioned a host of things, but I believe he misrepresented the Bill and a number of things in it. What he said about the perjury aspects of the Bill was straightforwardly wrong. Perjury provisions exist in the Bill. Anyone providing an account to the ICRIR when applying for immunity will have to provide an account that is truthful and if they do not, they will not get immunity.

May I start to conclude my comments by thanking my civil servants for all the work that they have done on the Bill, especially over the course of the past year. I would like to think that everybody recognises the huge amount of work that has gone on.

Ian Paisley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid I do not have the time.

I wish to close by reiterating that the Government have sought to make a realistic assessment of what we can best deliver for families, over a quarter of a century after the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and nearly 30 years since the first ceasefires and well over 50 years since the troubles began. I recognise that this is challenging for all those involved, but I am prepared to make this difficult decision to try and help Northern Ireland to take a step forward towards reconciliation. This Government will give people the accountability, acknowledgment and information they require to allow Northern Ireland to become a more reconciled society.

It is a matter for regret, though, that the Labour party would rather see veterans and victims treated the same as terrorists. During the Bill's Second Reading, in May 2022, the hon. Member for Hove said:

"I have been very clear: I want to make sure that the rights of victims and veterans are equal to the rights of terrorists and people who committed crime in the era of the troubles".—[*Official Report*, 24 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 193.]

Peter Kyle: The Secretary of State is quoting from a response to an intervention from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), where I stated categorically, in the full extent of the reply, that the Bill gives more rights to terrorists than victims. That is what the full response says. What he read is out of context.

[Peter Kyle]

I would also quickly say to the Secretary of State that I did not mention perjury in my opening speech. Could he address the issues that I did raise in my speech—not the ones I did not?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think I might have struck a nerve there. Today the Government will demonstrate that they are committed to getting victims—veterans are victims, as the hon. Gentleman says—the families and survivors answers, when Labour simply—

5.42 pm

Two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F), That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 20.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 20 disagreed to.

Clause 18

IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 44.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 200.

Division No. 308]

[5.44 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Britcliffe, Sara
Afriyie, Adam	Browne, Anthony
Aldous, Peter	Bruce, Fiona
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Buchan, Felicity
Anderson, Lee	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Anderson, Stuart	Burghart, Alex
Andrew, rh Stuart	Butler, Rob
Ansell, Caroline	Cairns, rh Alun
Argar, rh Edward	Carter, Andy
Atkins, Victoria	Cartledge, James
Bacon, Mr Richard	Cash, Sir William
Bailey, Shaun	Cates, Miriam
Baillie, Siobhan	Caulfield, Maria
Baker, Duncan	Chalk, rh Alex
Baker, Mr Steve	Chishti, Rehman
Baldwin, Harriett	Chope, Sir Christopher
Baron, Mr John	Churchill, Jo
Baynes, Simon	Clark, rh Greg
Benton, Scott	Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Clarkson, Chris
Blackman, Bob	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Bone, Mr Peter (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Colburn, Elliot
Bowie, Andrew	Collins, Damian
Brady, Sir Graham	Costa, Alberto
Braverman, rh Suella	Coutinho, Claire
Brereton, Jack	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bridgen, Andrew	Crosbie, Virginia
Bristow, Paul	Crouch, Tracey
	Daly, James
	Davies, rh David T. C.

Davies, Gareth (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims

Davies, Philip

Davis, rh Mr David

Davison, Dehenna

Dinenage, Dame Caroline

Dines, Miss Sarah

Docherty, Leo

Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Double, Steve

Doyle-Price, Jackie

Drax, Richard

Drummond, Mrs Flick

Duguid, David

Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain

Eastwood, Mark

Edwards, Ruth

Ellis, rh Sir Michael

Elphicke, Mrs Natalie

Eustice, rh George

Evans, Dr Luke

Evennett, rh Sir David

Everitt, Ben

Fabricant, Michael

Farris, Laura

Fell, Simon

Firth, Anna

Fletcher, Katherine

Fletcher, Mark

Fletcher, Nick

Ford, rh Vicky

Fox, rh Dr Liam

Francois, rh Mr Mark

Frazer, rh Lucy

Freeman, George

Freer, Mike

French, Mr Louie

Fuller, Richard

Fysh, Mr Marcus

Garnier, Mark

Ghani, Ms Nusrat

Gibb, rh Nick

Gibson, Peter

Gideon, Jo

Glen, rh John

Goodwill, rh Sir Robert

Gove, rh Michael

Graham, Richard

Gray, James

Grayling, rh Chris

Green, Chris

Green, rh Damian

Griffith, Andrew

Grundy, James

Gullis, Jonathan

Halfon, rh Robert

Hall, Luke

Harper, rh Mr Mark

Harris, Rebecca

Harrison, Trudy

Hart, Sally-Ann

Hart, rh Simon

Hayes, rh Sir John

Heald, rh Sir Oliver

Heaton-Harris, rh Chris

Henderson, Gordon

Henry, Darren

Higginbotham, Antony

Hinds, rh Damian

Holden, Mr Richard

Hollinrake, Kevin

Hollobone, Mr Philip

Holloway, Adam

Holmes, Paul

Howell, John

Howell, Paul

Hudson, Dr Neil

Hughes, Eddie

Hunt, Jane

Hunt, Tom

Jack, rh Mr Alister

Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil

Jenkinson, Mark

Jenrick, rh Robert

Johnson, Dr Caroline

Johnson, Gareth

Johnston, David

Jones, Andrew

Jones, rh Mr David

Jones, Fay

Jones, rh Mr Marcus

Jupp, Simon

Kawczynski, Daniel

Kearns, Alicia

Keegan, rh Gillian

Knight, rh Sir Greg

Kniveton, Kate

Kruger, Danny

Lamont, John

Largan, Robert

Latham, Mrs Pauline

Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea

Levy, Ian

Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Sir Brandon

Lewis, rh Sir Julian

Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian

Loder, Chris

Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Longhi, Marco

Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Lopresti, Jack

Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim

Mackinlay, Craig

Mackrory, Cherilyn

Maclean, Rachel

Mak, Alan

Malthouse, rh Kit

Mangnall, Anthony

Mann, Scott

Mayhew, Jerome

Maynard, Paul

McCartney, Jason

McCartney, Karl

McPartland, rh Stephen

McVey, rh Esther

Menzies, Mark

Mercer, rh Johnny

Merriman, Huw

Metcalfe, Stephen

Millar, Robin

Miller, rh Dame Maria

Milling, rh Dame Amanda

Mills, Nigel

Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Robbie

Mordaunt, rh Penny

Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Shapps, rh Grant
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris

Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jacob Young and
Julie Marson

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Tahir
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris

Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon

Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dixon, Samantha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Doughty, Stephen
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glendon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Kane, Mike
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadbeater, Kim
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Lockhart, Carla
Long Bailey, Rebecca

Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Sarah
Paisley, Ian
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Gavin
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeter, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick

Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Gerald Jones and
Colleen Fletcher

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 44 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made to the words so restored to the Bill.

Lords amendments 1 to 19, 21 to 43, 45 to 118, 120 to 129 and 119 agreed to.

Government consequential amendment (a) made to Lords amendment 119.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I recently asked the Minister for Immigration what the cost to the taxpayer was of painting over murals featuring cartoons designed to welcome lone child refugees at an immigration centre. The Minister replied, saying that there was no cost. To me, this answer does not seem to be possible, unless overstretched workers were redeployed from far more pressing duties and the Minister himself brought the paint in from home. Can I seek your advice on how I can get clarity on the accuracy of the Minister's answer?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. The hon. Lady will be fully aware that all Members, including Ministers, are responsible for the words that they utter in this Chamber. The usual channels will have heard what she has had to say. If the Minister chooses to come to the House and make a comment or correct a statement then that is up to the Minister, but it is not a point of order for the Chair.

Environmental Protection

5.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move,

That the draft Environmental Civil Sanctions (England) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): With this it will be convenient to consider the following motion:

That the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.

Dr Coffey: The purpose of these instruments is to strengthen environmental civil sanctions, so that our environmental regulators can apply an unlimited penalty to companies that break the terms of their permits and do damage to the environment. We are also making it easier for such penalties to be applied rather than having to resort exclusively to taking polluters to court for fines to be applied.

Rightly, the Government care about the environment, as do the public. In January, we published our environmental improvement plan, which set out an ambitious five-year blueprint for action to make our country cleaner and greener, to restore nature and to improve the state of our environment. In April, we set out our comprehensive integrated plan for clean and plentiful water. Both plans demonstrated our ambition and the action that we would undertake to have a laser-like focus on cleaning up the environment, including enabling our regulators to enforce the law effectively and efficiently.

Let me turn to the enablers that we are debating today. First, the current provision for variable monetary penalties under the Environmental Civil Sanctions (England) Order 2010 is capped at £250,000. Possible penalties are supposed to be an effective deterrent to poor performance. Unfortunately, it seems that some operators may have priced in the fact that it can be cheaper to pay the current penalty than to fix the problem and tackle the pollution. Of course, people who breach their permits and pollute can be taken to court facing a criminal conviction and be faced with an unlimited fine and the prospect of going to prison. However, we know that such investigations and court cases can take years to accomplish such an outcome. Therefore, I am clear that we must provide a strong deterrent, particularly for large operators with significant turnover.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I very much welcome these Government measures. Last week, we on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee had an emergency session with Thames Water, Ofwat and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We received strong confirmation that the regulators and the Environment Agency now have the teeth that they need to hold polluting water companies to account with unlimited fines or by stopping dividends being paid out. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Conservative Government are the first Government to take clear and strong action, and that this is in strong contrast to some of the toxic rubbish that comes out especially from the Liberal Democrats, who, I notice, are not in the Chamber today? They seem to forget that, when they had a water Minister during the coalition, they did nothing on this.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I have two points to make. First, interventions should be interventions, not speeches. Secondly, there is a lot of chirruping going on. Even if I am the only person in the House who wants to hear what the Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State have to say, then I want to be able to hear.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about these measures. By voting for them today—of course, they also need to go through the Lords—we will give our regulators all the tools that they need and that they have asked for to tackle this situation. He is right that it is a bit of a surprise that the Liberal Democrats are absent, but there we go. We will be able to remind people that, when Parliament was voting for this legislation, the Liberal Democrats were nowhere to be seen.

Secondly, there is currently no provision under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 for variable monetary penalties. The majority of Environment Agency investigations are conducted under those regulations, and at the moment the Environment Agency is limited in its enforcement options to giving warnings, advice, guidance or enforcement undertakings, or indeed having to go the whole hog and undertake formal criminal prosecutions.

The secondary legislation that we are debating will introduce variable monetary penalties to the 2016 regulations, ensuring a comprehensive, clear, effective and proportionate deterrent within the environmental civil sanctions regime. Penalties will be based on the degree of environmental harm and culpability, as well as the size of the operator. They are calibrated to act as a proportionate deterrent and punishment, and both instruments will require the environmental regulators to update and publish guidance that sets out their methodology for determining the penalty levels.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Last year, Anglian Water used its storm overflows in Southend West at least 13 times, which resulted in diluted sewage water being pumped into our waters for at least 24 hours, which is simply unacceptable. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that today's measures, which I welcome, will mean that Anglian Water will face severe penalties if it breaks the rules again, and will she assure everyone in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea that we will finally have a real deterrent against it using those unacceptable practices?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right. By giving our regulators the tools that they have asked us for, we are taking action. Of course, the only reason we know about the storm overflows is the level of monitoring, which was pretty much completely absent before the Conservative party took power in 2010. It is critical that we use our tools effectively to ensure that people who have these permits are doing the right thing. The uncapped penalties will certainly be a deterrent.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Can the Secretary of State reassure us that any fines will be used to improve water infrastructure in the local area?

Dr Coffey: Indeed. I was planning to explain shortly how the penalties will be used. They will go into the new water restoration fund. It is my decision that that will be

localised to the region of the water company that it applies to—ideally as local as possible. It certainly will not go back to the water company to fix the problems that it was having.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I understand what the Government are trying to achieve, but as the Secretary of State points out, the Environment Agency could go through due process with the courts, and there is already the sanction of unlimited fines. What will she do to protect a farmer, for instance, from unreasonable, heavy-handed fines by the Environment Agency, particularly as it now has an incentive to fine because it will keep the money for its own projects?

Dr Coffey: On the farming laws related to water, we normally find that people are not trying to break the law deliberately, so it is about guidance and how we make the fixes, but we have to act and, where necessary—in severe or continuous cases—undertake a criminal investigation. That will always be a decision for the regulator—the Environment Agency, in this case. That is where an element of judgment can and should be applied, but ultimately we have to allow our regulator to use the full force of the powers available to it to clean our water and improve our environment.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What will be done to force the Environment Agency to do its duty? In the lower Avon, north of my constituency, flooding across the area is affecting farmland because the Environment Agency has refused to enforce the law and ensure that the blockage at the Knapp Mill waterworks is removed.

Dr Coffey: Clearly, my hon. Friend is an assiduous constituency MP in raising this issue during our discussion about how penalties can be applied. If he would like to write to me with more details, I could ask the new chief executive of the Environment Agency to investigate the matter further and respond to him directly.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. My constituents, almost by historical accident, have the privilege of paying two water bills rather than one—one to Anglian Water and another to Essex & Suffolk Water—for different aspects of their water usage. They have seen those bills increase considerably in the last couple of years. As well as fining water companies for getting it wrong, since she mentions the regulator, can she please put pressure on Ofwat to do everything it can to make sure that those increases are, first, fully justified and, secondly, as low as practically possible?

Dr Coffey: We are straying somewhat from the purpose of the statutory instruments that we are dealing with today, but I have that same situation whereby Anglian Water covers sewerage and Essex & Suffolk Water covers the supply of water. One critical element in the price review process that we have is that Ofwat goes through a mechanism of working through with water companies what they are allowed to invest in and, as a consequence, what the bill changes could be. We have a situation where bills go up with inflation—that has been part of the mechanism so far, and there is a price review process under way, but I have listened carefully to what my right hon. Friend said.

[Dr Coffey]

It has always been the case that Ofwat is there to ensure that the investment that is required in our waterways and our sewerage is made, to ensure that we get best value for money. It is important to note that these SIs cover what happens when we see water companies and other operators, having had that ability to invest, breach their permits. We want to make sure that the penalties are uncapped in order to act as an effective deterrent, as I have mentioned.

Hon. Members have asked how some of those penalties will be applied. I expect that, as now, the Environment Agency will use the guidelines for environmental offences, which are published by the independent Sentencing Council, to determine the level of all variable monetary penalties. Thinking particularly of some of the very small businesses covered by the environmental permitting regime, that will also include a number of safeguards to make sure that penalties are proportionate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the subject of penalties, one thing probably annoys most of us—it certainly annoys many of my constituents—is that whatever happens, the chief executive seems to get a massive dividend. When it comes to damages and penalties, is it possible that those dividends could be retrieved and used for the betterment of customers?

Dr Coffey: The water industry in Northern Ireland is not covered by the UK Government. It is a separate system, so with the greatest respect I think the hon. Gentleman will need to follow that up with the Northern Ireland Executive when they are reformed, which I hope will be soon. However, I will also ask the permanent secretary to write to him in that regard.

The regulations apply only to England. We invited the Welsh Government to join us in making the regulations, but they felt unable to act at the pace at which we have acted. That is not to say there are not sewage spillages or other environmental breaches in Wales—there are: we know that on average there were 38 spillages from Welsh storm overflows last year, compared with 23 in England.

The new regulations sit alongside the freedom that we have given Ofwat to link water company dividends to environmental performance. As I have referred to, the fines and penalties will be reinvested in local water improvement schemes through our new water restoration fund, while the water company will pay the polluter penalty and will have to fix the problems at no cost to the bill payer.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's very timely regulations. This Thursday I am meeting the Environment Agency, along with two of my local angling societies, the Royal Tunbridge Wells Angling Society and the Dorset Arms Angling Club. Southern Water regularly pollutes the tributaries of the upper Medway, causing great damage to the natural environment and to those angling societies. Will the fines that are to be levied be available to the angling societies to restore the stocks of fish in which they have invested, which have been destroyed by those breaches by Southern Water?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. It is the intention that the penalties will be put into the water restoration fund and used primarily in that local area and certainly not beyond the boundaries of the water company involved. If that is persistent, I would expect the Environment Agency to tackle the situation. It may be such a severe case that it merits criminal prosecution, but what we are doing today is enabling the Environment Agency, and indeed other regulators, to act much more swiftly to apply penalties that are a strong deterrent. I should point out that these new changes apply to all industries that operate under the environmental permitting regime, so the strengthened deterrent will also apply, for example, to waste site operators.

The regulations show that, yet again, this Conservative Government are taking action to improve our environment. I commend the regulations to the House.

6.15 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The only reason we are here today is that, after 13 years, the country we love, and the quality of life for millions of working people, are suffering from the Tory sewage scandal. As a direct result of the Government's actions, raw human waste was dumped across our country for more than 11 million hours, resulting in 1.5 million sewage dumps—more than 800 every single day.

Millions of water customers—our constituents—have paid their hard-earned money in good faith for their waste water to be treated properly. Instead, they see the places that they care about—the places where they have put down roots and invested their families' shared futures—being polluted. Those sewage dumps go into the sea, where people swim; into the canals, along which people cycle and walk their dogs on the towpath; into the rivers, where people fish or canoe; on to the beaches, where our children and grandchildren build sandcastles; and, of course, into our leisure and beauty hotspots, where hard-working local businesses rely on tourists to come flocking in numbers.

On 14 October last year, I asked the Government what assessment had been made of

“the economic impact of beach closures as a result of sewage pollution on coastal businesses”.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), confirmed that her Department had not made such an assessment. Can the Secretary tell me today whether her Department has finally worked out the economic impact of sewage discharges on those businesses—yes or no?

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is scaremongering by Opposition MPs about the level of sewage being discharged, and that some of us have outstanding bathing water on our beaches because there has already been significant investment? It is important to recognise the difference between combined sewer overflow and the alternative to it running out to sea; less than 5% is contaminated water. Is it rushing up through people's front rooms?

Jim McMahon: Nuance and facts do matter in this type of debate, but the facts speak for themselves, frankly: going by the Government's figures, there are 800 such discharges each and every day. As we see right across the country, including in my own region, beaches

are completely closed off to members of the public, and that has a material impact on the businesses who rely in good faith on tourists coming. That is the lived experience of people there, and we should not decry that either, so let us get the balance right and accept that this issue needs to be addressed.

A responsible Government would undertake an economic impact assessment to truly understand the impact of the problem, but the order itself states that an economic “impact assessment has not been produced for this instrument as no, or no significant, impact on the private, voluntary or public sectors is foreseen.”

That feels to me as if the Government have their head in the sand.

Mr Francois: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there is a great deal of debate at the moment not just about the Government’s spending plans but about those of His Majesty’s official Opposition. Everyone knows that preventing any discharges of any kind would involve the investment of hundreds of billions of pounds. As the Secretary of State has already made plain, the Government are committed to spending billions as it is. If Labour thinks that we are not doing enough, how much more money would it spend on this that we are not already committed to? Give us a number.

Jim McMahon: I will check the voting record later, but we presented our plan to Parliament, and Members had the choice to vote for or against it. That plan would have seen sewage discharges ended by 2030. We believe, and the evidence says, that that could be done with the money that is currently being derived from dividends. That is how it would be funded, and that would mean bill payers were protected. I am disappointed that the Government did not support that, but we are where we are.

Mr Francois rose—

Jim McMahon: I am going to make some progress.

Mr Francois: Perhaps he could tell us, as it is his plan, what the figure is?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order.

Jim McMahon: If the right hon. Gentleman is excited at this point, he is going to get even more animated shortly, so he should bear with me.

What we see today is not just the result of Government inaction or an industry too focused on short-term dividend payouts, above the long-term interests of the country. More than that, it is about a system of regulation that is not just ineffective but a clear part of the problem. All the failings we see in the sector have built up in plain sight of Ofwat, as the financial regulator, and the Environment Agency—debt piling up, dividends pouring out, sewage being dumped, water leaks leading to supply shortages, and at least one water company now on the financial cliff edge. These water companies have not acted under the radar; they have done it all in plain sight, all allowed to get completely out of hand and all signed off.

We know that Ofwat already has the power today to issue unlimited fines, to curb dividends and to stop the debt mountain getting even higher. The chair of the

Environment Agency spoke out against the previous £250 million cap proposed by the Government, saying at an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee hearing just a few months ago:

“The previous Secretary of State suggested that the limit on penalties should increase from £250,000 to £250 million. That is a number that I believe to be higher than should be given to us for a penalty that we can impose.”

He went on to say:

“My personal view is in the £10 million to £25 million range.”

That is the chair of the agency that these powers are being handed over to for unlimited fines. In there lies the truth—watering down the threat of action and watering down the consequences, too.

Rather than going further than what was previously announced, what we see in practice is the Government going backwards, now suggesting penalties just of between 5% and 10% of the cap previously mooted. The Government know that this is not an answer to the Tory sewage scandal and, more than that, the water companies know full well that it is not either. They know it is not even business as usual. I am concerned about the very likely consequence that we will see even less money being taken in penalties and fines, as the regulator moves away from using its criminal powers to civil powers, with grubby backroom deals being struck in favour of the water companies. There is also the risk, as we have seen in the case of Thames Water, that even where water companies are found to have deliberately frustrated and misled an investigation, criminal powers to hold individuals to account are not used.

Regulators under pressure to demonstrate that this cut-price policy is delivering the goods, matched with a lack of capacity and political will to undertake criminal investigations, could well mean that offenders are let off the hook. Water bosses are already given a “get out of jail free” card, and now they will not even see the inside of a courtroom—that is what this will do. What safeguards will be in place to ensure that there is full transparency on financial penalties, to rule out cut-price discounts or dodgy deals in backrooms? Given what has come to pass, will the Secretary of State use this opportunity to give notice to the regulators that the watchdogs themselves are now being watched?

The Labour party presented a Bill to the House on 25 April that would have ended the Tory sewage scandal by 2030. That Bill proposed four crucial measures to reduce sewage discharges while ensuring that no further burden was added to household bills. First, it would have set a legal requirement for the monitoring of all sewage outlets and penalties if companies failed to monitor. Secondly, it would have introduced automatic fines for sewage dumping. Thirdly, Labour’s plan would have implemented a legally binding target to reduce dumping by 90% by 2030. Finally, it would have required the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for the reduction of sewage discharges and, importantly, regular economic impact assessments. That is a plan—that was Labour’s plan—but the Tories blocked it. They marched through the Lobby to make sure it would not get time to be debated in this House.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Labour’s plan, let alone not being fully costed, would have tripled the bills that householders had to pay and would have seen sewage

[Sally-Ann Hart]

backing up in people's homes? That is the reality of Labour's plans; they do not want to admit it, but that is the reality.

Jim McMahon: Government Members seem to be under the misapprehension that our costings for the manifesto are in line with contract awards for personal protective equipment. They absolutely are not. We are of the opinion—the industry says this, as do the regulators—that our plan is affordable within the envelope of money that is currently being taken out for shareholder dividends. If shareholders can find £72 billion of our money to go out in dividends, they can find the money to fix the system and put right the wrong.

Sally-Ann Hart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress.

Since we presented that Bill to the House for debate, 40,000 sewage dumps have taken place. Labour's plan would have ensured that polluters pay the moment they start dumping sewage, not months or years after the event, with investigations and lawyers needed to make a ruling. As such, I ask the Secretary of State whether her Department has considered the potential benefits of introducing automatic fines for sewage dumping. Does she agree that that would save regulators time and money, and do the right thing by bill payers and the environment?

It is not just the coastline that is suffering from the Tory sewage scandal: sewage, unfortunately, is closer than many believe. Our national parks, lakes and rivers—the arteries of our nation—are being sullied by Tory-sanctioned sewage dumping. This is not just an environmental crisis, or an economic one for our coastal businesses: it is about whether families can live decent and fulfilled lives.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman describes a very long-standing problem. Does he have evidence to suggest that the problem was any less during the years before 2010, when the Labour party was in office?

Jim McMahon: I am very proud of Labour's record of leaving the cleanest air and water since before the industrial revolution. What the data says—dump by dump, outlet by outlet, beach by beach, lake by lake, river by river—is that, year on year, the problem is getting worse under the Tories, not better. It has all been sanctioned by the Tories.

Greg Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress, if I may. This is all about whether families can live decent and fulfilled lives in the places where we live, where we work and where we holiday together—where families create memories, forge bonds and strengthen relationships by enjoying the beauty that our country has to offer. It is moments like those that make life worth living.

In the middle of the Tory cost of living crisis, households are being hammered from every angle, with rocketing food prices—again, straight to the door of the Secretary of State—soaring energy bills and crippling mortgage rates. When it comes to people's water bills, the public

are paying for a service that is not being delivered. That is being felt across the country, including in recent weeks on the doorsteps of Uxbridge and South Ruislip and Selby and Ainsty. I can tell the Secretary of State that people are not buying her party's excuses. They want a better Britain, and that starts with treating our country, the public, and businesses with the respect they deserve.

Labour could vote against these measures. It is true that they do not go far enough; that they carry a significant risk of actually weakening enforcement; and that there is little evidence that we will see the change needed. However, we will not allow the Government that excuse. If a vote does come, we will vote for the measures, for one reason only: to prove that, for all the talk of action, in the end, nothing will change until we get a change of Government, because only Labour will end the Tory sewage scandal.

6.29 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The title of these statutory instruments is "Environmental Protection", but they should perhaps properly be named as the continued protection of the over-mighty quangos of Natural England and the Environment Agency. I am concerned to see that no additional powers or extension of their powers are given without their also being fundamentally reformed, together with a modern, fit-for-purpose water regulation structure, and I have made that case before in this place.

I understand that the purpose of these regulations is to change the balance of costs and fines for water-based pollutions so that the natural market drivers will make it less expensive to comply with investing in upgrading infrastructure, rather than to pay the cost of pollution. If a water company gets an eye-watering, attention-grabbing fine, the investors and managers will be pressed to take action. I understand that the intention is that no consumer will pay, either by increased charges or decreased investment. Furthermore, I understand that arrangements will be made to keep the value of fines for investment in the particular region affected.

I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—are personally deeply committed to this issue. They have led the way in this House with groundbreaking legislation and action. However, it has been my experience of Ofwat, Natural England and the Environment Agency that good intention may not translate into effective delivery, and I would like to expand on that.

Tackling sewage has been one of my primary pieces of work as the Member for Dover and Deal. It is an issue I care about very deeply, because repeated sewage flooding into people's homes is incredibly damaging, and devastating for those affected. They find themselves constantly on alert for flood warnings, with carpets and possessions damaged or destroyed, and back gardens watered by things other than rain, while insurance premiums soar and houses are difficult to sell. That is why repeated sewage flooding is subject to specific regulatory intervention.

One of my earliest challenges has been to address decades-long sewage flooding in the town of Deal, and in Albert Road in particular. I did all the things that

MPs normally do. I met residents, wrote letters, spoke in this place, met Ministers, asked Ofwat to use its regulatory enforcement powers, and met the chief executive of Ofwat to make the case, but none of that moved the dial. Why was that? Because, when I finally managed to get out of Ofwat what was going on, it would not use its regulatory powers because there was not an agreed solution.

At the heart of the problem was a traditional Bazalgette system, or the combined surface water and sewage approach that we have had in our country for a very long time. That system applies in one part of Deal, but not in the rest, and it was not physically possible to separate out the combined system within the historic structure of the town, even if it were financially viable to do so. Every party involved following every sewage issue—from the highways authority to councils, the drainage board and the water company—each had a different technical report and view, and each of them put responsibility for solving it on the other.

Pretty much my whole career has been one of problem solving in one form or another, and I knew a bit about water infrastructure and regulation because I carried out a year-long research programme into it before I came into this place, so I decided to do what I would do if I was not an MP. I picked up the phone to the chief executive and asked to meet. I put forward a proposal to set up a joint taskforce that was chaired by the then chief executive, Ian McAulay, and me as the Member of Parliament. Southern Water agreed to fund a top expert team, led by Doctor Nick Mills and Rob McTaggart, to work out what was possible.

Southern Water agreed to this approach, provided I could convene the other statutory bodies to take part with the same degree of commitment to solve this long-standing problem, and that is what is happening. Six months' work has led to 12 months' work, and it is now one of the pathfinder projects, bringing hundreds of thousands of pounds of new investment to Deal—more than £500,000 to date, with more committed expenditure—and bringing in innovation in “slow the flow” work right across the town of Deal. Work is ongoing on technical engineering solutions and environmentally based solutions, which are the so-called nature-based solutions.

We are determined to see the programme through in order to tackle long-standing flooding and be an early adopter of the elimination of sewage outflows. There will be a showcase to Parliament in the autumn, and I very much hope that Ministers and Members who are interested, and who are perhaps speaking in today's debate, will come and see how we are approaching this.

What matters to our constituents is what works, and what works is technical solutions to technical problems. That has been my experience on the ground, and it is also the expert advice on this issue from the Institution of Civil Engineers. It has advised that the water regulatory framework needs updating, that there needs to be better testing and assessment of the nature-based solutions, and that nature-based solutions need to be better incorporated into the planning system for the built environment.

Who has not been in the room, and who has not been part of the solution? That is either the Environment Agency or Natural England. That matters because these new mega-fines will be imposed by bodies that have no ideas, and no role in solving these issues. The fines will

be imposed on water companies, without requiring other relevant and necessary parties to come to the table and work through proper technical and deliverable solutions for the benefit of our communities. The fines could be imposed on water companies that have already agreed an investment strategy to tackle this issue, including the cost to the consumer, and agreed to by their own regulator, Ofwat. There is a clear disconnect in what is being discussed today.

Although one must hope that the agencies will act responsibly, holistically and sensibly, current evidence does not support that. Natural England's first moratorium on house building was imposed in June 2019. Since then, bans on new builds have spread to more than a quarter of England's local authority areas, affecting around 145,000 homes across 74 local authority areas, from Cornwall to the Tees Valley, and a further 41,000 fewer homes are expected to be built each year until a solution is found. That solution will not be found in Natural England.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to bring up the problems for house building from the nutrient neutrality programme. Does she agree that the way to solve that problem and reinforce the Government's welcome efforts to prevent pollution lie within the water industry itself, and with better treatment of sewage, so that we achieve nutrient neutrality without the slightly blunt instrument that Natural England has chosen to use over the past couple of years?

Mrs Elphicke: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments, because he is absolutely right. Blunt instruments will not solve the issues that are blocking house building in our communities, and we have not seen a solution from Natural England that will bring those solutions forward. He is correct to comment on the failure of water companies to invest, which has contributed to this issue, in addition to the root cause of agricultural run-off in river pollution. It is estimated that all existing development—residential, commercial and the rest of the built environment—contributes less than 5% towards the phosphate and nitrate loads in our rivers. That means that occupants of any new homes built would make a negligible difference to that issue, yet it has an enormous cost and impact on the communities where those new homes are not being built.

While those much-needed new homes with their negligible impact are blocked by Natural England, the Environment Agency is allowing farmers to pollute with high-nutrient fertilisers, which are themselves a source of nutrient polluting problems. Planning permissions continue to be granted for high-intensity poultry units, for example, resulting in the absurd situation where a developer may be forced to buy a pig farm and close it down, in order to get permission to build homes, only for the now cash-rich farmer to open another new pig farm just down the road. While the rich farmer gets richer, the small and medium-sized enterprise developer goes bust. A delegation of SME builders brought their case to Downing Street this month. The large developer Redrow has just announced plans to close its offices in the Southern and Thames Valley region, which is one of the areas affected by the nutrient issue.

The Secretary of State is aware that I and many other colleagues are gravely concerned about the proposed approach of keeping Natural England in control, as

[Mrs Elphicke]

currently set out in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. That continues to put immense uncontrolled power over the shape and delivery of our homes and communities with an unelected, unaccountable, single-purpose quango in Natural England.

Mr Francois: As the House may know, it is not often that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and I agree on much, but on this he is absolutely right. Natural England is becoming an over-mighty regulator, and it is referred to directly in the regulation that we are debating. Does my hon. Friend agree that it should stay in its lane, do what it does well, and not keep trying to expand its empire into areas where it is not best qualified to judge?

Mrs Elphicke: I am struggling to think of those lanes where Natural England does things well. An overhaul of these quangos is required, because they are now making decisions about community policy and economic matters without any of the accountability and balance that Ministers would have over these issues. I thank my right hon. Friend for making those points.

Moving on, the water restoration fund is where all these mega fines will be put. The Department's press release in April 2023 refers to some £141 million in fines that have been collected since 2015. They currently go to the Treasury but will now go to the new water restoration fund. It seems that £140 million in the fund is clearly not enough, so we now have an unlimited amount—perhaps billions of pounds of fines—that will be available for, as set out in the press release, community-led projects. I have visions of an army of green wellies wading through rivers, removing non-native and invasive species, picking up nets and unblocking blockages that would cause barriers to fishes' natural movement in rivers, as the Department's press release mentions.

However, the Government already have a proper water regulator, although it needs reform, for the industry. It needs to be the body driving through the change needed to deal with the historical Bazalgette-style water engineering. That change can only happen with big-ticket investment and complex technical solutions. It is not one for the green welly brigade or the orange Just Stop Oil brigade.

To conclude, will the Secretary of State look again at the relationship between Ofwat—the water regulator—the Environment Agency and Natural England in relation to this matter? I have set out a case for the reform of those bodies. In relation to today's statutory instruments, higher fines will not in themselves lead to solutions. The only solutions to this issue will be detailed, complex, technical and professional, such as those we have pioneered with the Deal Water Action Taskforce with Southern Water, and also those set out by the Institution of Civil Engineers and the National Infrastructure Commission. By failing to keep big quangos in check, I am afraid that DEFRA is responsible for a substantial fall in house building in this country. It is vital that does not happen to investment in our water companies too, and that we see better regulation, effective working and technical solutions delivered on the ground and in the waterways for the benefit of our communities and constituents, and for the natural environment.

6.42 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I want to make only a few brief points. First, the purpose of these regulations is to strengthen the civil sanctions available for environmental regulators in England, including Natural England and the Environment Agency, in order to provide a greater deterrent against environmental offences for operators. A number of colleagues on this side of the House have already expressed concerns about the extent to which those regulators are perhaps expanding their remit—we might call it “remit creep”, for want of a better term—and not necessarily making the best possible decisions as a result. In that context, will the Secretary of State look again at the remits of those regulators, in particular Natural England, and enter into a conversation, perhaps over a cup of tea, about whether they are going beyond the remit that Parliament gave them? As they are mentioned in the regulations today, I take the opportunity to make that request.

Secondly, I notice from the Order Paper that both these statutory instruments—the House has agreed to take them together—have not been cleared by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. Before anyone gets overly excited, that is not unknown—there are sometimes good reasons for why they have to be brought to the House before the JCSI has had an opportunity to scrutinise them—but it is slightly unusual. When the Secretary of State replies to the debate, perhaps she could explain to the House why that is the case. I am sure there is a perfectly legitimate reason, but it might be helpful for her to get that on the record.

Thirdly, I can report that I have had quite a lot of emails from my constituents about sewage discharges. People in Rayleigh and Wickford are just as concerned about this issue as anyone else, and no one wants to see sewage—particularly if it is untreated—being discharged into our rivers, our estuaries or, indeed, the sea. On that, I suspect we could achieve unanimity across the House. However, as I intimated in my intervention, there are already billions of pounds going in from the Government to try to reduce those discharges as far as is practically possible so that they would occur only in periods of the most exceptional rainfall.

In fairness, I gave the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), an opportunity to tell the House how much money Labour would spend on this issue above and beyond the billions of pounds that the Government are clearly committed to. [Interruption.] Well, he did not answer my question.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): He did.

Mr Francois: No, he did not. Perhaps there is a reason why. On 25 April, the *Daily Express* reported, “Tories humiliate Labour as they're forced to abstain on their own anti-sewage debate”. Under the by-line of Christian Calgie, its senior political correspondent, the story stated:

“The Labour Party was left humiliated by the Government in the House of Commons this afternoon ... Labour MPs ended up refusing to vote in favour of reducing sewage discharge. It's claimed a senior Labour MP was overheard saying ‘We've been made to look like’”

twits.

I did not want to introduce a partisan element to the debate—[*Interruption.*] No, no, but having heard the shadow Secretary of State's speech, in which he did that, I thought it was only fair to reply in kind. I hope that when the Secretary of State replies to the debate, she will try to get elucidation from him on why Labour had this big Opposition day debate, made a big thing of it, briefed the press, told the country and then abstained. There must be some reason. If he is too embarrassed to tell the House of Commons, perhaps she can oblige.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend also note that, as the shadow Secretary of State talked about the passion with which Labour feels on this subject, not one single Labour Back-Bench MP was present, and that while the Government Benches are now almost full, just two Labour Back-Bench MPs have appeared, probably because they want to get warm?

Mr Francois: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful observation. The passion on the Labour Back Benches has almost doubled in the last 15 minutes. The Whips have obviously been around the Tea Room and said, "It's looking a bit thin at the back there, boys and girls. You'd better get in there quickly." So now—I want to be accurate—I count seven Labour MPs in the Chamber. Am I short-changing anybody? No. As for the abstention—[HON. MEMBERS: "They're coming in now."] Oh, crikey. Keep going; we could be in double figures in a minute.

As for the abstention on 25 April, it is admittedly unusual to table an Opposition day motion and then abstain on it; that is not an everyday thing. Because the shadow Secretary of State said that Labour was so passionate about it, I can only assume that it was a passionate abstention. Labour felt so strongly that it deliberately chose one of its Opposition day debates to raise the issue, and then passionately abstained in person, as someone once famously said. If there is a really good explanation for that, I look forward to hearing it from the Opposition. In fact, I will allow—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Could I gently try to connect the hon. Gentleman's speech with the motion before the House?

Mr Francois: In the interests of equity, I was allowing the shadow Secretary of State to intervene on me. Perhaps he could connect it? He does not want to intervene to explain why Labour abstained on its own motion. Going, going, gone. In that case, perhaps the Secretary of State could help to elucidate, because the Labour party, clearly, is incapable of explaining its own policy. On that point, so as not to detain us further, I conclude my remarks.

6.50 pm

Dr Coffey: I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for the wide-ranging contributions to the discussion of the regulations that we are bringing forward today. Across the country, people want to see an end to pollution and want polluters to pay. That is why we are bringing forward these proposals. My right hon. and hon. Friends are right to ask, what have we heard so far from Labour? Frankly, His Majesty's loyal Opposition continues to mislead the public again and again at the Dispatch Box, but not the House because the Government and Back Benchers know that they are talking a load of the proverbial.

There is no doubt that beaches have been cleaner than they were under Labour. We know that through statistics, because Labour did nothing about it. When we came into office, if there had been a version of Labour's famous "There is no money left" note lying at DEFRA's door, it would have said, "You're being sued by Europe because sewage is being discharged and we have done nothing about it." That is what Labour did. The Labour Government knew what was happening and they did nothing to stop it. For the avoidance of doubt, water policy is devolved. If Labour had a credible plan it would use it in Wales, but it does not, and we are seeing on average more sewage discharges there than in England.

I am also concerned that the Opposition continues to accuse our civil servants of bad behaviour. I encourage the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) to stop the practice of blaming civil servants. Going on about grubby backroom deals and suggesting that our regulators would try to do that is a disgrace. I will apologise on his behalf to our civil servants and regulators. I do not accuse our civil servants of grubby backroom deals—that is behaviour I associate with the Opposition.

The Government voted for Labour's motion on 25 April. It is Labour who ran away embarrassed and exposed, because we were already doing what Labour was putting forward—it was already in legislation and under way. Labour seems to have forgotten that water policy has been devolved to the Labour Government in Wales. An element are clueless, and an element are accusing civil servants of potentially doing grubby backroom deals. The Government will continue to clean up the mess that Labour left behind.

Let me be clear: we are not here to be apologists for water companies; they need to clean up their act and cover the costs. It is up to water companies to make sure that they direct any profits they make from billpayers' hard-earned money into improvements. These regulations are what our regulators asked for. That is why we are backing our regulators to help restore the environment. I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Environmental Civil Sanctions (England) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.

Resolved,

That the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.—(*Thérèse Coffey.*)

ONLINE SAFETY BILL: CARRY-OVER EXTENSION (NO.2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That the period on the expiry of which proceedings on the Online Safety Bill shall lapse in pursuance of paragraph (13) of Standing Order No. 80A, as extended by the Order of 13 March 2023 (Online Safety Bill: Carry-over Extension), shall be further extended by 103 days until 31 October 2023.—(*Paul Scully*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

BUILDING AND BUILDINGS

That the draft Building Safety (Leaseholder Protections etc.) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 12 June, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CUSTOMS

That the draft Postal Packets (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 29 June, be approved.—(*Mike Wood.*)

The House divided: Ayes 402, Noes 21.

Division No. 309]

[6.54 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Britcliffe, Sara
Abrahams, Debbie	Brock, Deidre
Afolami, Bim	Brown, Ms Lyn
Afriyie, Adam	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Aiken, Nickie	Browne, Anthony
Aldous, Peter	Bruce, Fiona
Ali, Tahir	Bryant, Sir Chris
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Buchan, Felicity
Amesbury, Mike	Buck, Ms Karen
Anderson, Fleur	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Anderson, Lee	Burghart, Alex
Anderson, Stuart	Burgon, Richard
Andrew, rh Stuart	Butler, Rob
Ansell, Caroline	Byrne, Ian
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Byrne, rh Liam
Argar, rh Edward	Cadbury, Ruth
Atkins, Victoria	Cairns, rh Alun
Bacon, Mr Richard	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Bailey, Shaun	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Baillie, Siobhan	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Baker, Duncan	Carter, Andy
Baker, Mr Steve	Cartlidge, James
Baldwin, Harriett	Cates, Miriam
Barker, Paula	Caulfield, Maria
Baron, Mr John	Chamberlain, Wendy
Baynes, Simon	Chishti, Rehman
Beckett, rh Margaret	Churchill, Jo
Begum, Apsana	Clark, Feryal (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Benn, rh Hilary	Clark, rh Greg
Benton, Scott	Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Clarkson, Chris
Blackford, rh Ian	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Blackman, Bob	Colburn, Elliot
Bone, Mr Peter (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Collins, Damian
Bowie, Andrew	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Brady, Sir Graham	Costa, Alberto
Braverman, rh Suella	Coyle, Neil
Brereton, Jack	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bristow, Paul	Creasy, Stella
	Crosbie, Virginia
	Crouch, Tracey
	Cunningham, Alex

Daby, Janet	Grayling, rh Chris
Dalton, Ashley	Green, Chris
Daly, James	Green, rh Damian
David, Wayne	Greenwood, Lilian
Davies, rh David T. C.	Griffith, Andrew
Davies, Gareth (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Griffith, Dame Nia
Davies, Dr James	Grundy, James
Davies, Mims	Gwynne, Andrew
Davies-Jones, Alex	Haigh, Louise
Davis, rh Mr David	Halfon, rh Robert
Davison, Dehenna	Hall, Luke
Day, Martyn	Hamilton, Fabian
De Cordova, Marsha	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Hardy, Emma
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Dines, Miss Sarah	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Dixon, Samantha	Harris, Carolyn
Docherty, Leo	Harris, Rebecca
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Harrison, Trudy
Dodds, Anneliese	Hart, Sally-Ann
Donelan, rh Michelle (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Hayes, Helen
Double, Steve	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Henderson, Gordon
Duguid, David	Henry, Darren
Eagle, Dame Angela	Higginbotham, Antony
Eagle, rh Maria	Hinds, rh Damian
Edwards, Ruth	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Efford, Clive	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Elliott, Julie	Holden, Mr Richard
Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Hollern, Kate
Elmore, Chris	Hollinrake, Kevin
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Holmes, Paul
Eshalomi, Florence	Howarth, rh Sir George
Esterson, Bill	Howell, John
Eustice, rh George	Howell, Paul
Evans, Dr Luke	Hudson, Dr Neil
Evennett, rh Sir David	Hughes, Eddie
Everitt, Ben	Hunt, Jane
Farris, Laura	Hunt, Tom
Fell, Simon	Hussain, Imran
Firth, Anna	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Fletcher, Colleen	Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Fletcher, Katherine	Jenkinson, Mark
Fletcher, Mark	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Fletcher, Nick	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Ford, rh Vicky	Johnson, Kim
Fovargue, Yvonne	Johnston, David
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jones, Andrew
Foxcroft, Vicky	Jones, Darren
Frazer, rh Lucy	Jones, Fay
Freeman, George	Jones, Gerald
Freer, Mike	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
French, Mr Louie	Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Fuller, Richard	Jones, Ruth
Furniss, Gill	Jupp, Simon
Gardiner, Barry	Kane, Mike
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Kearns, Alicia
Gibb, rh Nick	Keegan, rh Gillian
Gibson, Patricia	Kinnock, Stephen
Gibson, Peter	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Gideon, Jo	Kniveton, Kate
Gill, Preet Kaur	Kruger, Danny
Glen, rh John	Kyle, Peter
Glindon, Mary	Lamont, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Largan, Robert
Gove, rh Michael	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Grant, Peter	Lavery, Ian
Gray, James	Leadbeater, Kim
	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
	Levy, Ian
	Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lynch, Holly
 Maclean, Rachel
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCabe, Steve
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Pawsey, Mark

Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shah, Naz
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Royston
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spellar, rh John
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephens, Chris
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sultana, Zarah
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tracey, Craig

Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew

Western, Matt
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggins, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Jacob Young and
 Julie Marson

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Drax, Richard
 Fletcher, Nick
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Kruger, Danny

Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Millar, Robin
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Shannon, Jim
 Smith, Greg
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gavin Robinson and
 Paul Girvan

Question accordingly agreed to.

PETITIONS

Hull York Dental School

7.8 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Select Committee on Health and Social Care declared in its report published last Friday, 14 July:

“NHS dentistry is facing a crisis of access”,

and that will not come as news to the constituents of Hull West and Hessle. The National Audit Office ranks East Riding of Yorkshire as having the third lowest count of dentists per head of population in the entire country. We desperately require more NHS dentists in the region, and this petition calls for the establishment of a new dental school to help meet that need.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the recent survey by the British Dental Association shows the dental workforce has been reduced to a level not seen since 2012-13; further that unmet need for dentistry is at record high at 1 in 4 of adult population in 2022; further that the proportion of dentists now reporting their intention to reduce – or further reduce – the amount of NHS work they undertake in 2023 stands at 74%; further that the National Audit Office ranked the East Riding of Yorkshire as having the third lowest count of dentists per head of population in the country at 3.6 per 10,000 in its latest report; further that Hull has historically high levels of tooth decay in children; further that there is a direct correlation between increased rates of tooth extractions and the risk of mouth cancer; further that there is an overwhelming need for more dentists in the region; further that this need can be met by training more dentists locally; further notes Hull York Medical School opened in 2003 and now sees over 150 newly qualified doctors a year enter the profession.

[Emma Hardy]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to facilitate the creation of a Hull York Dental School.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002844]

Bank branches

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Everyone deserves to be able to manage their own money, which is why banks have long been focal points within local communities. However, branch closures—most recently the Bank of Scotland branches in Cupar and Falkland, and the Barclays branch in St Andrews—have left a massive hole and created incredible stress for people who, for whatever reason, cannot rely on online banking. This is particularly true in rural areas.

I present this petition on behalf of local residents who recently signed it, and on behalf of the many others who have spoken to me on the doorstep about their concerns. The petitioners

“therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the bank closures in North East Fife are reversed and all local bank branches are protected.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of North East Fife.

Declares that bank branches, particularly those in Cupar, Falkland and St Andrews are the heart of their communities, and are relied upon by local communities, those who need access to cash and those without internet banking.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the bank closures in North East Fife are reversed and all local bank branches are protected.]

[P002846]

Transport Infrastructure: Warrington

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

7.11 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss Warrington's transport infrastructure. One of my main motivations for doing so is that, during the 15 years I have lived in Warrington, the traffic jams have got worse, principally on the vital routes crossing the Manchester ship canal, which runs through the heart of my constituency.

A few weeks back, during business questions, I raised with the Leader of the House the difficulties that my constituents have been experiencing when trying to cross the canal, owing to the age and upkeep of the swing bridges that carry the traffic. There are three main swing bridges in Warrington—one on the A56, one on the A49 and one on the A50—all of which have been in operation for almost 130 years since the Manchester ship canal opened back in 1894.

The Manchester Ship Canal Act 1885 was passed when Queen Victoria was on the throne, and it did not anticipate the number of vehicles crossing on these routes. The volume of traffic that the bridges carry today makes them critical routes for residents and commuters travelling through Warrington. However, their age makes them susceptible to ever more frequent breakdowns and faults. They are sometimes left stuck open for hours at a time during periods of exceptionally hot or cold weather, when the metal expands or contracts.

During peak hours, the standard opening of a bridge to allow a boat to pass along the canal can result in huge congestion, which takes up to 90 minutes to return to normal. And it is not just one bridge opening—all three bridges open as a boat passes from Liverpool to Manchester. Naturally, this is only made worse when the bridges do not function as they should.

The deteriorating condition of the bridges means that they require essential and thorough maintenance. The sticking point—pardon the pun—is not who is responsible for the repair work, which is accepted to be Peel Ports, the owner of the Manchester ship canal, but who pays for the wider mitigation when the bridges are closed.

Peel Ports estimates that the repair works for each bridge will cost around £6 million and take up to nine months to complete, during which the bridge undergoing maintenance will be closed to traffic and left permanently swung open. This will result in a 2 mile diversion to use one of the adjacent bridges when each bridge is undergoing maintenance. As such, the council has sought appropriate mitigation costs from Peel, particularly to cover the costs of providing home-to-school transport, as the hundreds of pupils who currently walk or cycle to nearby schools would become eligible for free transport to be provided.

The difficulty has arisen from Peel's refusal to acknowledge any responsibility to provide that bus service or school transport costs, which encompass the majority of the mitigation sought by the council. That has left the situation at an impasse, with the scheduled maintenance works to the A49 London Road bridge, due to have commenced in April, having now been put on hold, with no date agreed for the work to take place.

Unfortunately, the swing bridges are not the only vital transport routes where Peel is involved in Warrington. The Warburton toll bridge over the Manchester ship canal, which crosses the Warrington and Trafford council boundaries, is also in need of upgrade works. To fund that, Peel has proposed raising the toll from 12p per crossing, a price set in 1980, to £1 for every journey. For someone travelling to work each day, as many people do over the bridge, that would mean having to pay about £500 extra per year simply to get to and from work. It is simply not acceptable that the burden should be placed on the motorists for whom this route is an essential part of their daily lives, and I made that point last November at the public inquiry on the plans.

Several of my constituents have also got in touch to raise their concerns about the introduction of a proposed auto-pay system at the Warburton bridge, because of their experiences of having been caught at similar crossings such as the Mersey Gateway bridge between Runcorn and Widnes. In the first quarter of this year, 3.5 million crossings over the Mersey Gateway bridge were recorded. In that period, 149,000 penalties were issued, meaning that there was one fine for every 24 crossings made. That is an incredibly high rate and I do not want to see a similar situation develop at the Warburton toll bridge.

The overarching point I hope the Minister has gathered from that is that my constituents, who depend on these vital canal crossings for work, school and general travel are currently left at the mercy of a private company that just does not appear to grasp the reality of the situation. Owning a major waterway such as the Manchester ship canal brings great responsibility to the people who live and work on either side. Peel should therefore be doing everything possible to minimise disruption to the daily lives of my constituents, yet there has been a failure to acknowledge the enormous impact that the closure of the swing bridges will have on the Warrington South community in particular, coupled with an unacceptable and, for many, unaffordable toll increase on vital crossings in and out of Warrington. These issues have called into question the validity of these vital canal crossings being owned and operated by a private company, and it is time that we looked at whether that should be changed.

Another issue I would like to raise with the Minister concerns the proposed Warrington western link bypass to connect the A56 Chester Road with the A57 Sankey Way in Great Sankey. That scheme has been put forward as a means to significantly reduce congestion in the town centre by providing an alternative route to crossing the Manchester ship canal, meaning that cars would not have to use the swing bridges or go to the Bridgefoot gyratory.

In April 2019, the Department for Transport confirmed that the scheme had been successful in securing programme entry into the large local major scheme programme, and Warrington Borough Council subsequently approved the proposal costs at £212 million, of which £142 million would be funded by the Government, with the borough council providing the remaining £70 million. Since then, the projected cost of the scheme has ballooned into the region of £269 million, leaving a shortfall of some £56 million, on today's figures. That has left the proposal for the western link in serious jeopardy. My greatest fear is the knock-on effect that this uncertainty has for the infrastructure in the council's proposals in its local plan to build thousands of new homes and logistics

warehouses on green belt in south Warrington. As of now, no one can say for certain whether the western link will become a reality. That is deeply concerning when we are talking about proposals that will see many more cars on the road, increased congestion and worsening air quality if sufficient road infrastructure is not there to support that.

Despite those issues, one area where I can speak positively is Warrington's bus network. Thanks to various pots of funding from this Government, Warrington Borough Council has finally been able to benefit from a significant increase in bus funding. The largest sum—£21.5 million—comes from the Department for Transport. That will enable Warrington's Own Buses, a municipal bus company, to replace its entire fleet with over 100 new zero emission electric buses.

The Minister will recall that, a couple of month ago, in this Chamber, I asked him to join me in calling on Warrington Borough Council to get on with ordering our new buses. I am pleased to update the Minister as, finally, 20 months since receiving the zero emission bus regional area funding, an order has been placed. The funding has finally been put to use and a new bus fleet will be rolling out from 2024. Disappointingly, it is not necessarily being made in this country, but at least we are going to see new buses on the streets of Warrington. People reading the council's press release would be forgiven for believing that the entire project has been funded by Warrington Borough Council.

The buses needed a home and I was incredibly grateful that the Minister joined me in Warrington, back in February, to see the progress on the new bus depot that was being built on Dallam Lane. Again, I am pleased to update him that that has been completed. The project received £5 million from the town deal, but no mention of that was made by Warrington Borough Council in its press release.

On top of the new fleet and depot, the Government have been able to make improvements to routes and services across Warrington, thanks to the £16.2 million we have received from the Department for Transport's bus back better fund. Because of that, the council has been able to proceed with its bus service improvement plan, capping fares at £2 for adults and £1 for young people aged five to 18 until 2025. Again, people would be forgiven for thinking that was all down to funding provided by Warrington's Labour council, when, in reality, the funding commitments have come from this Conservative Government.

As I say, the Government have put approximately £42 million into Warrington's bus network, which I can safely say is one of the largest investments of its kind in the north of England. It is a great example of what can be achieved when local and national Government work together to deliver for people in the north. However, coming full circle, the fundamental weakness in all these initiatives in Warrington is the failure to invest in the road infrastructure to carry the buses.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the Minister a couple of questions on points I have raised in the debate. On the issues surrounding the operation and maintenance of the Manchester ship canal swing bridge crossings, will the Government give any consideration to reviewing the original legislation, the Manchester Ship Canal Act 1885, which seems to be fundamentally out of date?

[*Andy Carter*]

Is it not time that cars were given priority and there was a focus on ensuring that the bridges stay open at peak times?

Will the Minister and his Department take steps to ensure that private owners such as Peel are playing their part to minimise disruption and operate the crossings for the benefit of the people who depend on them? Does the Minister know if there are any support packages available to help with the costs of mitigations when major infrastructure work takes place, such as the swing bridge replacements currently proposed?

With regard to the western link, I know his Department has received correspondence recently from Warrington Borough Council requesting that the Government increase their funding contribution to help make up the shortfall caused by the increased cost of the scheme. Will the Minister outline the position of his Department on the funding shortfall? Will he reaffirm that the Department for Transport will be committed to the funding originally approved towards the cost of the scheme when it goes ahead? Does he agree that, while the scheme remains in limbo, it is frankly inappropriate for the borough council to be proposing large housing and logistic developments on green belt, if it cannot commit to funding the infrastructure there to support those projects? Finally, will he reassure me that he will look carefully at any recommendations from the independent inspector to increase crossing tolls for the Warburton bridge? Local residents are already impacted by high inflationary pressure on the cost of living; they do not need a further £500 of tolls simply to cross the Manchester ship canal.

Warrington was designated a new town in 1968. Since then, the population has more than doubled, yet our transport infrastructure simply has not kept pace with the increased demand. An additional high-level crossing, which was planned near to the existing cantilever bridge, has never materialised between Stockton Heath and Grappenhall, despite land being reserved for it. Because of that, a private company is attempting to play catch-up with essential repair work to vital crossings at the expense of residents and commuters who depend on them, and the local authority is pressing ahead with a half-baked local plan that could only severely worsen transport issues in Warrington.

The Government have done a great deal for Warrington residents in the past few years, and I am particularly grateful to the Department for Transport and the Minister for the investment that has been made in Warrington buses. I thank him again for coming to the Dispatch Box to respond to one of my Adjournment debates and I look forward to hearing him address some of the concerns that I have raised today.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is always a delight to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). He is a persistent campaigner on behalf of the people of Warrington South and the broader local community. I congratulate him on again securing an Adjournment debate and on speaking so passionately about the issues that affect his constituents in Warrington. Without doubt, he is an absolute local champion for the

area. It is great to hear him acknowledge the championing of his community by my Department and the huge amounts of investment that we have made. I might even put him in touch with my communications team at the Department for Transport to see whether he can give us some pointers on how we can ensure that this Conservative Government get the credit for the tens of millions of pounds of investment that have been ploughed into his area.

I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to discuss transport in Warrington today. This Government understand the importance of transport to people and businesses, as it powers local economies across our country. Our levelling up White Paper, published last year, set out our plan to transform the UK by spreading opportunity and prosperity across the country, and bringing left-behind communities up to the level of more prosperous places. Transport is vital to achieve that end. It improves access to jobs and services, changes business location decisions, and helps to restore pride across our country. That is why we are investing in both local transport and major infrastructure projects to improve connections across our country.

I will touch on some of the investment in Warrington that my hon. Friend mentioned. This is one of the largest investments in any town by this Conservative Government. We have committed more than £16 million in the bus service improvement plan to supercharge the local bus network; £21.4 million in zero emission bus regional area funding to transition local operator Warrington's Own Buses entire bus fleet to zero emission—I was delighted to visit the area in February to highlight some of that investment; and £10 million to develop the full business case for the Warrington western link road scheme—overall, we have made a conditional commitment of up to £142.5 million to deliver that scheme, subject to final approval. There has also been an allocation this financial year of £5.5 million to help Warrington support highways maintenance, pothole repairs and local transport measures; an additional £709,000 was announced this year at the spring Budget for pothole repairs.

Warrington has benefited more broadly from many different transport schemes, including the big plans that we have to transform rail across the north. In November 2021, we committed in our integrated rail plan to a £96 billion programme that will transform rail services across the north and the midlands. It is the single biggest rail investment ever made by a UK Government. This includes a Northern Powerhouse Rail network running from Liverpool to York and Newcastle, via Warrington; a commitment to a new high-speed line between Warrington, Manchester and Yorkshire; reinstatement of the Warrington Bank Quay station as a low-level station; and upgrading and electrifying existing lines between Warrington and Liverpool. Warrington Bank Quay station, in my hon. Friend's constituency, will also get direct benefits from the HS2-NPR connection there, including better regional services and better services into London. In addition, development opportunities in Warrington, including sites close to Warrington Bank Quay station, will be an attractive draw for local investment when combined with the connectivity improvements that we are planning. That builds on an over £1 billion investment, completed in 2019, that upgraded and electrified many railway lines across the north-west.

Let me turn to some of my hon. Friend's specific points, particularly in relation to the Manchester ship canal and, importantly, the three swing bridges that serve the town centre. Warrington is a nexus of road, rail and waterways—historic waterways and crossings that echo the glorious industrial heritage of the region, which we both hail from. By its nature, it is an intricate network, and I understand just how disruptive it can be to communities when key arteries are out of action. The three bridges in question, owned and operated by Peel Ports, have served the town for over 130 years and, as my hon. Friend stated, are clearly in need of complete refurbishment. Recognising the dual purpose that the bridges serve—access for the local community and access along the Manchester ship canal for shipping—there will inevitably and regrettably be disruption that needs to be planned for and managed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his efforts to date.

On the matter of managing the impact of that disruption to the local highway network, it is for the local highway authority, Warrington Borough Council, to assess the needs of the local community, including residents, visitors and businesses, and to weigh up the options. I recognise that the bridges are outwith the local authority's direct control. It is therefore vital that the local authority and Peel Ports work together as closely as possible to manage any disruption caused by the works. I understand that discussions between the local authority and Peel are ongoing, and I hope that a reasonable solution can be found so that the whole local community can benefit. I hope that they hear my hon. Friend's plea today. I know that he will continue to campaign hard for something that both Peel and his local authority can come together on.

In order to help local authorities to plan effectively for managing their roads and to improve asset management, the Government have moved to a three-year funding settlement for local highway maintenance, amounting to approximately £915 million of capital funding per year. That funding covers us all the way through to 2024-25, and is some of the money that I hope the local authority might be able to use locally. Warrington Borough Council is receiving around £5.5 million of it this year, on top of the £709,000 in the Budget. It will be for Warrington to determine which aspects of its highways maintenance programme it wishes to prioritise. The council may want to look at how it can use some of its money, potentially working with Peel Ports, to look at the issues that my hon. Friend raises.

Turning to the support for local bus services, Warrington is rightly proud of its bus network, and the Government recognise the importance of local bus networks to ensure that communities can stay fully connected. We have provided over £2 billion across the country since the pandemic to help mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus, most recently through the bus recovery grant, which Warrington, along with most local transport authorities, benefited from. In May we announced a long-term approach to support and improve bus services, with an additional £300 million to support services right up until April 2025. That will be made up of two elements: £160 million provided to local transport authorities, including Warrington, through a bus service improvement plan plus mechanism; and £140 million provided to operators through the bus service operators grant plus. Given that Warrington operates its own buses, that

BSOG will come directly to it. The flexibility for Warrington around the £16.2 million of BSIP funding that it received has, I think, been welcomed by all.

I must be clear that responsibility for the maintenance and care of bridge and road—particularly in a case such as this, where a road crosses a waterway and has commercial implications, and implications for local businesses and commuters—must fall to local parties to manage. I commend my hon. Friend on his efforts to resolve this locally. I will say a little more on that at the end.

On the Warburton toll bridge crossing, I am very much aware of the issues that he mentioned. The inspector's report into the proposed Rixton and Warburton toll increase was received by the Department for Transport on 13 July. The report and all the documentation pertaining to the proposals will be assessed, with a decision issued in due course. I assure my hon. Friend, in answer to his question, that the inspector will look very carefully at its implications for local people.

As my hon. Friend knows, Warrington has been progressing the Warrington western link road scheme for potential Government funding as a large local major scheme. This scheme would provide a new 3.2 km link road in west Warrington, including a new high-level bridge over the Manchester ship canal, which people have been campaigning for, as my hon. Friend says, for a very long time. It would also look at other bridges, including over the Mersey, to better connect north and south Warrington and help to reduce the reliance on the swing bridges that were the focus of his speech.

In 2019 the Government made a conditional commitment of up to £142.5 million towards delivery of the scheme, bringing it into the large local majors programme, subject of course to an outline business case. That approval would come after the approval by my Department of a full business case for the scheme.

At the time, as my hon. Friend said, the total scheme costs were estimated at £210 million, with the council contributing £68 million and the Department for Transport £142.5 million. As I have already mentioned, £10 million has already been provided directly by the Department towards the development of that final business case. The council has informed my officials of the challenges that the scheme now faces from cost increases as a result of inflation—I understand that the potential funding gap has now reached about £57 million.

I am of course sympathetic to the challenges that local authorities face. I understand that my officials have asked the council for information from recent business case development for the scheme, to better understand the position and whether the strategic case for the scheme has been strengthened, including perhaps by some of the issues my hon. Friend raised in relation to the swing bridges.

However, I need to be clear that my Department's policy for any scheme on the MRN/LLM programme—major roads network and large local majors—is that the potential funding contribution is capped at the point of the outline business case. However, we are continually willing to look at that, and I look forward to further conversations between my Department and the council to see whether the business case can be strengthened.

In answer to my hon. Friend's question about the Manchester ship canal, we are always willing to look at historical issues and legislation. I urge him to write to

[Mr Richard Holden]

me about it in detail so that I can give him a properly detailed response. Given that it is a piece of Victorian legislation, it would need to be looked at in depth, due to the intricacies that it will involve and the many other pieces of legislation that will interact with it across Government.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friend again for securing this debate. I hope that I have reassured him and the House of the Government's commitment to transport infrastructure in Warrington—not in words, but in the tens of millions of pounds that have already been

provided, the more than £140 million that has already been ringfenced for the western link road and the huge investment in the rail network. I look forward to working with him on future plans and developments for Warrington, and I am sure that both Peel Ports and the local authority have heard his voice strongly, calling for them to come together and find a solution for his constituents and for Warrington. I congratulate him, as ever, on speaking up on behalf of Warrington in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

7.37 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 July 2023

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

Radiotherapy: Accessibility

9.30 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Before we start, may I point out that there will be some videoing by the education department? Please do not be distracted. The Doorkeepers are aware and the video will simply be used to illustrate how a Westminster Hall sitting works, so just ignore it.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the accessibility of radiotherapy.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, all colleagues who supported the application, and Professor Pat Price for her tireless work in supporting the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy and championing this vital treatment.

We all know that the cancer backlog was affected by the pressures of covid-19, but in May this year there were 7.47 million people waiting for cancer treatments and 3 million of those have been waiting for over 18 weeks. Only 61.7% of patients receive their first treatment within two months, far below the operational standard of 85%. Radiotherapy is a key part of cancer care. It is the second most effective treatment for cancer and is needed in four out of every 10 cancer cures.

Radiotherapy targets the cancer with radiation. The cancerous cells are more affected than the healthy cells, which are better at repairing themselves. Modern radiotherapy has come on leaps and bounds, and within the last 10 years breakthroughs have increased the accuracy and focus of the treatment to within millimetres, significantly reducing collateral damage to healthy cells.

Surgical treatments require intensive care, with all of the hospital resources and emotional trauma that that entails, and chemotherapy has a significant impact on the immune system. In contrast, radiotherapy is an out-patient treatment that requires fewer patient visits to care centres. It only costs between £3,000 and £7,000 per patient, despite being incredibly high tech.

The international recommendation is that 53% to 60% of cancer patients receive radiotherapy treatments. However, in the UK only 27% of cancer patients received radiotherapy treatment in 2019. In my North Devon constituency, only 4.7% of my constituents live within the recommended 45-minute travel time for radiotherapy treatment. The other 95.3% are among the 3.4 million people in England for whom distance from a radiotherapy service effectively limits the availability of treatment.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): As the hon. Member said, radiotherapy is the second most effective cancer treatment and is required by half of all cancer patients. However, the ability to access treatment has been described as a postcode lottery,

with 3.4 million people unable to access radiotherapy without travelling more than 45 minutes. Does the hon. Member agree that it is unacceptable that there should be such significant disparities in access to radiotherapy?

Selaine Saxby: I do indeed agree with the hon. Member. In my case, North Devon is the fourth worst constituency in the country for access to radiotherapy services. North Devon is home to the smallest and most remote hospital on the UK mainland—and possibly the most loved. An exceptional team works tirelessly to deliver the best care, despite the challenges of rurality and the availability of staff, mostly linked to the availability of affordable housing, which is currently at its most extreme.

Radiotherapy is usually a series of daily treatments over a number of weeks. Far too many of my constituents choose not to have radiotherapy because the 120-mile round trip each day is too much to consider on top of the understandable pressures that patients with a cancer diagnosis already experience.

Radiotherapy is a far less invasive treatment than many others. With such an elderly population in North Devon it is often the best treatment for patients. A further complication that has been brought to my attention by the wonderful volunteer drivers we have in North Devon who help patients to their appointments across the expansive county, often to Exeter—a 120-mile round trip—for many different treatments, including radiotherapy. I do not want to discourage anyone from reaching out for those services, it will be clear to everyone that a daily radiotherapy session involving a journey of that length is a significant undertaking for patients and volunteer drivers alike. We have a declining number of volunteer drivers, which restricts driver availability for other patients.

It is hard to explain to those who have not visited North Devon the remoteness and the distances involved in undertaking all sorts of treatments. We benefit hugely from the merger of our hospital trust with Exeter's, but that does not bring Exeter any closer. While it is positive that the backlog of patients waiting longer than 62 days for a GP referral is improving, the 62-day wait to start treatment is not. We know that every four weeks of delay in starting cancer treatment can increase the risk of death by 10%. To ensure everyone receives timely cancer care, radiotherapy needs to be an accessible treatment for every patient.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward a matter that is so important, which I think all of us here recognise. She has set the scene very well.

Another issue, which the hon. Lady is perhaps coming to shortly, is the shortage of radiotherapists across the United Kingdom. I understand that England is some 1,500 shy, and we have vacancies in Northern Ireland as well. The training takes five years, which means that it will be five years before the workforce, who are under pressure now, make gains, and that is if all the vacancies are filled. Furthermore, the age of current radiotherapists is an issue. Does the hon. Lady think that the Government need to take the initiative and put in place a visionary recruitment plan for the five-year period?

Selaine Saxby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We do not talk enough about the lack of specialist staff in this area, and I am indeed going to

[Selaine Saxby]

talk about the need for a proper plan for radiotherapy. Obviously, that involves resources of all types moving forward.

I think we all ask why a treatment as effective as radiotherapy is not used more often. Funding for radiotherapy falls between the cracks, and radiotherapy receives only 5% of the cancer budget. While there has been specific investment in radiotherapy, such as the £162 million in 2016 to replace 64 out-of-date machines, and the additional £32 million in 2019, there will be approximately 74 machines in need of replacement by the end of 2024.

We all know the NHS budget is under strain, but radiotherapy is the closest thing we have to a silver bullet for improving cancer care. An investment of £200 million would update all the machines due to be out of date by the end of next year, benefiting an estimated 50,000 people a year. An investment of £45 million in an innovative British technology—surface guided radiotherapy—could reduce waiting times by 1.8 weeks nationwide, and the use of artificial intelligence tools in radiotherapy could save clinicians two hours per patient.

If radiotherapy received between 10% and 12% of the cancer budget, instead of 5%, we could invest in more machines to bring ourselves up to international standards. In England, we have 4.8 treatment machines per 1 million people, while France has 8.5 and Italy 6.9. New machines and techniques would treat patients more quickly and help to clear the backlog. We need to reap the benefits of successful investment in early diagnosis and increased screening programmes so that early diagnosis leads to timely treatment and improved patients outcomes, rather than long and stressful waits for treatment.

We also need to focus investment in the right areas. Treatments such as proton therapy do not help patients outside Manchester and London. Proton therapy assists only 1% of patients, and my constituents in North Devon do not benefit from more investment in urban centres.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that satellite radiotherapy centres have an important role to play? People from my area have to travel down to Hillingdon from north Hertfordshire. The journey is supposed to take 40 minutes, but it is actually an hour and a half each way. If we had a satellite radiotherapy centre in north Hertfordshire it would make all the difference.

Selaine Saxby: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his intervention, and I agree entirely. Indeed, I believe the Government should look at bringing radiotherapy treatments closer to patients such as those in my constituency of North Devon. I ask the Minister to consider bringing radiotherapy to satellite centres or community cancer treatment centres to complement diagnostic tools such as radiology in community diagnostic hubs.

Furthermore, may I recommend a trial in North Devon? We have a proud history of raising funds locally for cancer care provision, and I would dearly love to work with the Minister to deliver a new radiotherapy machine—on a partnership basis, if necessary—to begin to tackle some of our challenges head on. Indeed, that sounds significantly more achievable than tackling some

of the other health inequalities from which my constituents suffer. Not a single NHS dentist across Devon is taking patients, and the last orthodontist has just left Barnstaple. I recognise that dentists are hard to come by but, for anyone listening, the surf is fantastic and you will be the most welcome blow-in we have ever seen in Devon.

Sorting out radiotherapy could be easier with a community-driven fundraising scheme and some assistance from the Minister to facilitate such as trial. I have former community hospitals waiting, and space on the main hospital site that could accommodate the machine and bunker. As we look to 2040, when an estimated 500,000 people will be diagnosed with cancer each year, we need to invest in cost-effective and efficient treatment.

Half of us will get cancer in our lifetime, so one in four of us will require radiotherapy treatment. Access to such treatment should not be limited by someone's postcode. I ask the Minister not just to look at modernising and supporting radiotherapy, but to ensure that planning for cancer care accounts for rurality and that everyone has access to all available treatments.

9.40 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) on securing this important debate. Unusually, I agree with absolutely everything that a Conservative MP said, and I hope the Minister is making copious notes.

I hope you will forgive me if there is a bit of repetition, Dame Maria, because we have been trying hard to address this issue. In effect, this is the radiotherapy lobby. Although we do not have the big guns and finances of the pharmaceutical industry, we are the Members of Parliament who argue for the very small, dedicated and highly skilled radiotherapy workforce to be given the tools and facilities to deliver what they want, which is an improvement in cancer outcomes.

I would like to declare an interest: I am a cancer survivor and have had it twice. I have undergone various treatments, including cancer drugs, chemotherapy, surgery, and radiotherapy on three occasions. I am also privileged to be a long-standing vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary groups for radiotherapy and on cancer. Given the current economic climate, characterised by fiscal conservatism and a reluctance to commit to new spending—that is not a criticism of just the governing party, because it is an issue that my own party is addressing—it is crucial that we optimise the opportunities that present themselves to improve cancer outcomes, and the hon. Member for North Devon raised the issue of IT networks and the use of AI software.

Margaret Ferrier: AI technology is proving to be an asset in improving cancer treatment outcomes, and Radiotherapy UK has outlined the fact that a £4 million investment in AI technologies, which equates to £15 to £40 per patient, would immediately enhance NHS workforce capacity and reduce wait times. Does the hon. Member agree that further investment in AI could be vital in increasing access to radiotherapy?

Grahame Morris: That is a really important point, and I hope the Minister is taking note. I do not know whether the term is “low-hanging fruit”, but here is an opportunity to get some synergies from the new technologies

that are available now but perhaps were not available even a couple of years ago. I will return to that theme, but AI is potentially a force multiplier, if that is the appropriate term: it can improve the productivity of the small radiotherapy workforce. As the hon. Member for North Devon mentioned, AI can save a consultant oncologist two hours in planning a patient's treatment. As a couple of hon. Members have said, it is wonderful to have centres of excellence—some of the best hospitals not only in the United Kingdom, but in the world—such as the Royal Marsden in London and the Christie Hospital in Manchester. Now we have the opportunity, through IT networks and AI, for doctors and clinicians, even in remote locations, to access highly qualified oncology specialists, who can plan the treatment to be delivered in satellite centres. There is a huge opportunity here.

As we have heard, almost half of individuals experience cancer at some point in their lives, and about a quarter require radiotherapy. It is quite a disturbing statistic that only 27% of cancer patients in the UK access radiotherapy. The international recommendation is that between 50% and 53% should. Only half the people who would benefit from radiotherapy are accessing it at the moment.

Sir Oliver Heald: One thing of great concern in my constituency is that people start radiotherapy by travelling to Mount Vernon, which is an excellent hospital, but they cannot keep going, because it is such a terrible journey, so they give up.

Grahame Morris: That is a valid point that needs to be addressed. Perhaps part of the solution is the development of more satellite centres. If I have two words for the Minister, if he will forgive me, they are “treatment capacity”; or make that three words: “radiotherapy treatment capacity”. That is what we need—to increase radiotherapy treatment capacity.

Radiotherapy has immense potential for treating various types of cancer. It has been found that a greater number of cancers can be treated effectively using radiotherapy, either exclusively or in combination with other treatments. It has a critical role in four out of 10 cancer cures. As the hon. Member for North Devon said, it is highly accurate, and there is limited damage to healthy cells surrounding the cancerous tumours, particularly with the latest forms and most modern types of radiotherapy, such as stereotactic ablative radiotherapy and so on.

Radiotherapy is particularly useful for treating cancers in vulnerable areas, and requires fewer patient visits compared with other treatments. It does not occupy intensive care capacity, in the way surgery does, nor does it impact the patient's immune system like chemotherapy. Dame Maria, I am still suffering from the impact of a depressed immune system from the chemotherapy that I had some years ago. That does not happen with radiotherapy. We are not fully utilising the life-saving potential of radiotherapy.

In 2019, Cancer Research UK published a report highlighting inadequate early cancer detection and limited access to the best treatments, resulting in the UK having some of the worst cancer survival rates among western countries. Radiotherapy has been chronically underfunded and under-resourced for a number of years. That is not a political criticism of only this Government, but of

previous Governments too, and it needs to be addressed if we are to approach the outcomes and improved survival rates that we all want to see.

As the hon. Member for North Devon said, the UK currently allocates only 5% of its cancer budget to radiotherapy. That is not the whole NHS budget of more than £100 billion; that is just the cancer budget. Most other European countries allocate 10%. That disparity is very telling. It affects patient outcomes, waiting times and the overall NHS budget. Radiotherapy is the most cost-effective of the three main cancer treatments, with a typical cost per cure of £3,000 to £7,000.

However, the lack of investment has left us lagging behind other countries. Our technology is characterised as outdated. As we have heard, within the next year approximately 55 existing radiotherapy machines, which are 10 years old or more, will need replacement. That is about a fifth of the total number of linear accelerators in our NHS. Although the Government talk about record NHS investment, our radiotherapy access falls behind international comparators. As the hon. Member for North Devon said, England has 4.8 radiotherapy treatment machines per million people, while Italy has 6.9 and France has 8.5. The NHS would require another 125 linear accelerators to meet international standards.

It is true that covid-19 had a devastating impact on the NHS and on cancer services, but it is important to note that this problem—the cancer care crisis—predates the pandemic. We had a statement on 3 July from the Health Secretary about the NHS workforce plan. I was rather disappointed, because I raised the issue of the cancer workforce and the 62-day treatment target and he completely avoided giving an answer. The target is that 85% of people should start their first treatment within two months—62 days. However, the latest figures, which have just been published, show that we are hitting that for only 59% of patients. If the Secretary of State does not know that stat, I will be very disappointed. I know a little about Sunderland football club. I know that Jimmy Montgomery, our best ever goalkeeper, made 638 appearances and that we won the FA cup in 1973 and 1937. I would not expect the Health Secretary to know those things, but I would expect him to know the latest key performance indicators in relation to cancer waits, so I hope that the Minister responding today will emphasise the importance of that.

Delays in cancer treatment are not academic. It is not just a question of statistics for our constituents. For every four-week delay—for every month that a treatment is delayed—the chances of survival reduce by 10%, so this is significant. The hon. Member for North Devon mentioned Professor Pat Price. She is a leading authority on cancer, based at the Royal Marsden, and she has warned that up to 45,000 cancer patients could face deadly delays in their treatment by the end of the year. She is consistently reported in the national press, most recently in the *Express*, and emphasises the need for a cancer-specific plan supported by the requisite investment in improving radiotherapy treatment capacity.

It is great to invest in diagnostics, but this is a hand-in-glove situation: we need to ensure that as the investments in new diagnostic hubs are taking place, we are also making, in parallel, investments in treatment capacity. The Government have access to world-leading cancer specialists such as Professor Price, but we need a

[Grahame Morris]

greater sense of urgency from Ministers to lift the UK from the bottom of the global cancer outcomes league table to the top. I say to this Minister: that is within our grasp; we have given you the route map for how it can be done.

The NHS has undergone two major reforms in the past 13 years and, although reforming public services is essential, the root causes of the issues sometimes come down to a lack of investment. Investment in cost-effective cancer treatments such as radiotherapy can result in quick gains. Expanding and modernising radiotherapy equipment with a modest—by NHS standards—£200 million investment could update the estimated 76 machines about to become outdated. That would benefit 50,000 patients annually. Then, allocating £45 million for the new surface guided radiotherapy—a fast and accurate British innovative technology—could reduce national waiting times for radiotherapy by almost two weeks. We had a meeting quite recently just along the corridor from this Chamber, and these machines can be installed over a single weekend in a specialist radiotherapy centre. We must utilise new technologies to address the workforce crisis and make access to radiotherapy treatment available across the entire country. Technology is available to the NHS today that was not available 25 years ago, and it is unwise that we are not currently using that technology to its utmost potential. If the NHS made better use of AI software, cancer specialists could plan for radiotherapy treatment two-and-a-half times faster than at present, ensuring that many more patients could be treated sooner. I urge the Minister to reconsider accelerating the roll-out of AI technologies in radiotherapy. There is no shortage of excellent science, technology and innovation in this country, and it is worth noting that most of the advanced radiotherapy machines currently operating all across Europe and in North America are made here in the UK—in Crawley, actually—so we are not making the best use of this British technology.

The Government should be laser-focused on retaining current staff and harnessing the opportunities of AI, up-to-date treatment machines, software and innovation to treat more patients and improve productivity. Some of these technologies could save clinicians up to two hours per patient, which is vital in a health service where we have a workforce crisis and a shortage of specialist oncologists. To bring treatment closer to home, investment is necessary in satellite centres or community cancer treatment centres to complement community diagnostic hubs.

Radiotherapy is a quick and highly effective treatment, and cost-effective radiotherapy services are at the forefront of cancer treatment across the world. It is the first duty of the Government to protect their people. The Minister can demonstrate his commitment to that duty by outlining a workable plan to meet the 62-day cancer treatment target after almost a decade of failure, and ensuring that all patients who will benefit from radiotherapy have access to this lifesaving treatment within 45 minutes of their home.

9.57 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this morning, Dame Maria. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for

North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for leading the debate and doing so extremely well; I agree with every word she said. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for not just his speech, but his ongoing work in this area. He speaks with great authority and obviously with great personal experience. I also thank Professor Pat Price, who has been mentioned by both of my colleagues and leads the cancer charity Radiotherapy UK. She is a specialist who adds enormous value to our campaigns to help those in positions of influence to make wise decisions about this vital technology.

Let me start with another positive, and say a massive thank you to that small but incredibly talented workforce of maybe only 5,000 people who deliver radiotherapy in all the centres around the country, literally saving lives every single day. We are massively, massively grateful to all of them.

I apologise that there will be some repetition, but all good campaigns involve repeating one's messages. We know that one of the most dark and terrible facts of life is that around half of us at some point in our lives will contract cancer, which means that pretty much all of us have experienced it in our families—some with remarkable and wonderful outcomes, some with tragic and incredibly sad ones. I have experienced both within mine. We know that radiotherapy is a really important tool in tackling cancer in terms of both palliative and curative treatment. As has been said, the international standard for the number of people with cancer who should receive radiotherapy is 53%; in the United Kingdom, it is only 27%. That should ring enormous alarm bells in all parts of the House and in every corner of the national health service, but I am afraid that it does not feel like that is happening. There are many reasons behind that, but one that we have already heard is that we spend only 5% of our cancer budget on radiotherapy, and the average of countries similar to ours in the western world is nearer to 10%.

Again, we have already heard—but I will restate—that in the United Kingdom we have 4.9 linear accelerators per 1 million of population. In France, there are 8.5 linear accelerators per million people. For the UK to become just average, we would need 125 additional linear accelerator machines this year, as has already been said. Put bluntly, the fact that this is quite a balkanised commissioning process is one reason why we are where we are. The lack of central commissioning means that different centres will, or will not, have sinking funds, so there is absolutely a postcode lottery. It also means that, as our survey—through the all-party parliamentary group for radiotherapy, which I am privileged to chair—discovered, 75 machines that are basically past their sell-by dates will be in use in our hospitals next year, many without a plan to replace them.

We are behind not just on the volume of technology but, as has been suggested, on the deployment of new technology, much of which was developed in this country. That makes it all the more inexcusable. For example, AI software could allow clinicians to accurately plan patient care in a few minutes rather than a few hours. Imagine the impact that would have on our workforce.

We absolutely need to invest in our workforce. We need to support them, to ensure that we boost the morale of people who are already in the service to keep them working in the service, and to bring in the perhaps 1,500 additional net posts needed to ensure that we have

a properly functioning radiotherapy workforce. Alongside that, the fact that we could allow clinicians to do their planning even more accurately, in a fraction of the time, obviously makes sense because we would get even better use out of the workforce than we currently do, in terms of the hours that they put in.

We could also invest, as has already been mentioned, in surface-guided radiation therapy to reduce waiting times. Again, that was developed in the UK, but has not been deployed much here. When we have 40% of people in north Cumbria and about 30% of people in south Cumbria waiting more than two months for their first treatment—we have already heard that every four weeks of delay means that someone is 10% less likely to survive—then, surely, investing in that capacity in radiotherapy, as well as in new technology, is just a no brainer.

All of that costs peanuts—that is a Treasury term, I think—in comparison with equally worthy but vastly more expensive drug treatments. We are talking just £200 million for those 125 new linear accelerators. I am not knocking those treatments, by the way; chemotherapy and immunotherapy are vital weapons in our fight against cancer. Herceptin has saved so many lives, for example, but I have picked that drug for a reason, because the cost of Herceptin, in one year, is equivalent to two thirds of the entire radiotherapy budget.

That is understandable, because drugs do cost more than kit, but it is a reminder of how relatively straightforward this problem is to solve. For a Government that wanted to shift the dial quickly and do something of long-term value, but that would have an impact in a short period of time and would cost, relatively speaking, very little, it should be an obvious no-brainer, and it frustrates me that we are where we are.

Let us be cross-party in our self-criticism, because I can blame this Government for their inaction, and I can blame the coalition Government, and I can blame the previous Labour Government. It is 30 years of us being behind the curve here. Let all accept that we are all responsible and we will all do something about it, starting right now.

Why are we in this situation? I suspect that it is because decisions are often made when the right people are in the room. I am not knocking the pharmaceutical companies, but they have the resource to be in the room. However, when we have our radiotherapy APPG meetings, and we have clinicians from right across the country—the best people in their profession—huddled into little rooms off Westminster Hall, I realise that that is the radiotherapy industry. That is the radiotherapy “lobby”. That is it. We do not have paid specialists; the lobby is in that room. That is perhaps why radiotherapy has slipped off the radar. This is the moment in which it must go right back on to it.

The situation is even worse in rural communities. Some 3.5 million of us live in what we would refer to as radiotherapy deserts, where we are more than a 45-minute journey away from the nearest radiotherapy treatment centre. The national radiotherapy advisory group says that any trust that allows that to happen is guilty of bad practice. In my constituency, pretty much everybody lives outside that 45-minute guideline distance, and when we are looking at the travel times, they are always those from the best-case scenario—travelling at 2 o'clock in the morning, or not in the middle of the tourist

season. Twenty million people visit the lakes every year; the roads get a bit clogged up from time to time. If someone is from Dent, the round trip to Preston to get their treatment will take them about two and a half hours. From Kirkby Stephen, it is two hours to Carlisle, two and a half hours to Preston. From Grasmere and Coniston, the round trips are nearer three hours.

Over my time as an MP it has been a privilege to often take my constituents to their treatment in the Rosemere cancer treatment centre in Preston. By the way, it is absolutely excellent, but just blinking miles away; it is far too far away. I remember taking a young mum—a teaching assistant—and her two young children, for her breast cancer treatment. I remember the impact it had on her, how wearying it was; and she was an otherwise fit and healthy young person. I remember taking an older woman from Kendal, some years later, also for daily treatment, and the impact that had on her and her family. It is not just that travelling those long distances is inconvenient; it is actually dangerous. Sometimes, as has already been said by the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), it means that people will choose not to complete their treatment. It is also true—clinicians will sometimes baulk at this, but I am not criticising them—that people will not be recommended or referred for radiotherapy because it is recognised that that person will not cope with the travelling.

Not long ago there was a bus driver in my neck of the woods who gave up work for two months and moved to Preston for his treatment, because he could afford to do so. The economic impact on people, in terms of worsening their poverty because of the distances that people have to travel, is huge. The simple fact is that because of the distance they have to travel to treatment, people do not live as long in rural areas. That is outrageous.

In 2008 we launched a campaign to bring a cancer treatment centre to Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal. We have largely succeeded. We brought chemotherapy there in 2011, there is more and more surgery, and diagnostics is arriving in the coming months. The one thing we wanted that we have not got is that radiotherapy satellite unit. I want to be clear that the Rosemere unit in Preston is fantastic. We do not want to replicate it; we want to be associated with it. That is, we want a satellite unit that is attached to the Rosemere one and operating at the hospital in Kendal—just as Rosemere itself was once a satellite to the Christie. Today, there are centres that are satellites of the Christie at Oldham, Macclesfield and Bolton, all of them doing a fantastic job and allowing people who live in those communities closer access to that important treatment.

The simple reality is that over these last few years the proposal that has been made for a radiotherapy satellite unit at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal has been written and proposed, and the trust has been behind it. It was eventually signed off in 2014 and then cancelled in 2016. I often point the finger at Ministers and the NHS for that failure to deliver, but I also encourage the trusts and commissioners locally not to let it drop off their agenda. It has vital importance. I often hear commissioners, local trusts in Morecambe Bay and the Lancashire hospitals teaching trusts say the right things, but it feels not sufficiently urgent—tell you what, it is urgent to my constituents. It is urgent every time that somebody gets that awful diagnosis and then

[Tim Farron]

realises that they have weeks and weeks of travelling and might not make it. They might not complete the journeys; that might mean that they do not survive.

Yet if we look at the demographics, our need in Cumbria is increasing. It is recognised that at the moment there is demand for 1.3 linear accelerators, just in the area that is closer to Kendal than to Preston. Sadly, cancer is a disease of ageing, at least in part; as our population ages, we know that that demand will get greater.

Here is a crucial point that I really want the Minister to take on board. The evidence is that when a satellite unit is opened, there is a greater level of demand than was predicted. Why is that? There are reasons why only 27% of people are having radiotherapy treatment when it should be 53%, and access is one of them. The APPG for radiotherapy had a forum for the satellite units a little while ago. What we gained from that was the staggering news that when a new satellite centre opens, rather than just getting the demand from the parent centre that was predicted, there is at least 20% more demand than was expected, in every single one. In some cases, the increase in demand is 50%. That is because those patients were not being referred or were choosing not to complete. If you build them, Minister, they will come, and lives will be saved. That all means that people in Kendal, Grange, Windermere, Kirkby Stephen, Appleby, Sedbergh, Ambleside, Coniston, Grasmere and the rest of our communities in rural Cumbria are facing not just longer journeys, but shorter lives. That is not acceptable.

The United Kingdom needs a radiotherapy boost across the board. It would be relatively inexpensive, and if the Government committed right now, we would see dividends and lives being saved within a matter of months. Rural communities, from Westmorland to the west country and from Northumberland to Norfolk, need it even more. For the 3 million people who live in a radiotherapy desert, as I do, investing in satellite units will make an immense difference.

We are desperate for action in Westmorland. We are desperate to see our satellite radiotherapy unit delivered at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal. I ask the Minister to act personally now and look at our bid for a satellite unit. If he acts and instructs commissioners to get on with the business of commissioning, I promise that our community will raise at least £2 million to help him to make that case in a partnership bid. If he commits to helping people in Westmorland to have better treatment, shorter journeys and longer lives, I will be permanently, eternally grateful.

10.11 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this important debate and for all her work on this issue, which is not a party political one. As we have found today, there is great consensus across the House on this cause, because it is the right thing to do to use our voices as Members of Parliament to champion it. I commend her and other hon. Members present for their work.

We have had a good debate. There has been a lot of repetition, because these issues need reinforcing, and I fear that I will be reinforcing some of the arguments that we have already heard. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for all his work over a long time. He is always championing the cause of radiotherapy and bending the ear of shadow Ministers, and no doubt of Ministers, about its importance. I also commend the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for his work as chair of the APPG for radiotherapy. He brings great knowledge to these debates.

This issue is close to my heart, too. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale said, all families are touched by cancer. Some have good experiences, where loved ones survive; others have less good experiences. I lost both my parents to cancer: my mum died from ovarian cancer when I was 19, and my dad died last year. In fact, last week was the first anniversary of his death. He lived to the age of 77. He had a very rare and aggressive form of rectal cancer; sadly, it could not be treated, because by the time even the earliest symptoms had been discovered, the cancer had already spread in various places throughout his body.

I will be forever grateful for the loving care that my dad received, principally from The Christie in Manchester, but also from the satellite at Oldham. He received palliative care, chemotherapy, immunotherapy and, indeed, radiotherapy. It gave him at least a year longer than he should have survived. My dad was a sporting man and a bit of a gambler, so he was willing to take those odds. Anyway, it gave him an extra year with his great-grandson, as well as with the rest of his family. That is precisely why radiotherapy is key. It was a game changer. The chemotherapy and the immunotherapy did not work; it was the radiotherapy that probably prolonged his life for those extra months.

As we know, radiotherapy is a key treatment for many people affected by cancer. It can be used to try to cure cancer completely, it can make other treatments more effective; it can reduce the risk of cancer coming back post surgery, and it can relieve symptoms in palliative care. Unfortunately, as we have heard today, radiotherapy services are under significant pressure, which is all too evident in the treatment statistics that have been cited. For example, the proportion of people in England having their first cancer treatment within two months of an urgent GP referral has fallen to 58.7%, which is down from 61% in April. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Easington, the target is 85%, but that target has not been met on an annual basis since 2013-14. That really needs the Government's urgent attention. We cannot just blame the pandemic for these statistics, because way before the pandemic the targets were not being met, although I am sure it exacerbated the issue and made the challenge even harder.

My first question to the Minister is what action he is taking to reverse this concerning decline in treatment within two months. We all know that the key to treating cancer is catching it early, but it seems that a significant number of patients are waiting far too long even to begin care, which potentially harms their chances of receiving successful treatment.

There are also serious concerns about technology and infrastructure within radiology services, as we have heard from hon. Members today. In a response to the

Government's long-overdue NHS workforce plan, the Royal College of Radiologists stated that

"we all know how frustrating it is to try and do our jobs with systems and infrastructure that simply aren't fit for purpose."

The RCR also cited an interview in which

"Tom Roques, Vice President for Clinical Oncology, talked...about needing to use seven passwords for seven separate systems in order to provide information to one patient".

When the Opposition talk about embracing new technology and giving NHS staff the tools they need to do their job, that is precisely what we mean. We must embrace new technology. For example, there are tools that can map radiation therapy to cancer cells, avoiding organs more precisely and more quickly than a human can. That is standard technology in the United States of America, but is used by just one in three radiotherapy planning centres in England. Alongside the workforce plan, what is the Minister planning to do to address this problem? Staff already face an uphill battle. The last thing they need is inadequate equipment or overly complex systems.

Regarding the workforce plan, Cancer Research UK has highlighted what it calls

"a lack of detail on cancer-specific professions".

What assessment has the Minister made of that? Can he set out what engagement his Department is having with organisations such as Cancer Research UK on ensuring that services such as oncology are adequately staffed into the future?

The final point on which I wish to press the Minister relates to the inequality in access that all hon. Members have spoken about. Approximately 30,000 extra cases of cancer in the UK each year are attributable to socioeconomic deprivation. Studies have consistently shown that there is unwarranted variation in radiotherapy access rates. We have heard about poor access in rural parts of England, which is an issue that specific hubs linked to the main centres of excellence would start to tackle. I certainly welcome the calls from the hon. Members for North Devon and for Westmorland and Lonsdale. It is crazy that their constituents are missing out on key treatments because access requires them to travel too far, and some who do access such treatments give up their treatment early. We should be doing everything we can to encourage people to access those treatments and keep on them until they are completed.

There are issues with monitoring the inequalities. Cancer Research UK has called for improvements to be made to radiotherapy data collection so that policymakers can understand the scale of the problem and set about addressing it. Does the Minister agree? What action is he taking to ensure that we eliminate the inequalities in radiotherapy access that we have heard about today, and certainly to try to get England to the average level of kit needed, if not to exceed the average? I do not just want England to be average at these things; I want us to be an exemplar.

The next Labour Government will work tirelessly to improve access to radiotherapy, alongside providing the NHS with the staff it needs. We will reform our health system and embrace new technology that has the potential to transform the way we deliver care. We will build an NHS that is fit for the future, and we aim to achieve all relevant cancer waiting time standards within our first

term. That is a pledge that we have made: we have done it before, and there is no reason we cannot do it again, with the political will.

Until then, however, we need to see this Government engaging with clinicians and experts, and doing everything in their power to ensure that the treatment is there for patients when they need it most. As I said, this is not a party political point. We are a responsible Opposition. We encourage the Government to do more. We want them to meet those targets and to expand services—particularly in rural areas, so that access is equal across the country. We encourage Ministers to do that, and to do it at pace. If they do, we will support them.

10.22 am

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for securing this important debate on the accessibility of radiotherapy. I agree wholly with the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) that there are issues in this place that are not by nature party political. The debate has demonstrated that there is huge consensus on all sides of the House on the need for change, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions today.

Let me turn back to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for one moment. Whether it is in the meetings—dare I say it, the many meetings—that I have had with my hon. Friend, or through her public contributions in the House and outside, she has been consistent and powerful in her advocacy on health issues. Her constituents, and patients around the country, are very lucky to have her in their corner.

It is rare for the Front Benchers in a Westminster Hall debate to be allowed so much time to respond. I do not intend to take the entire time available, but I would like to try to answer as many of the questions, points and themes raised as possible. Although Members will know that I am not a new Minister, I am relatively new to this brief, having taken on the cancer portfolio in the last few days. I very much look forward to working with parliamentary colleagues from across the House, including those present today and others who I know have specific interests in cancer, to bring about the changes that we all want to see. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and thank him for sharing his personal experience; I certainly agree with him that we all want to see cancer outcomes improve across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon raised the matter of performance levels, which I will touch on briefly before turning to specific points raised in the debate. I echo the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) in paying tribute to the brilliant work of NHS staff in this field. Thanks to them, levels of first treatment following an urgent cancer referral have been consistently above pre-pandemic levels, with activity in May standing at 111% of pre-pandemic levels on a per working day basis. Over 52,000 people had their first or subsequent treatment for cancer in May. In total, over 332,000 people received their first cancer treatment in the 12 months up to May, which is up by more than 18,000 on the same period before the pandemic.

[Will Quince]

As hon. Members have eloquently pointed out, waiting time performance for radiotherapy is influenced by a range of factors, including workforce and equipment—two subjects that I will come on to address in greater detail. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon referred to the impact of covid and the recovery of cancer services following the pandemic. In February last year, the Government published the delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care. We will spend more than £8 billion between now and 2024-25 to drive up elective activity, including cancer diagnosis and treatment. My hon. Friend referred to the community diagnostic centres, which make a huge difference, and the building of surgical hubs.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Minister for taking the time to answer the points that have been made. Over the years, we have seen every single cancer Minister and probably every Secretary of State, but it seems that just when the penny is about to drop for the responsible Minister, they get shuffled off and nothing actually happens. I hope the Minister will stay in post long enough to deliver the improvements that we want to see.

The community diagnostic hubs are, of course, a wonderful thing, and we have been calling for them, but they must go hand in glove with increased treatment capacity. Otherwise, all that will happen is that the waiting lists will get longer as we diagnose more patients who require early treatment, but without having the treatment capacity to make the inroads that we all want.

Will Quince: I will come on to the hon. Gentleman's specific point, but he is absolutely right. On remaining in post and Government reshuffles, the Prime Minister giveth and the Prime Minister taketh away, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his best wishes ahead of any future reshuffle. Having been in the Departments of Health and Social Care, for Education and for Work and Pensions, I know that any Minister understandably ends up taking a considerable interest in their work. I assure the hon. Gentleman that whether or not I maintain my position in the Government, I will maintain my interest in all the areas I have worked on as a Minister. I certainly commit to continuing that work from the Back Benches when one day the Prime Minister chooses to dispense with my services.

Selaine Saxby: I thank the Minister for all his time and commitment and for meeting me so regularly. When he takes things away and reflects on them, will he bear in mind that although community diagnostic hubs are fantastic, it is still a 120 mile round trip from my constituency to get to one, so there are issues in respect of rurality. In Ilfracombe in my constituency, the healthy life expectancy is 59. Remote coastal communities need to be able to access services, and we are underdiagnosing because it is so hard to access even a diagnosis, let alone the treatment.

Will Quince: I will come on to this point in greater depth, but many of the conversations that my hon. Friend and I have had on health issues, and previously on education issues as well, were about rurality and the challenges of rural and coastal communities. Her points

are well made—I certainly understand them—and she makes a compelling case. I will address them in greater detail later in my speech.

Not only are we building the community diagnostic centres and surgical hubs—and notwithstanding my hon. Friend's point about the distance that some have to travel to get to them—but we are creating them deliberately closer to communities; they are not just based in district and general hospitals. In each of the next two years they will be supported by an additional £3.3 billion of funding, which was announced in the autumn statement, and that will enable rapid action to improve emergency, elective and primary care performance towards the pre-pandemic levels.

On cancer specifically, NHS England recently set out the progress made on reducing the number of patients with urgent suspected cancer who wait for longer than 62 days, and announced that the faster diagnosis standard was met for the first time in February this year. It also confirmed the ongoing priorities to improve performance and long waits, prioritise diagnostic capacity for cancer and, of course, focus on the cancer pathway redesign.

The Government and NHS England have pushed to improve the early diagnosis of cancer, which is so important to give patients the best chance of receiving successful treatment and in turn see more people living longer following a cancer diagnosis. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon eloquently and articulately pointed out—the hon. Member for Easington also made this point—we know that early diagnosis needs to be backed up by high-quality treatment options such as radiotherapy, with its remarkable ability to shrink tumours, as has been set out, and often with minimal side effects.

The hon. Members for Easington and for Denton and Reddish referred to the 62-day cancer target and the changes required to improve cancer outcomes. I hear the strong and compelling arguments that have been made, and I am happy, as I set out at the beginning of my speech, to meet hon. Members to discuss the steps that we are already taking and the further steps that can be taken, alongside NHS England, to improve cancer outcomes.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish asked specifically about steps to meet the 62-day target. To target support towards the most challenged trusts in the country, NHS England has developed an intervention model that is designed both to maximise and expand capacity. Challenged trusts have been placed into tiers 1 and 2, and all tiered trusts have weekly or fortnightly oversight calls, and they also have visits with the regional and national teams from NHS England. They receive support on things like the development of a co-ordinated support plan, which is monitored by fortnightly progress meetings. The plans have focused on areas such as pathway improvements, workforce support and targeted capacity increases. That supports the trusts that do not have the resource or bandwidth internally to turn around services.

When my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon made the case for a satellite centre in her constituency, she raised specific challenges in relation to North Devon that are translatable to other parts of the country that have rural and coastal characteristics. I will outline the basis on which provision is reviewed, but before I do

let me acknowledge the local efforts that she mentioned. She is rightly proud of her constituents' initiative in terms of support with travel and other things.

The network oversight group, in conjunction with the relevant specialised commissioning team and cancer alliances, is required to review service provision on a regular basis to ensure that optimal access arrangements are in place. That applies to proposals that relate to the expansion or re-provision of existing services, or to the development of any satellite facilities. The development of any new service location requires the development of a business case, as my hon. Friend pointed out, and business cases must demonstrate, among other criteria, the consideration of the effect on the provision of existing cancer pathways, both within and outside the network geography.

As I have mentioned, that responsibility sits not with the Government but with the integrated care boards, cancer alliances and local specialised commissioning teams. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend, alongside the ICB, to understand the challenges and what can be done in this space. I understand from NHS England that around 450 patients a year travel from my hon. Friend's constituency to Exeter for treatment, but I am cognisant of the point made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that many more patients might want to access those services but do not because of the travelling and distances involved. That is why a meeting between me, my hon. Friend and the ICB might be a good starting point.

Grahame Morris: The Minister is being generous in giving way. The debate is instructive, and I am glad he has mentioned integrated care boards. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned—sorry, the right hon. Gentleman.

Tim Farron: I am merely honourable.

Grahame Morris: Well, I am sure it is only a matter of time.

One of the issues has been commissioning. NHS England is responsible for commissioning without having a sensible plan to replace old machines, and there are bizarre disincentives to using the most modern machines, which require fewer visits. Furthermore, the fractionations are smaller, and the radiotherapy could be delivered in a shorter time. Bizarre commissioning arrangements and tariffs apply. Is the advent of the ICBs, with the responsibilities they hold, an important element in deciding where the new treatment centres are going to be? Will the Minister outline their role in the context of access to radiotherapy services?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and will jump to the part of my speech that covers equipment, because the issue has been raised by all hon. Members during the debate.

We are absolutely focused on improving cancer treatment and supporting advances in radiotherapy using cutting-edge imagery and technology. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon pointed out, since 2016 we have invested £162 million in the most cutting-edge radiotherapy equipment, which is designed to replace or upgrade more than 100 radiotherapy treatment machines so that we can deliver the best possible outcomes for patients.

As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale said, NHS England is carrying out a stocktake of linear accelerator age, which will be completed in the summer. It is also working with partners to undertake a demand and capacity review, which will complete by the end of the year.

On AI specifically, we want to ensure that we have the best possible cutting-edge, innovative equipment and technologies in the NHS, so we have announced an additional £21 million of funding that will speed up the roll out of AI across the NHS. That will enable us to help to improve diagnosis and to reduce waiting times—one of our top priorities—and clinicians will be freed up to spend more time delivering frontline patient care. The point made by the hon. Member for Easington about AI and the benefits thereof is well made.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has been campaigning on the issue for around a decade, or perhaps longer, and he has met several Ministers. I am yet to meet with the hon. Gentleman, and I know he was due to meet my hon. Friend the Minister for Social Care, but I am happy to honour that meeting. He recently met his local hospital trust to discuss radiotherapy being part of the new hospital programme. Ultimately, that is a matter for commissioners, but we can certainly have that conversation when we meet and try to find a way forward.

A number of hon. Members raised the issue of the workforce. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is no longer in his place, but he laboured this point, and rightly so. We have made good progress in growing the cancer workforce. The annual growth rate of the workforce remains steady at between 3% and 4%, but we need to go further. As of February, there were 33,174 full-time equivalent staff in the cancer workforce. In trusts, that is an increase of more than 11,300 since February 2010. Specifically, the number of therapeutic radiography staff grew by 17.4% between 2016 and 2021. As has been referenced, we published our long-term workforce plan, which sets out actions that are backed by £2.4 billion of Government funding up to 2028-29, a couple of weeks ago.

On travel, the travel that a patient needs to undertake is dependent on the type of treatment they need. Decisions about treatment locations are made on a case-by-case basis. As hon. Members have pointed out, specialised services are not available in every local hospital, in part because they have to be delivered by specialist teams of health professionals with the necessary skills and experience and access to the necessary equipment and medicines. Patient-specific requirements are based on what each individual can cope with and are discussed between the patient and clinician.

The Government are, of course, striving wherever possible to reduce any necessity to travel unreasonable distances, which is why our priority continues to be to bolster the specialist workforce and ensure ever-expanding coverage of equipment. That includes by investing in new radiotherapy machines, but the responsibility for investing in that equipment sits with local systems—the ICBs, which I suspect we will discuss in greater detail when we meet. I hear the case that has been made about equality and rurality. We can address some of those issues and work with integrated care boards so that they see the benefits to patients and to outcomes, as well as the cost savings, if we get it right.

[Will Quince]

We are supporting providers to accelerate the delivery of stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy for targeted cancers, thereby lowering the risk of damage to normal cells. Specialised commissioners have allocated £12 million to support providers to deliver SABR.

Tim Farron: The Minister has given a comprehensive response to us all. On the issue of SABR, would he look in particular at the point made by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) about commissioning arrangements and the perverse incentives that lead to some cancer treatment centres effectively being paid more for using lesser treatment than they would be for more efficient, less invasive, less frequent but more powerful SABR technology and other similar advanced forms of treatment? It would save an awful lot of money and still do a better job.

Will Quince: In short, the answer is yes. There are perverse incentives that exist across Government, and the NHS is no exception. Wherever we identify them, we have to work to drive them out of the system. We have a tendency, unfortunately, to focus on processes and procedures. I want all trusts—I would like us to do this across Government—to focus more on outcomes than on processes. Perhaps when we meet the hon. Gentleman could set out that exact challenge in more detail, because I would be glad to look at it in detail.

Dame Maria, I am conscious that I have gone on for longer than I should have; you have been very generous. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon for bringing this matter to the attention of the House, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions on this hugely important subject. I hope I can assure my hon. Friend and Members from all parties that with the investments we have made and the innovations the NHS has adopted, and the innovations to come, we will continue to improve access to radiotherapy throughout the country. I look forward to meeting the hon. Members present, alongside NHS England, to see what is within the art of the possible in this space. I look forward to working with parliamentary colleagues throughout the House to bring about the improved cancer outcomes that we all want to see.

10.43 am

Selaine Saxby: It has been a pleasure to participate in a debate with you in the Chair, Dame Maria. I thank the Minister for such a comprehensive response, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for participating in the debate. I very much hope that the next time we come together we will be celebrating some successes and improved access for our rural constituents to radiotherapy and other cancer treatments. I thank the Minister once again for his time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the accessibility of radiotherapy.

10.44 am

Sitting suspended.

Electronic Travel Authorisation: Northern Ireland

11 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I will call Stephen Farry to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Electronic Travel Authorisation and Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I thank the Minister for his attendance.

This debate is not about the concept or the introduction of the electronic travel authorisation itself, though I have my concerns in that regard. Rather, the debate covers the implications for the movement of residents and tourists on the island of Ireland, and especially the implications for Northern Ireland. Significant concerns have been expressed by the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Committee on the Administration of Justice and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland. The issue has also been raised with the Government by the Irish Government and in the Oireachtas, the Irish Parliament. The key, overarching point is that a one-size-fits-all approach to the world does not work when it comes to the island of Ireland.

Of course, we have the common travel area, which has been in place since the 1920s. By convention, it allows free movement and residency for British and Irish citizens, with associated rights and privileges. Although the UK and Ireland have always had their own immigration rules and systems for other nationalities, until recently there has been a relatively free flow of other residents and tourists from non-visa jurisdictions across the island. I welcome the exemption to the ETA requirements for non-visa third-country permanent residents in the Republic of Ireland, which I and others had been calling for, but there is a lack of clarity on the evidence requirements for legal residents of Ireland. The UK Government had committed to publish guidance on which documents would be accepted as proof of legal residence, but I do not think that has been published yet. Given the nature of land crossings, it is essential that a pragmatic approach is taken, as many people will drive over the border without ID documents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this important and pragmatic debate on the practicalities of the issue. Does he agree that, for the hospitality industry, the ability of residents of Northern Ireland to travel freely to the Republic for a night away, and the ability of the residents of the Republic to avail themselves of the world-class facilities in Northern Ireland—especially in Strangford, where the beauty and the attractions are very obvious—must be as seamless as someone coming over on a boat from Scotland or hopping on a flight from Liverpool for a boys' weekend away?

Stephen Farry: I thank my colleague from Northern Ireland, who represents the constituency neighbouring mine. I agree with everything the hon. Member said,

with a minor exception: I would put North Down marginally ahead of Strangford, obviously. Yes, the ETA has to work in both directions.

It is essential that immigration enforcement throughout the UK is familiar with the exemption and the documents that can be accepted, as it applies to travel within the entire common travel area. We need to know what happens if someone who is exempt from an ETA is encountered and has no documents proving their legal residence in Ireland, as this will happen from time to time. Will they be given an opportunity to return to Ireland or to provide the documents subsequently, or will they face criminal prosecution and immigration detention?

Overall, the exemption illustrates that it is possible for the Government to be pragmatic in recognising the particular circumstances in Ireland and the reality of the thousands of daily journeys by non-UK or non-Irish citizens: to shop, for leisure, for medical appointments, for education, and in some cases to work. The focal point for flexibility is now largely centred around tourism, although there is considerable disappointment in the tourism sector that similar flexibilities were not announced at the same time as they were for residents in Ireland.

It is important to note two key, overarching factors. First, under the Good Friday agreement, Ireland is marketed internationally as a single destination. The success of tourism on the island is one of the standard examples of successful north-south co-operation. Secondly, most visitors to the island of Ireland, including those who travel onwards to Northern Ireland, enter through airports and seaports in the south. The overwhelming majority of international flights to the island come via Dublin, especially from the lucrative North American market. Overall, 70% of international visitors to Northern Ireland start in the Republic of Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. He will recall the engagement that we had collectively, as Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland, with the Minister at the turn of the year. One point that we made to him was about the practical outworkings of a lack of enforcement against the legal requirement that tour operators and insurance companies would have for their visitors to comply with the law. We had a discussion about an exemption for such individuals, so that they could visit Northern Ireland and avail themselves of all of our beauty and our offering without this legal impediment, which would render them without insurance cover or put tour operators in an invidious position. Does he share my disappointment that we thought we had reached a positive conclusion with the Home Office, but that has not been borne out?

Stephen Farry: The hon. Member is right to highlight the situation whereby enforcement and practice may be very light or non-existent but none the less the legal jeopardy continues. That is the nub of the problem that will complicate matters for the tourism sector, particularly when it comes to things such as insurance cover. Again, he reflects on our general disappointment, because there was a time when we felt that a pragmatic outcome for tourism was very close to getting over the line—and, indeed, the Minister kindly facilitated some discussions between his officials and representatives of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance.

Overall, there are three types of negative impacts of the ETA on tourism. The first is the bureaucracy, which could serve as a deterrent to visitors coming to Northern Ireland; they may perceive it to be too much hassle and not worth the bother of coming north, and instead choose to do other things in the Republic of Ireland. The Government may well argue that the relative cost is low, highlight the two-year duration of the ETA and stress that it will be relatively easy to apply, but it is worth highlighting a few features of Northern Ireland entry in contrast to other potential entry points. Unlike with the rest of the UK, visitors will be entering via a land border rather than an air or seaport, so there is not the failsafe of drawing attention to the ETA requirement as visitors enter the UK at those other locations. Visitors to Ireland may have the need for an ETA highlighted to them within wider marketing of the island, but that may not necessarily always filter through.

There will also be practical difficulties in highlighting the need for an ETA at the time of booking flights because many tourists will be arriving formally into Irish airports, where there is no need for an ETA, so it would be a case of trying to second guess whether people were going to make further journeys into Northern Ireland. Indeed, there is a clear pattern of tourists making spontaneous decisions to come to Northern Ireland, including for day trips—after all, Northern Ireland is barely an hour's travel time from Dublin—and feedback from coach operators confirms that much of their business reflects last-minute bookings. Any marketing campaign at Dublin airport will obviously require the co-operation of Irish authorities, which would be difficult at the best of times, never mind in the politically charged context of today. The biometric aspect may also become a barrier to some with limited ICT literacy—for example, some older people, especially whenever they are seeking to make spontaneous journeys.

The second area of impact is the legal jeopardy for tourists who travel to or through Northern Ireland without an ETA. Although there will be no routine immigration control on the Irish land border, those who enter Northern Ireland will nevertheless still legally be required to possess a valid ETA. Problems may arise if someone has an accident or needs medical assistance or otherwise has to interact with the UK state, and they do not have an ETA and the associated legal right to be in the UK. That could lead to insurance policies becoming invalid. Failure to possess an ETA could open someone to a criminal offence and potentially—under the Illegal Migration Bill—to deportation.

At the same time, the absence of routine immigration controls undermines the Government's main justification for the ETA—knowing or monitoring who is entering the UK—so we could end up placing legitimate visitors in legal uncertainty without any real benefit to the state from the ETA. There is a potential headache and deterrent to those running coach tours and other forms of transport, especially if there is a danger that operators become liable for any passengers they carry who do not have an ETA.

Confusion and uncertainty may also exist for those seeking to travel from two different points in the Republic of Ireland, but who travel through Northern Ireland to get to the second point. For example, the quickest route for most of County Donegal to and from Dublin means travelling through County Tyrone on the A5, even

[Stephen Farry]

without stopping. A short journey from Clones to Cavan town entails a short road journey that weaves in and out of Northern Ireland in the south-east of County Fermanagh. There is now an enhanced consequence of the Illegal Migration Bill for those who knowingly come into the UK, including Northern Ireland, without permission, including having an ETA.

The interpretation of “knowingly” will be crucial, including in what circumstances it is deemed reasonable or otherwise for someone to be expected to know that requirement. In the event that the term “knowingly” is interpreted in due course in a very narrow way, it may render the application of the ETA to movements within the common travel area to be relatively meaningless in certain respects. None the less, it will still leave that degree of jeopardy and uncertainty for tourists. Someone could potentially be deported to their own country or a third country, even banned from ever returning, under the provisions of clause 2 of the Illegal Migration Bill. That risk is most acute with inadvertent movements over the land border, because elsewhere, at air and sea ports, there would be safeguards.

Any such outcomes for tourists moving into Northern Ireland would send a terrible message regarding the UK being open or otherwise to international tourism. I understand that the Government are looking at that particular point in relation to the Illegal Migration Bill, and I would welcome any clarification from the Minister in that regard, not least given that the Bill has now concluded its formal proceedings.

It is worth stressing the potential legal jeopardy will also apply to visa nationals who are ordinarily resident in the Republic of Ireland and who cross into Northern Ireland without proper permission. I shall give a couple of examples. A woman from Kenya, living legally in County Donegal, could cross the border, which is a simple bridge, into Strabane to do some weekly shopping, and end up interacting with the state and attracting the attention of immigration control. She could be detained and deported back to Kenya. A Nigerian man, travelling between two points in the Republic of Ireland, could unfortunately have a traffic accident and come to the attention of the state. Again, under clause 2 of the Bill, he could be deported, not just back to his home in Ireland, but all the way back to Nigeria.

There will be a resultant impact on the tourism sector in Northern Ireland from the ETA. Tourism professionals tell us that additional bureaucracy and costs are decisive in what are otherwise marginal tourism decisions. That could be an American choosing between going from Dublin to Cork and going from Dublin to Belfast. Despite having some amazing scenery—already alluded to—and wonderful attractions, the tourism sector in Northern Ireland is still below its full potential. Profit margins are very narrow in that sector, so this additional burden and deterrence could be critical, and make or break for a number of operators and attractions. Overseas tourism represents 25% of the annual tourism spend in Northern Ireland, so it is very significant.

A potential pragmatic solution lies in granting a short exemption for tourists to come to Northern Ireland for around five to seven days, without the need for an ETA. There is no routine immigration control planned anyway, so the actual threat to the integrity of the UK

borders is overstated as a contrary argument. Legal jeopardy would kick in after that period of exemption had expired, if the person had not left the UK or otherwise applied for an ETA. The Northern Ireland tourism sector believes that that exemption is not only vital but workable. Another angle could be to decriminalise the penalties for someone who crosses inadvertently. That is another potential angle that we would like to put on the table.

I shall move on to a wider issue. Despite Home Office assurances that no immigration checks will take place along the land border, individuals travelling between Northern Ireland and Britain, or directly from Ireland to GB, may still encounter some immigration inspections. An inconsistency between residents and tourists on the island of Ireland raises concerns about how one could possibly differentiate between the two, as determining who fits into each category is highly subjective. Such subjectivity could create fertile ground for perpetuating biases and heightening the risk of racial profiling.

The instance of racial discrimination and profiling within the common travel area has generated significant alarm, with direct negative consequences on our racialised and migrant communities. We would welcome clarity on how the Government intend to safeguard the rights of people of colour departing the island of Ireland, ensuring that racial profiling does not increase on such journeys.

It is worth stressing that until recently, there has been a degree of harmony in how the UK and Ireland have managed movements around these islands. Notably, both the UK and Ireland stayed outside the Schengen arrangements when they were first put in place. However, we are now seeing the implications of growing divergence. The Government may well reference the US electronic system for travel authorisation, and the fact that the European Union is developing its own system specifically for the Schengen zone. However, Ireland is not joining the EU system. Any notion of reinventing an all-islands framework to manage such an arrangement, even if politically doable, would flounder on the basis that Ireland cannot restrict or impinge the free movement of EU citizens beyond passport control, while the post-Brexit UK can.

In conclusion, this is a significant issue for the tourism sector in Northern Ireland specifically. We are joined today by some of its representatives in the Public Gallery. I appreciate that there has been considerable communication between stakeholders and the Minister and his officials, but we do not yet have a solution to this extremely thorny problem. We believe that a pragmatic solution is warranted on the island of Ireland, given our very particular circumstances, and I look forward to a constructive response from the Minister.

11.16 am

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) on securing the debate, and I thank his colleagues from Northern Ireland—the hon. Members for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—for attending. I thank him for the opportunity to further discuss what is, as he said, an important issue for Northern Ireland.

I intend to cover as many of the specific points that have been made as possible, although the purpose of the debate is not to relitigate the UK Government's decision to introduce an electronic travel authorisation, or ETA, scheme. It is worth explaining that decision. The ETA scheme will enhance the Government's ability to screen visitors and prevent the travel of those who pose a risk to the UK.

The introduction of an ETA scheme is in line with the approach that many of our international partners already take to border security. The United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have similar schemes, and the European Union is preparing to introduce the comparable European travel information authorisation scheme, or ETIAS. That scheme is due to be implemented later this year, although we hear from the Commission that it may be somewhat delayed. In that sense, the UK is not an outlier; it is moving in lockstep with international partners. However, I appreciate that the Republic of Ireland has not chosen thus far to create its own scheme, and there may be reasons why it is particularly difficult for it to do so.

Overall, we believe that the UK will be a safer place as a result of the ETA scheme, but that is not to deny the fact that the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland pose a series of challenges, which is the purpose of this debate. The Government have tried to take a pragmatic approach, which is seen most vividly in the exemption for non-visa national residents of Ireland. In response to concerns raised by Members of this House and the Government of the Republic of Ireland, as well as other stakeholders, about the possible impact of ETAs on residents of Ireland who frequently cross the Northern Ireland-Ireland border, the Government have agreed to exempt non-visa nationals who are legally resident in Ireland from the requirement to obtain an ETA when travelling to the UK on a journey within the common travel area. In order to benefit from that exemption if required by a UK immigration official, those who are legally resident in Ireland may instead present physical evidence to demonstrate that they are legally resident in Ireland. That seems to be a satisfactory solution to most parties involved.

The next issue is whether the Government could agree some form of exemption for tourists. As the hon. Member for North Down said, I am grateful for opportunities to engage with him and others, including some of the tourism organisations who are in the Public Gallery. My officials have also done extensive engagement work behind the scenes.

We have carefully considered the request to exempt those tourists visiting Northern Ireland from Ireland from the ETA requirement due to concerns that the requirement to obtain an ETA will be considered a bureaucratic barrier for international visitors visiting Northern Ireland from Ireland. We appreciate that the Northern Irish economy depends to an extent on those visitors and that a number of businesses and sectors benefit significantly from tourists who primarily come to, or at least fly into, the Republic, but want to take advantage of the many great attributes of Northern Ireland, whether that is golfing or visiting the coastline or historic cities and towns. We appreciate the concern that those people may view this modest barrier as sufficient to deter them from making day trips to or overnight stays in Northern Ireland.

In the Government's view, ETAs will for the first time allow us to have a comprehensive understanding of those seeking to come to the UK via the common travel area and to refuse them permission in the very judicious circumstances where that would be appropriate. Exempting tourists visiting Northern Ireland from Ireland from the requirement to obtain an ETA would, to our mind, result in an unacceptable gap in UK border security, which would allow persons of interest or risk who would be refused an ETA to enter the UK legally, undermining the very purpose of the ETA scheme, which is to prevent those who pose a risk to the UK from entering it.

Stephen Farry: Will the Minister respond directly to the point that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I made? While the Government's justification for the ETA is to collect that data and have an understanding of who is coming in, the Government do not have the means to collect that data from people crossing the land border, because there is no routine immigration control on the border. As such, those tourists entering Northern Ireland will not be in the system, but none the less they still carry the legal jeopardy of having that legal requirement. That is the nub of the issue: they do not go through immigration control, but they still bear all the risks associated with it. That is the essence of the plea for pragmatism.

Robert Jenrick: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes. This is not a perfect solution. A perfect solution is unavailable as long as we want to respect the unique circumstances of the island of Ireland and the common travel area, but we consider that it would be even more complex, or suboptimal, to have a situation where Northern Ireland was hived off from the scheme altogether. That would be a greater loophole in the ETA scheme and one that, having given this considerable thought, we are not willing to countenance.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) *rose—*

Robert Jenrick: I will come back to the hon. Lady in a few moments time. I would like to answer the questions posed by the hon. Member for North Down around non-compliance and the legal jeopardy of individuals, because those are important points. As now, the UK will not operate routine immigration controls on journeys from within the common travel area, with no immigration controls whatsoever on the Ireland-Northern Ireland land border. However, as is currently the case, individuals arriving in the EU, including those crossing the land border will need to continue to enter in line with the UK's immigration framework, including the requirement now to obtain an ETA. For example, visa nationals are required to obtain a visa for the UK when travelling via Ireland to lawfully enter the United Kingdom. That is a well-established requirement, and we are simply extending the same principle to individuals requiring an ETA.

The Government will launch a clear communications strategy to tackle any misunderstandings about the requirement on travel to Northern Ireland. That is something we are preparing, and we will work extensively with Northern Irish, Irish and island of Ireland tourism organisations to ensure that we get this right. For individuals who accidentally travel to Northern Ireland without an ETA under the illegal entry offence, we want

[Robert Jenrick]

to take a sensible and pragmatic approach. We have made it clear that prosecutions under illegal entry will focus on the most egregious cases and not on accidental errors.

We will take a very careful approach when examining the individual circumstances of each case before deciding whether or not it should be pursued for prosecution, and the Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales and the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland will ultimately determine whether a prosecution is proportionate and in the public interest. We hope and expect that they will take that responsibility very seriously, so those individuals who are simply going about their daily lives or who are tourists who inadvertently forget to obtain an ETA will not be put in an unnecessarily difficult situation.

Claire Hanna: As the Minister can see from the debate, this is an issue that has a very broad consensus—he will know that that is no mean feat—due to the very serious impact on tourism businesses. He will be aware of that impact and the fact that many decisions to come north are ad hoc ones to visit, for example, the Ulster Museum, the Lyric Theatre or the Let's Go Hydro water park, or for destination shopping on the Lisburn Road. Has his Department conducted any economic analysis of the loss to Northern Irish businesses of those ad hoc decisions to come north for just one day in a trip to the island?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to note all of the many reasons why it is great to visit Northern Ireland; I have visited Northern Ireland myself on several occasions and always enjoyed it. The Department has conducted an impact analysis, which shows that there is an impact on tourism in Northern Ireland. However, we still consider that the overall value to the security of the United Kingdom outweighs concerns about that impact.

That does not mean that we do not take mitigating steps, one of which is to work with the Northern Irish tourism bodies on communications. I have mentioned

that and my officials met representatives from the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance, Tourism Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland last month to begin discussions about how we can collectively work together on communications, both within the UK and abroad. Clearly, there is more work to be done in that regard with travel agents and some of the ancillary services to which the hon. Member for North Down referred, such as insurance companies and car rental companies, to ensure that this message is properly communicated to all involved.

We have deliberately chosen to keep the cost of the ETA as low as possible. We have now announced that it will have a maximum fee of £10, which compares favourably with the fees for the versions of the ETA in the EU and the United States, so we do not think that that level of fee is likely to deter visitors, particularly some of the higher-income and higher-spend tourists whom Members present are particularly concerned about.

We have also said that we will work very closely to keep this matter under review and of course we want to ensure that we learn from the initial experience once the system is created. If there are things that we need to do to change the system over time, we will do so. We want to work pragmatically with Northern Ireland and its MPs, because we care about the success of the Northern Irish economy.

In closing, I thank the hon. Member for North Down for securing this debate and for raising this issue today. I commit that we will continue to discuss this issue and will continue to work well with the organisations that I know he is in contact with, and we will try to find sensible, pragmatic solutions to make this system as successful as possible, while understanding that this is not the solution that he wanted. Nevertheless, we all share a common desire both to protect security for the people of Northern Ireland and of the wider United Kingdom and, of course, to ensure growth and prosperity in the years ahead, particularly for the critical sector of tourism.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Cost of Living: Private rented sector

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of living and the private rented sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I am pleased to have secured this debate on an aspect of the cost of living crisis that does not get the attention it deserves: the huge financial challenges facing private renters. Much focus is rightly placed on the Tory mortgage bombshell that is causing misery for millions of homeowners, but we should not forget that this crisis also affects renters, who are seeing increased mortgage costs passed down to them as a result, or landlords selling up and leaving them at the mercy of a market in which rents are soaring. It is the latest blow to renters, whose home lives are already characterised by insecurity and extortionate costs. For many of the approximately 11.6 million people privately renting in this country, the situation is becoming increasingly untenable. Average rents in the UK are almost 10% higher than they were in 2020, and rents on new tenancies recorded by Zoopla have increased by 22% since March 2021.

National statistics do not tell the whole story, as they mask staggering increases in certain areas. For example, average monthly rents for lets in my home borough of Trafford were £1,093 per month in January 2023—a 12% increase on the year before. Rent as a share of income is at its highest level in over a decade, at 28% of average earnings, rising to 40% in London. That is among the highest in the OECD, and around three times higher than in Germany and France. Evidence from Shelter shows that a third of private tenants are now spending over half of their monthly income on rent.

The steep increases are a result of local housing allowance rates being frozen since 2020. In the past year, the number of private rented homes that are affordable on LHA dropped by some 55%. When less than one in five private rents in England is viable for those on LHA, and virtually everyone accepts that there is not enough social housing, what do we expect low-income renters to do? Grim figures released by the Office for National Statistics last week revealed that one in seven renters have reported running out of food and being unable to afford more. According to Shelter, almost 2.4 million renters are behind on their rent or consistently struggle to pay it. It is clear that renters have been experiencing the cost of living crisis for some time and are reaching breaking point.

Let me illustrate the situation by sharing some stories from my constituency of Stretford and Urmston. A single mum recently contacted my office in desperate need of help. She has two children, one of whom is disabled, with multiple health issues that mean she is now awaiting the fourth surgery of her young life. My constituent told me:

“The cost of living crisis makes it impossible to stay where I am.”

The family, unable to afford their rent, are now homeless and living in temporary accommodation under a level of stress that I cannot begin to imagine.

Another mum from my constituency suffers from a tumour on her spine, as well as anxiety and depression. She is currently living with her baby in a third-floor flat with no lift. There is mould in the flat, which is making her baby and her ill. She is in arrears, as the flat is so mouldy that she has been spending £100 a week trying to heat it. She has recently been issued with a section 8 eviction notice by a landlord who will not even return her messages.

I thank both constituents for allowing me to share their stories today, but the sad reality is that their experience is not uncommon. I could provide dozens of examples from my constituency alone, and many hundreds more, as a result of the engagement work that the parliamentary engagement team did in advance of the debate. On behalf of my constituents, and every other renter living under this intolerable pressure, I ask the Minister why support is so slow to arrive. Why is the plight of renters so often ignored? What will the Government do to help? The Renters (Reform) Bill, first promised in 2019, yet introduced only in May 2023, is moving at a snail's pace—still no Second Reading, two months on from First Reading. During that time, the House has risen early on 10 occasions, which tells us the simple truth that this is not an issue of parliamentary scheduling; it is an issue of priorities.

We are going into a summer where, according to Generation Rent, a section 21 eviction claim—something the Government promised to end—is being made once every 15 minutes. That means that 96 tenants a day will be forced to find new homes over the summer, in this incredibly difficult market. Inevitably, that means that renters will be forced into cheaper substandard parts of the market, where approximately 600,000 homes pose a serious risk to health, with issues such as damp and mould.

Some renters will fare even worse, and be made homeless, adding to the shameful record of this Government, under which the number of people living in temporary accommodation has increased by 97% since 2010. The Government are sitting on the sidelines as our housing market, from rents to mortgages, is in crisis. Because of that, the situation is set to get even worse, with rents now expected to rise by 6.5% by the end of 2023, and the number of homeless people potentially reaching 300,000.

As the chief executive of the charity, Crisis, has said, low-income renters are facing a “catastrophe”. The Labour party grasps the urgency of the situation. Our renters’ charter will deliver substantial new rights and protections for tenants, including longer notice periods and, finally, a ban on no-fault evictions. Ultimately, the cost of living crisis for private renters is, at its core, another symptom of our broken housing market. The increased demand for private rentals, driven by years of Government failure to invest in genuinely affordable social homes, is the major reason why rents are so high. The only solution to this, and to the wider housing crisis, is to build, build, build. That is not just my view. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee says in its report on the private rented sector:

“The affordability crisis in the private rented sector, the source of many of the other problems in the sector, can only be properly solved by a significant increase in house building, particularly affordable housing.”

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he acknowledge that we have more houses now per head than we did in the 1950s? It is not just a crisis of the number of units but, as he has just said, it is the tenure of those units that is vitally important. If we do not get that mix right, the crisis will not be solved.

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend is right and, like him, I look forward to a Labour Government ensuring that social rent is returned to the second highest form of tenure. We retain a significant shortage of homes overall. We are nowhere near where we should be, compared with the European average. He is correct, and I agree, that we are in desperate need of a significant increase in social homes, up and down this country.

Conservatives seem to have given up on building, as demonstrated by their capitulation on housing targets, which will leave house building at its lowest since the second world war. Only last week, we learned that, under this Government, we are in a situation where, despite the UK being short of approximately 4 million homes, the Department that is meant to build those homes is handing back £1.9 billion to the Treasury after failing to find housing projects to spend it on. I am pretty sure that, had the Minister sought advice or support from Members in this room and beyond, that money could have been well spent.

Thankfully, Labour has not given up on house building. Reforming planning rules, reintroducing house building targets, building on parts of the green belt that are in fact far from green, and, as I have just discussed with my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), restoring social housing to the second largest form of tenure will be key drivers in our mission to achieve the fastest growth in the G7.

I congratulate the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), on all his work to raise this issue and to promote house building but, as he knows, I would go further still. Our 76-year-old planning system needs to be scrapped so that we can shift away from a discretionary system at the mercy of nimbyism towards one that is rules-based, underpinned by a flexible zoning code and determined nationally for local implementation. Only then will we be sure that we can build the number of homes, and the types and tenures of property, that we require.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend welcome the Labour party's proposal to empower local councils to set up development bodies, which would not only be reactive in the planning policy debate, but would be proactive, in the sense that they could buy up land at the current land-value cost rather than inflated future costs, and develop it themselves or with partners?

Andrew Western: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I welcome the Labour party's commitment not only to end the hope value that exists in the sale of land at present but, as he says, to introduce the vehicles that empower local authorities to build. As a formal local authority leader, I know how challenging it is, particularly without a housing revenue account, to build those homes, and therefore to influence the place-shaping of communities. It is imperative that local authorities can do that to ensure that we get the homes that our local neighbourhoods require.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I am a London MP, representing a constituency in south-west London. On average, renters in London are spending almost 50% of their pre-tax income on rent, and the housing supply in the private rental sector has dropped dramatically. The impact is that our key workers—our nurses and teachers—cannot afford to live in the capital, and young families are being driven out, which is demonstrated in falling school rolls. However, London Councils says that local authorities could be building 143,000 new social homes; they are ready to do that, but they just need the funding. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need urgently to come forward with that cash so we can boost the supply of social housing in our capital?

Andrew Western: I agree with the points made by the hon. Lady. I commend the work of the local authorities that are leading the way in building social and affordable homes in an incredibly difficult climate. It is not an easy thing to do with the way the grant regime is set up, but I know how fixated council leaders are on tackling the housing crisis, particularly in places such as London and my constituency in Greater Manchester, where prices are driving key workers and low-income workers out of the local area, which causes all sorts of issues with labour shortages and the provision of skills that we desperately need.

I support planning reform, but it will not be easy. Difficult choices must be made to end the gross inequities of our housing market. In the current system, we are set to spend more on housing benefit than on building affordable homes, and renting is no longer a step in the journey towards owning a home, but an expensive, insecure quagmire, dragging down a generation of younger people. The cost of living crisis is affecting us all, but especially private renters. They are generally, younger, poorer, more vulnerable people, trapped in the vicious circle of a broken rental market. It is no wonder that Sky News found last week that low-income private renters are suffering the most in the current financial climate, and the need for action to tackle this social catastrophe is now acute. Labour has shown that it gets this. I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, she will show that she understands it too.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Members should bob up and down if they wish to speak, so we can calculate how long everyone gets.

2.45 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I had not intended to participate in this debate, but having listened to what the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) said in introducing his debate, I wondered where the issue of supply comes into this equation. The crisis in the rented housing sector is largely one of a lack of supply. When I had the privilege of being a junior housing Minister in the 1980s, we transformed the supply of rented housing by introducing the Housing Act 1988, which freed up tenancies and introduced shorthold tenancies. It enabled those with surplus accommodation to let it out through agreements under which they realised that, if they wanted to recover possession, they could do so at a time of their choosing

and by agreement with the tenants. As a result of the 1988 Act, the supply of private rented housing in this country soared, and the sector was completely transformed for the better.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the hon. Member recognise that 50% of former council houses that have been sold off are now just rented out, rather than providing stable homes? The reforms that he talks about have led to an increase in private rents above and beyond the inflation in the housing market, less home ownership, less stability in the housing market and more insecurity. They have partly caused the crisis that we are in now.

Sir Christopher Chope: Obviously, I do not accept that analysis, and I certainly do not accept the hon. Gentleman's proposition that, just because somebody lets out a property that used to be a council property, that somehow means it is a meaningless value to the person renting it. If a former council tenant buys a house and ultimately chooses to let it out, that property is available in the private rented sector. On supply, a lot of people in that sort of situation are now withdrawing their properties from the rental market, thereby reducing the supply and forcing up pressure on costs and rents.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the chief executive of the National Residential Landlords Association that it is a myth that landlords are leaving the market, that in fact the private rented sector is growing, despite further regulation, and that there is no evidence that the private rented sector is being vacated? Some people are leaving, but more people are joining.

Sir Christopher Chope: I do not accept that, because I have looked in vain at the impact assessment that accompanies the Renters (Reform) Bill—I looked at the latest iteration a couple of weeks back—and the Regulatory Policy Committee condemned that impact assessment as totally inadequate in dealing with the consequences of the reforms for the supply of housing from the private rented sector. The Government's own impact assessment does not answer the question as to the quantity and quality of private rented accommodation that would be available were those reforms to be implemented. One can only assume that the Government either do not know the answer to that question or do not wish to disclose it.

As somebody who believes in the market, my instinct is that, if we put pressure on potential suppliers of a product through regulation, the likely consequence is that the potential suppliers will withdraw some of that product from the marketplace. That is exactly what is happening at the moment. One of the figures used by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston in introducing the debate was the large increase in section 21 evictions. My understanding—admittedly, it is only anecdotal—is that that is because private landlords now feel that they are going to be squeezed by both a nominally Conservative Government and the prospect of a real socialist Government, both of whom are basically anti-private landlord and are determined to reduce the supply of rented accommodation available in the private sector.

The Renters (Reform) Bill has only been printed and had its First Reading—it has yet to receive a Second Reading, which is a complaint from the Opposition—but I hope the Government withdraw that legislation, because the mere fact that it has been printed in the form of a

Bill is driving a large number of people away from renting out their private homes and causing them to bring property back under their control, with a view to selling it. A lot of the property that is available for sale at the moment is property that was formerly rented.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I take the hon. Gentleman back to his analysis—I will be polite and say “analysis”—of section 21 evictions? If there is fear of a Labour Government, can he explain why so many Members of Parliament are having to move out of their London accommodation? Landlords are putting up prices by so much, and when an MP says to the landlord, “Let's negotiate,” they are immediately served with a section 21 eviction notice. If landlords are doing that to Members of Parliament, surely they can do it to anybody else. That why the legislation needs to be scrapped.

Sir Christopher Chope: Surely a landlord should have the right to decide whether they wish to rent out a property. If they decide that they cannot rent it at a price that they think is reasonable, they can withdraw it from the marketplace.

The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point about Members of Parliament and the rented sector. When I was first a Member of the House, we had a system whereby the taxpayer subsidised the cost of Members of Parliament renting a second home. Then the rules were changed, because it was decided that it was very poor value for taxpayers to keep on paying rent for Members of Parliament. The rules were changed to allow Members of Parliament to take out a mortgage on their constituency home or second home, and the interest on that mortgage, rather than rent, was paid by the authorities in Parliament. That was because prices in the rental market could only increase, and it is why, traditionally in this country, most people choose to be owner-occupiers, rather than renters, if they can afford it.

The point was made earlier about the reduction in the number of people who own their home, particularly among the younger generation. It is really sad and a chronic problem. Between 1 million and 2 million more people would probably own their home if we had the same policies in place for home ownership as we had in the late 1980s. The advantages of home ownership include flexibility, and the fact that when someone retires, they will probably have paid off their mortgage and not have any ongoing housing payments. It also means that people can be mobile; if their job takes them to another part of the country, they can move. All the rigidities in the private rented sector were reduced, to an extent, by the 1988 legislation, but it seems that there is pressure, from both my Government and the Opposition, to reintroduce a lot of the controls. That would make it very difficult for somebody to move from one private rented home to another in another part of the country for a job.

The supply of private rented housing is key, and nothing suggested by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston would do anything other than reduce the supply of private rented accommodation.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is arguing very strongly on behalf of landlords in the private rented sector, but the overwhelming evidence

[*Beth Winter*]

shows that the majority of tenants are on a low income. Their tenure is often insecure, and the properties are often low quality, with damp and mould. Did you consult tenants? Can you speak on behalf of the tenants who are suffering?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The “you” should be “he”.

Sir Christopher Chope: I shall try to address the hon. Lady’s remarks by saying that in my constituency, there is a lot of social rented accommodation, and to suggest that poor-quality accommodation with damp and mould is the exclusive purview of the private landlord is a complete travesty of the facts. In much of the social rented sector, the stock is very poor quality, insulation standards are very low, repair standards leave much to be desired, and rents are increasing. This year, the Government have allowed social rents to go up by 7%. The point was made just now that there may be a 6.5% increase in private sector rents by the end of 2023.

There is a problem right across the rental market—it is not confined to private landlords—but one thing is absolutely certain: if we restrict the supply of private rented accommodation, rents will go up, and the Government’s response will be to control the rents, which will produce an even worse result. Landlords will not even have the resources to maintain their properties in good repair. Those of us who were privileged to be around in the late 1970s and to see the state of the accommodation across much of our urban areas, particularly London, know that that resulted from years and years of neglect by the public sector, and of penalising the private sector and driving it out of business. My concern is that we should not get back into that scenario. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister winds up the debate, she will confirm that the Government will not go ahead with the renters’ reform legislation, because that will have the perverse consequence of reducing supply and increasing rent.

My final point is about population. The population of this country is expanding exponentially and unsustainably. Since 1990, which is also the base date for measuring CO₂ omissions, the population of this country has gone up by between 10 million and 11 million, or about 20%. Last year and the year before, net migration was more than 600,000. The number of people who wish to live in this country is increasing far faster than our ability to provide rental accommodation for them.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I am told by the Clerk that we are straying from the terms of the debate. There are others who want to get in.

Sir Christopher Chope: I have given way a lot, and hope that I have been able to give some more balance to the debate. My hon. Friend the Minister should not forget the undoubted success of the 1988 reforms, and should remember that she is a Minister in a Conservative Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We will go to an informal limit of six minutes, and will start with Alex Davies-Jones.

2.59 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As ever, it is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and an honour to take part in this debate, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western). It is really important and timely, because the cost of living crisis rages on. Inflation is at its highest for 41 years, and thousands of our constituents up and down the country are falling into poverty. I have no doubt but that since the emergence of the crisis, every colleague in this Chamber will have heard, in their advice surgery, harrowing stories—perhaps more of them than ever before—of suffering and difficulty. Indeed, when I hosted a dedicated cost of living support event in Rhydyfelin just a few weeks ago, I heard story after story from terrified residents who felt that they just could not make ends meet any more. They told me that it felt as though the walls were closing in. That is the reality of Tory Britain today.

It is the same story across the country. One in seven people in the UK goes hungry because they cannot afford to eat. According to recent research from the Trussell Trust, an estimated 11.3 million people have faced hunger in the past year. That is double Scotland’s population. This Tory Government have presided over the largest slide in living standards in a generation, in the sixth-largest economy in the world. That is a shameful indictment of the Government’s record. As colleagues will no doubt be aware, a staggering fifth of our population lives in poverty—13.4 million people. The Prime Minister has hedged his bets on delivering on those laughable five priorities, but so far he has failed to get a grip on inflation, or do anything of substance to help the thousands of families and households who are suffering.

We have nothing but inaction from this zombie Tory Government, who are asleep at the wheel while our constituents face the impossible decision of whether to pay the rent or feed themselves. In recent months, we have heard much about the impact of the Tory mortgage penalty on homeowners, and the mortgage market has capsized, thanks to the Tories’ incompetence, but it is absolutely right that today’s debate should highlight the incredibly difficult conditions that our constituents in the private rental sector face. Thousands of people are already struggling with rent arrears from the pandemic, but now, on average, renters are having to spend a third of their income—or, more often than not, half—on rent. We desperately need reform in the private rental sector. One of the most urgent changes for which Labour and housing campaigners have been calling for years is reform of the cruel practice of no-fault evictions. Tenants already suffering under impossible conditions thanks to inflation and the cost of living crisis frequently face eviction by their landlord, just for reporting disrepair or mould.

Colleagues will be aware that the Tory Government promised to ban no-fault evictions in England way back in 2019, three whole Prime Ministers ago. The disgraced former Prime Minister Boris Johnson also promised to ban them, but we are all familiar with his reputation for breaking promises. Of course, the disastrous short-lived tenure of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) as Prime Minister hardly left her time to act on no-fault evictions. It is shameful that it has

taken the Tory Government four years to act on their manifesto commitment to introduce a Bill banning the vile practice.

The Renters (Reform) Bill looks set to be delayed once again. As we have heard, First Reading took place in May, but colleagues will not be able to debate the Bill until September at the earliest. With every day of delay that passes, the Government are letting down thousands of renters in desperate circumstances. This is more dither and delay from a hapless Tory Government who seem to have given up the ghost. There is zero progress on debating the Bill, let alone passing it into law.

A staggering 65,000 households have faced homelessness through no-fault evictions since the Government first pledged to act, but I am pleased to say that the Welsh Labour Government are leading the way. The Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 is the biggest change to housing law in Wales for decades. The Welsh Government have taken the bold step of extending the notice of eviction that landlords must serve to their tenants to six months. That is a vital period of respite. The measure will go a long way towards reassuring renters in difficult situations. England is the only nation in the UK without a mandatory landlord register; the devolved nations, including the Welsh Labour Government, have had such a register for years. That is yet more evidence that this Tory Government are just not interested in helping vulnerable tenants in the private rental sector.

Before I finish, I would like to give one anecdote. We all have hundreds from our constituency surgeries, but the one that hit me hardest was from a resident of Tonyrefail. She has rented her house for 14 years, and is the single mum of a young daughter. Recently, she got in touch with me because she is being evicted by her landlord of 14 years. The landlord is putting up her rent from £425 to £650 per calendar month—a 50% increase in the rent. How is that reasonable? Where is the compassion? Where is she meant to find that extra money every month?

We urgently need action to help those in private tenancies who are already exhausted from the cost of living crisis, but with zero leadership from the Tory Government, it is clear that only a general election, and a Labour Government, will deliver the change that we desperately need. I urge the Minister to bring forward legislation as soon as is possible. We desperately need it on the statute book. Renters can no longer wait.

3.4 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on securing this vital debate. We are living through a housing crisis in the United Kingdom, and there is a desperate lack of affordable, accessible, suitable and settled accommodation for millions of people across the United Kingdom. At the same time, we are suffering the greatest cost of living crisis in living memory, with rising rents, extortionate energy costs, food bills rising, below-inflation pay rises and inadequate social security benefits. This is a perfect storm, and nowhere more so than in the private rented sector, as others have commented.

Data from last week shows that private renters are five times more likely to struggle financially than homeowners. The private rented sector is now bigger

than the social rented sector, and the demography of the people using the private rented sector has changed quite significantly. They tend to be older people, families and those on low incomes. Private renting tends to be insecure, and the accommodation tends to be in poor condition. If Government Members cared to look at research by Shelter, Crisis and many others—the Chartered Institute of Housing has written a lot about this—they would see that hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to accept properties that are either unsuitable or in poor condition. They are living in damp, mouldy and overcrowded accommodation, because that is all that they can afford. That is a major issue in the private rented sector.

The increasing competition for private rented properties means that there are increases in rents. Private rent prices increased by about 5% last year. Low pay is the cause of housing issues for millions of people, but many of those on low incomes are unable to afford private rent because of the complete inadequacy of the local housing allowance, which has been frozen since 2020. More than half of those receiving LHA have a shortfall. In Wales, during the first two weeks of February, just 1.2% of properties advertised on the formal rental market were available at or below LHA rates. That is absolutely shocking. That is putting unbearable pressure on families. There was an almost 70% increase in repossessions across the UK between January and March last year. Local authorities are doing what they can to help, through the discretionary housing payment scheme, but that is insufficient to meet the shortfall. Wales spent 155% of its discretionary housing payment allocation on support for housing costs. That is much more than any region in England.

The evidence is clear: the Government must restore local housing allowance rates and re-link them to rents, so that they cover at least the cheapest 30% of local rents. As others have commented, we have been inundated by constituents with an array of housing problems, including problems with affordability in the private rented sector. One lady has taken on a kinship caring responsibility, but she is being penalised by the system. She was unable to afford rent; she had assistance via the discretionary housing payment, but it was insufficient, and she is now in arrears with her utilities. That is not acceptable in the fifth-richest nation in the world. The quickest and most effective way to keep people in their home is for the Government urgently to invest in local housing allowance, so that it covers the true cost of rents.

The Renters (Reform) Bill does not address cost issues, so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) mentioned, the Welsh Government are leading the way. They have just opened a consultation on fair rents and affordability. They are seeking evidence on defining “local income” and “fair rent”, as well as setting out proposals for fair rent and affordability. ACORN in Wales commented that rent controls are “the bare minimum response”, but it is pleased to see the Welsh Government considering rent controls. Rent controls must be considered. I completely agree with the comments of the Bevan Foundation: it endorses rent controls, but says that we must also increase the provision of social housing, reform the social security system, and take action to improve security of tenure.

[Beth Winter]

To conclude, if we are to address the UK's horrendous housing crisis, we need a holistic approach that also looks outside housing. We need to challenge the capitalist neoliberal system, which allows the few to benefit at the expense of the many. Housing is more than bricks and mortar; it is a home. We need to look at housing in a different way. *Diolch yn fawr.*

3.10 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on securing this important debate.

The cost of living crisis has hit people across the country hard. The price of food, fuel and household bills have soared at the same time as wages have fallen in real terms, and 13 years of consecutive Conservative Governments has seen family budgets squeezed at the longest and deepest levels since records began in the 1950s. One of the biggest household expenditures, of course, is a place to live, whether that is a rented or mortgaged property, and that means monthly rent or payments. Almost one in five households in England live in the private rented sector, and that number is rising as the cost of home ownership rises, too.

As we have heard today, people who live in the private rented sector face a number of challenges. The charity Crisis found that private rents rose by an average of 11% across the country in 2022, but household allowances and people's wages have not kept pace with the rise. Between January and March 2023, landlord repossessions increased by 69%. More people are struggling to support themselves and their families, and, of course, if they live in the private rented sector, they often live in fear that they will be evicted through a no-fault eviction notice. As we have heard, this Government promised to abolish no-fault evictions in their 2019 manifesto, but they have not done so to date.

Privately renting in this country is far too insecure. Renters not only face the prospect of no-fault eviction, but can have their rent raised considerably at short notice. Landlords are piling the rising costs on to tenants, or in some cases simply putting prices up to the highest level they can get away with. One distressed constituent contacted me after they, along with their partner and four-year-old, were forced to move back in with their parents because their private rented property was repossessed. Their sibling and nephew are also living with their parents—all sharing one bathroom and toilet. Family members are suffering health issues because of the stress of the situation, and relationships are fraying.

Having somewhere to live should not be a luxury. A number of people living in private rented properties in Barnsley have contacted me about the quality of their housing. They have described having to put up with conditions that make it unfit to live in: plaster falling off the walls, areas of rising damp, windows that will not shut and unresolved structural issues. That needs to change. A Labour Government would pay the private sector the urgent attention it needs by introducing the

private renters' charter, which would ban no-fault evictions, lengthen repossession notices and introduce a code of practice for letting agents.

Too many people are being forced to make difficult choices just to keep a roof over their head, and the poorest in society are suffering the most from the cost of living crisis. I have spoken today about those living in the private rented sector, but of course people across Barnsley, whether they rent or own, are struggling. The Tory mortgage bombshell has cost mortgage owners £1,500 extra a year, and in Barnsley that is in the context of poverty rates that are higher than the national average. Over 40,000 residents in the borough are in fuel poverty, 11 children in every class of 30 are living in poverty and workers are on average £100 a month worse off than in previous years.

I have spoken to many constituents at the various cost of living advice surgeries that I have hosted across Barnsley East, and they have told me about the real impact of the cost of living crisis on their health and wellbeing. As we saw from the ONS report a few weeks ago, levels of anxiety and depression are at their highest in over 15 years, and life expectancy in areas such as Barnsley is significantly lower than the national average. The cost of living crisis has a real impact not just on people's day-to-day existence but on their future. I hope that the Government are listening to the debate, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.14 pm

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for securing this incredibly important debate.

The cost of living is one of the most difficult challenges facing people across the UK. It comes up on the doorstep and in my constituency surgeries in Erdington, Kingstanding and Castle Vale time after time. My constituents, just like many people across the UK, are really struggling to manage the rising costs of energy and food. A constituent told me that they cannot even pay their bills, let alone start paying off their debts. This is all while residents have been hit by the Tory mortgage bombshell—either as homeowners or as renters absorbing costs through higher rents. One of my constituents said:

“Our rent was increased twice within the space of a few months”.

That feeling of helplessness is sadly not unique to communities such as mine. Shelter estimated that on a single night in 2022, there were more than 20,000 homeless people across the west midlands and more than 14,000 in Birmingham. That is equivalent to one in 80 people in the region. We know that the cost of living crisis is pushing more people than ever out of secure housing, with no-fault evictions increasing by 116% this year.

One of my constituents was issued with a section 21 notice. She lives with her son and is a foster carer for her three grandchildren. She has been renting her home for the last six years, but her landlord has decided to sell the property and now she does not even know where they will be living this time next month.

Munira Wilson: I am sorry to interrupt the flow of the hon. Lady's speech, but she gave startling statistics on homelessness in the west midlands. I wonder whether

she is aware that in London, where the homelessness crisis is probably at its most acute, a shocking one in 23 children is homeless. That is, on average, one in every classroom. In constituencies such as mine—Twickenham, in the London Borough of Richmond—very little emergency accommodation is available to the council. Families who come to my surgery are having to come in from as far afield as Croydon, Slough and the upper reaches of north London to get to school. That is particularly difficult if their child is on an education, health and care plan. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that as well as urgently building more social housing, a short-term fix for some of these problems is to increase the local housing allowance urgently?

Mrs Hamilton: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I absolutely agree with her that the allowance needs to be increased. The situation is just going from bad to worse. At the moment, to say that we must tighten our belt, as the Prime Minister has said, is just not good enough. Sometimes we have to spend so that we can ensure that our citizens are being taken care of.

There are real, human implications from the Conservatives' failure to end no-fault evictions. Since they promised to do so three years ago, more than 50,000 households—like my constituent's—have been threatened with homelessness under section 21. Where people can find housing, it is not always suitable or even safe.

In Erdington, we have real problems with houses in multiple occupation and exempt accommodation. In April 2023, the ward of Stockland Green in my constituency was assessed as having 271 HMOs. That places the ward sixth highest in Birmingham, with an increase of 39 properties this year; it is reducing family homes in that area. I hear regularly from constituents living in so-called supported housing complaints about anything and everything from bedbugs and disrepair to serious concerns about fire safety, fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour.

In the last month alone, two new planning applications have been made for HMOs in my constituency. One is to turn a three-bedroom property into a seven-bed HMO, and one is to turn a former pub into a 10-bed HMO. I led a campaign calling on local people to object, and our petition collected the support of 398 concerned residents in a week. That is an issue that my constituents and I feel strongly about, and it is not going away. The only way to fix the housing crisis is to build far more social housing. Under the Conservatives, the number of new social rented homes has fallen by over 80%. Labour will build more social homes, ban no-fault evictions and prioritise boosting our economy so we can fix the broken housing market. The bottom line is that everyone deserves a secure and safe home, but sadly right now my constituents and people across the UK cannot have one because they are paying the price of a Tory Government. It is time for change.

3.20 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for bringing forward this extremely important debate. The UK is a country shamed by the poverty of its people and especially of its children. The Government's failure to act to curb the corporate

profiteering that is driving inflation is just one of many ways in which the Government are fanning the flames of the cost of living emergency. In this country, 14.5 million people live in poverty and 4.3 million of them are children. In the last full calendar year, real-terms wages fell by 3.1% while, according to the latest ONS figures, private rents rose by 5% in the year to May.

Figures from Generation Rent tell us that private rents have increased by 22% since March 2021 and have been pushed up further in response to even higher interest rates and as landlords take advantage of the crisis to improve profits. As a result, private renters in England pay up to 40% of their median household income on rent. Rent as a share of income is at its highest level in over a decade. While the Scottish Government took action last year to at least temporarily cap rent increases at 0% through the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022, the Westminster Government have allowed rents to be driven by the market and by greed, with little thought for the additional burden it places on the backs of those already going under.

The Government's Renters (Reform) Bill, which was introduced in May almost a year after the planned reforms were announced, has seen its Second Reading delayed until at least the autumn, with no date yet announced despite the imminent recess. Meanwhile, more than 4 million households that rent privately—a number that has doubled in the two decades of failure to build council and social housing—continue to face unsecure tenancies, arbitrary and back-door section 21 no-fault evictions and often appalling living conditions. In the middle of a cost of living crisis, they are also paying over £570 a year more than they need to in energy costs, according to E3G, because of landlords' refusal to upgrade heating systems and insulation. As a result, fuel poverty charity National Energy Action has noted that private renters are more likely to be fuel poor than people in all other types of tenure and more likely to live in the leakiest properties, often needing to spend thousands of pounds more than the average household just to keep a healthy temperature at home.

We have seen, in the case of the odious Illegal Migration Bill, just how quickly this Government can force legislation through Parliament when they have a mind to do so. Against the backdrop of a perfect storm of misery for millions living in privately rented accommodation, the Government must—yes, must—urgently publish an accelerated timetable for the Renters (Reform) Bill and combat the affordability crisis in private renting, which is absent from the proposed measures, but will at least go some way toward reducing the injustice and inequality of private rent.

3.25 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on leading the debate. I always like and enjoy listening to his contributions. He follows a fantastic former Member of Parliament, Kate Green, who represented his constituency very well. He used his local authority experience, which is very important when discussing such issues.

The related issues of the cost of living and the private rented sector should be of great concern to members of all political parties as they affect the wellbeing of people

[Chris Stephens]

in each of the nations of these islands. Much of what we are discussing today is centred on the experiences of people in England and Wales, so I will contribute a Scottish perspective. There have been some criticisms, from some sources, of the SNP-led Scottish Government and how they have handled the private rented sector. What Members will hear from me are the views of other interested organisations that contradict those misgivings and are supportive of the stance the Government have taken in Scotland.

We are familiar with the factors that have contributed to the current cost of living crisis, although some might question how much those factors have contributed, or even whether they have contributed at all—for example, Brexit—but no one will dispute that the war in Ukraine has driven up the price of oil, with a consequent massive increase in domestic energy costs. Russia's de facto blockade of the Black sea has also resulted in Ukraine's exports dropping to one sixth of the pre-war level, causing grain prices to rise dramatically. We have all seen the effects on the price levels on supermarket shelves. Covid has also played an obvious part in taking us to where we are.

We know that the biggest factors in determining the cost of living are wage rates and housing costs. The limits of devolution mean that the Scottish Government have no real say in private sector incomes, but for many in the public sector—nurses, midwives, teachers, junior doctors—pay awards have been sufficient to avoid protracted industrial and strike action. It is not as much as we would wish to pay, but better than elsewhere and certainly appreciated, which brings us to the major factor in the cost of living crisis: rent prices.

Different legislatures in the UK have taken different approaches to dealing with rent prices. In Scotland there were recent changes to the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022, which took effect from 1 April. With the exception of some defined limited circumstances, those changes have included a cap on most private landlords' mid-tenancy rent increases at 3%. The enforcement of evictions continues to be paused across all sectors for up to six months and increased damages for unlawful evictions of up to 36 months of rent will continue to apply. Those measures will be in force until 30 September, provided they remain necessary, but there is also the option to extend for another six-month period if required. As previously announced, a social sector rent freeze has been replaced with agreements from landlords to keep any rent increase for 2023-24 well below inflation. That voluntary approach to rent setting agreed with the social sector will equate to an approximate average rental increase of £5 per week. That is still a strain for many, but more manageable than is the case elsewhere.

The legislative approach has had its detractors who suggest that SNP policies have harmed or unfairly targeted the private rented sector. There is, however, no credible evidence for that, leaving the detractors' motives open to question. For example, concerns are expressed by some private landlord representatives about the different approach between social and private landlords. The Scottish Government contend that a collective approach like that in the social sector is simply not possible in the private rented sector. As a consequence of the policy,

the 3% increase in the average rent of a two-bedroom private rented property, which is the most common size, is broadly comparable in monetary value with the average planned increase in the social sector.

The Scottish Government continue to monitor the data and to listen to landlords and tenants, in order to consider whether the measures that are in place remain proportionate and necessary. The recent legislation is time-limited and can only be extended with the approval of the Scottish Parliament, and in any event it cannot extend beyond March 2024 at the latest.

Some have suggested that investors will exit when certain rent-controlled regimes are introduced, and some political parties claim that this has already happened. But, again, there is no evidence to support those claims or suggestions. On the contrary, the chief executive of the Scottish Association of Landlords has stated publicly that

"We do need to have rent control in Scotland. I think that's where we're going to be going."

Let me add a few other views about Scotland and its recent decisions. Crisis Scotland told Parliament:

"We all know that the cost of living crisis is an emergency at the moment, and for those in poverty that's an emergency as acute as the pandemic. And it calls for emergency measures that at other times wouldn't be considered. We absolutely support the need to do something to support tenants through that crisis."

Living Rent said that a rent freeze would have a

"massive impact, as skyrocketing rents continue to pile on top of out of control energy bills."

Shelter Scotland stated that short-term emergency measures in the Programme for Government

"are great news for tenants and will stop people from losing their homes."

The Scottish Trades Union Congress said that

"the Scottish Government is to be commended for freezing rents...when used, the powers of our Parliament can bring positive change."

It is on the use of the powers of the Scottish Parliament that I will now dwell, because Scotland has delivered 10.8 social rented homes per 10,000 population compared with just 1.2 per 10,000 population in England—nine times as many. Spend on affordable housing in Scotland remains the highest in the UK. Since the Scottish National party came into office in 2007, that has produced 14 homes per 10,000 population compared with 9.7 per 10,000 population in England. The Scottish Government's per capita spending on affordable housing is more than three times higher than that of the UK Government. And in their published 2022-23 Programme for Government, the Scottish Government pledged to deliver 110,000 homes ahead of 2032, of which at least 70% will be available for social rent and 10% will be in our remote rural and island communities.

The Scottish Government have also committed a five-year investment of £3.5 billion to Scotland's internationally recognised Affordable Housing Supply Programme, which this year's £752 million affordable housing budget feeds into, despite a 3.4% real-terms cut in capital funding from the UK Government.

The first-time buyer relief, which raises the nil rate band to £175,000, means that the majority of Scotland's first-time buyers pay no land and building transaction tax, which replaced stamp duty, and all other buyers benefit from a tax reduction of £600.

All that activity can be compared with the work of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which recently handed back £2 billion in funding, including £1.2 billion that was unused from the Help to Buy scheme.

I ask everyone here to ponder on the past achievements and future plans for Scottish housing, and consider whether some of them might also be applicable in some other parts of the UK. There have been several well-documented attempts in recent times to dilute the dissolution settlement and reduce the decision-making powers of the Scottish Government.

Beth Winter: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful contribution to the debate and the comments with regard to Wales and Scotland show the progressive, more radical policies there. Does he agree that if the devolved nations received fair, needs-based funding settlements from the UK Government, we could go much with those radical socialist policies?

Chris Stephens: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member.

In closing, on the cost of living in the private rented sector, the UK Government might do well to follow the policy lead of Scotland and Wales, and I urge the Minister to respond positively to the suggestions that have been made today.

3.34 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As ever, Dr Huq, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on securing this incredibly important debate and on his powerful opening remarks. He has served in this place only for a relatively short time, but he has already made a considerable impact. His commitment to advocating for all those at the sharp end of the acute housing crisis has helped and will continue to help to ensure that it remains a prominent consideration for the House.

I also thank all those other hon. Members who have participated in this afternoon's debate. I particularly commend the compelling contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton), and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter)—I hope that I pronounced that last constituency correctly.

I also want to take the opportunity at the outset to express the Opposition's thanks to all those organisations that have done so much to keep the issue of renters' reform on the political agenda, particularly the 20 organisations that form the Renters' Reform Coalition.

The cost of living crisis remains the most pressing issue facing households across the country. Against the backdrop of static inflation and rising core inflation, prices in some areas are easing, but remain high by historical standards. Pay is now rising, despite a cooling labour market, but continues to fall in real terms. Direct cost of living support for households is being scaled back, and the Government have overseen one of the biggest tax rises in a generation. As a result, families are continuing to feel the squeeze, and many are cutting back on essentials, withdrawing savings and racking up debts.

All the evidence suggests that private renters are particularly hard hit. Data released by the Office for National Statistics only on Friday, made clear that renters are nearly five times as likely to be financially vulnerable compared with mortgage holders or outright homeowners. According to that analysis, as many as four in 10 renters are finding it difficult to pay their rent. Renters are more likely than mortgage holders to cut spending on groceries and other essentials, to run out of food, and to be behind on energy payments.

The pressure on private renters reflects, at least in part, the sharp increase in rents over the recent period, owing to the mortgage crisis this Conservative Government presided over, as well as the general shortage of lettings, an issue rightly highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston in his comments relating to overall supply. According to the ONS, private property rental prices across the country rose 5% in the 12 months to May 2023, the biggest increase since the national data series began in 2016, with rent rises most acute in London.

We have heard several statistics in the debate, and other analysis suggests that the situation could be even more dire, with property website Rightmove suggesting that rents have risen nationwide by 9.4% in the past year, and by an eye-watering 14% in Greater London. The combination of all those pressures means that the situation for many renters is nothing short of dire. According to Shelter, almost 2.5 million are either behind or constantly struggling to pay their rent, an increase of 45% since April 2022. An analysis produced by the debt advice charity, StepChange, suggests that private renters are twice as likely as the general population to be in problem debt.

With renters across the country at breaking point, and many falling into arrears and at risk of eviction, they urgently need the long-term security and better rights and conditions they have been promised by this Government. After so many years of waiting, the Government finally published the Renters (Reform) Bill on 17 May. Yet, two months on, the Bill has not had its Second Reading and will not have it before the summer recess. That means, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd mentioned, we will not get a chance to consider it before September.

The Government's justification for the delay, as suggested by the Secretary of State at departmental questions last week, is that a "fit-for-purpose impact assessment" was required to be available before progressing the legislation. No one disputes the need for a fit-for-purpose impact assessment to accompany the Bill, as we subject it to detailed scrutiny. We welcome the fact that the regulatory policy committee declared it green rated as of 3 July. However, it is frankly laughable for a Government that published the impact assessment for the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill the day before Third Reading to suggest the absence of a fit-for-purpose one is the sole reason that Second Reading of the Renters (Reform) Bill was delayed.

Whatever the reason for the delay, with a green-rated impact assessment now available, there is no reason whatsoever that we cannot begin to progress this long overdue and desperately needed piece of legislation. Will the Minister confirm to the House, and all those renters following our proceedings today, that the Renters (Reform) Bill will finally have Second Reading in the

[Matthew Pennycook]

weeks immediately following the House's return after the summer recess? Can she also reaffirm the commitment she made in response to a question from journalist Vicky Spratt at the Renters' Reform rally on 21 March, to the effect that the Government will ensure that the abolition of section 21, and presumably therefore the passage of the Bill in its entirety, will be completed this autumn?

As the Minister will know, the Opposition were supportive of the proposals published in the "A fairer private rented sector" White Paper last year, on the basis that they provide a solid foundation for overhauling the private rental market, and we welcome much of what is in the Bill. However, we do have some concerns. We were troubled, for example, that the proposed legally binding decent homes standard for the private rented sector, and the ban on landlords refusing to rent to those in receipt of benefits or with children, commonly known as "no DSS" practices, are not in the Bill.

The explanatory notes accompanying the Bill state:

"The Government is carefully considering how to implement these policies and intends to bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity within this Parliament."

The Minister confirmed to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee last Monday that separate legislation was not required, but that the Government intended to introduce both measures, along with stronger enforcement powers for councils, through the Renters (Reform) Bill. Can she confirm today that that is indeed the case? Will she provide the House with an assurance that the changes will be considered and scrutinised in Committee, rather than tabled as detailed amendments just prior to Report, thereby allowing for only limited scrutiny, as her Department has done with other pieces of recent legislation?

Lastly, the Minister will know that the Opposition regret the fact that important elements of the White Paper are missing from the Bill as published, including powers to limit the amount of advance rent that landlords can ask for and measures to expand rent repayment orders to cover repayment for non-decent homes. Can she tell us whether the Government are open in principle to amending the Bill to include those measures and to address its other well-known and well-understood deficiencies and loopholes, not least the inadequate means of redress provided for challenging extortionate within-tenancy rent hikes, or is it the Government's intention to resist such attempts to strengthen this important piece of legislation?

Private renters have waited long enough to secure a fair deal. The case for transforming how the rental sector is regulated, and for finally levelling the playing field between tenant and landlord, is indisputable. The case for reform existed before the cost of living crisis, which has now made it an urgent imperative. The Government must act, and must act boldly. I look forward to listening carefully to the Minister's response.

3.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government. As is traditional, I thank the hon. Member for Stretford

and Urmston (Andrew Western) for securing the debate on this important issue, which matters to all of us, including those of us who serve in the Government. He spoke passionately on behalf of his constituents, as did the other Members who have spoken, and I will come on to their contributions before I conclude my remarks.

The hon. Gentleman's concerns reflect my determination to make sure that the Government deliver a strong, functioning private rented sector. As has been reflected during the course of the debate, private rented accommodation is the second largest housing sector in England, providing homes for 4.6 million households and an estimated 11 million tenants. It plays a vital role in supporting people to study away from home, explore new locations or move to find work, which is why we are ensuring that tenants have the security they need and enjoy a positive experience of renting a home.

As has been alluded to, the Government recently introduced the Renters (Reform) Bill to Parliament. The Bill will help change the landscape of the private rented sector. It is the most significant reform to the private rented sector for a generation, and it will deliver on the Government's commitment to a better deal for renters. The Bill will make a fairer, more secure and higher quality private rented sector, fit for the 21st century. It will end section 21 "no fault" evictions and move to periodic tenancies, allowing landlords and tenants to end tenancies when they need to. This means that tenants can rent decent, secure homes and put down roots in their communities, while being empowered to challenge poor practice without worrying about retaliatory eviction, or they can leave if the landlord fails to meet their basic responsibilities.

However, we know that the overwhelming majority of landlords provide a good service, and we recognise that good landlords play a vital role in providing decent homes for millions of people across the country. That is why we will introduce comprehensive, fair and efficient grounds to ensure that landlords have confidence that they can regain possession of their property when it is reasonable to do so. We also want to simplify the system for both tenants and landlords, which is why all rent increases will take place via one mechanism. We will allow rent increases once per year in periodic tenancies and increase the notice that landlords must give to two months, giving tenants more time to plan and to seek advice. That will create a fairer system that allows both parties to negotiate rents effectively, while protecting security of tenure. I want to be clear: this Government do not support rent controls. Some Members asked me to set out our position on that. We recognise, however, that most people want to buy their own home one day. We are therefore firmly committed to helping generation rent to become generation buy.

We are working towards delivering on our commitment of 300,000 homes a year. Despite all the doom and gloom that may be reported, we are making strong progress. There is always more to do, but it is important to recognise that annual housing supply is up 10% compared with the previous year, with more than 232,000 net additional homes delivered in 2021-22. That is the third highest yearly rate for the past 30 years. We have also announced £10 billion of investment in housing supply since the start of the Parliament, and the Government are on track to deliver thousands of affordable homes

to rent and buy across the country through our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme. A large number of those are for social rent.

I want to address the—if I may put it this way—nonsense stated by a couple of contributors to this debate, who said that money has been handed back to the Treasury. That is simply not the case. The money referred to was re-profiled, which is a normal part of Government accounting—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members might want to listen and find out how Government funding and finance work. That money will be recycled and refocused into the 2016 to 2023 affordable homes programme. I hope that we will hear no more of that kind of comment.

A healthy housing market thrives on having a range of tenures. That is why we have launched the £1.5 billion levelling-up home building fund, which provides loans and takes out equity in house builders that would otherwise struggle to access finance. The Government have made a range of interventions to support the sector over the past decade. The construction of new Build to Rent homes will play an important part in helping to ease demand pressures in the private rented sector and is already providing thousands of much-needed new quality homes.

We know that right now meeting immediate housing costs is a huge struggle for some people, and that a higher proportion of income is being spent on rent by those on lower incomes in particular. In April 2020, therefore, we raised local housing allowance rates—a significant investment of almost £1 billion—and that increase has been maintained since then. Where tenants are unable to meet their housing costs and need further support, discretionary housing payments are available from local councils. Since 2011, the Government have provided almost £1.6 billion in discretionary housing payment funding to local authorities. For those who need additional support, the Government are providing another £1 billion of funding—including any Barnett impact, as colleagues from the devolved nations have spoken today—to extend the household support fund in England into the next financial year, bringing total funding to £2.5 billion.

Beth Winter: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I will not give way, if the hon. Lady does not mind, because I have a lot to get on the record.

Cost of living pressures go beyond housing costs, and that is why we have taken decisive action to support households, totalling £94 billion or £3,300 per household on average, across 2022-23 and 2023-24. We uprated benefits and state pension by 10.1% in April. For 2023-24, the Government are providing additional means-tested cost of living payments of up to £900. We also provided significant support for households with their energy bills, covering about half of a typical household energy bill this past winter. I utterly reject comments to suggest that the Government are not interested in helping people on low incomes. I have set out how we are doing just that with billions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

I will touch on the Members who have spoken. I thank the hon. Members for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe),

the Front Benchers of the SNP and the official Opposition, the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope).

Sir Christopher Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am about to refer to my hon. Friend's comments, if he will allow me, so he can come back to me after that. He asked about the RPC and the impact assessment. I agree with him that this is about supply, and I assure him that the number of PRS properties increased by 11,000 in 2022 compared with the previous year. The data from UK Finance shows that the number of buy-to-let landlords reached a record high at the end of last year. There is no evidence that private rented landlords are leaving the market. Our Bill is fair to decent landlords, and the RPC has estimated the net cost to landlords to be just £10 per property. The committee has given the Bill a green rating, and I do not think £10 per property is a significant sum that is going to force landlords to leave the market.

Sir Christopher Chope *rose*—

Rachel Maclean: If my hon. Friend wants to challenge me further, I will allow him.

Sir Christopher Chope: I want to ask the Minister about her aspiration to move from generation rent to generation buy. When does she expect the Government to deliver the voluntary right to buy for housing association tenants, which was first promised in 2015?

Rachel Maclean: I refer my hon. Friend to my earlier remarks, which set out that we are building record numbers of houses both to buy and for rent. We will make further announcements on that point in due course.

I gently remind the other Members who have spoken that all of them, I think, represent areas that have Labour-run councils, or else represent areas in the devolved nations. Their own councils have considerable powers, funding and tools, especially in enforcement, to tackle a lot of the issues that have been raised in their casework.

I was struck by the complaint made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington about the way her own city council, which is run by the Labour party, is allowing HMOs to be delivered. I suggest that she takes that up with her own Labour-run council—likewise for the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston, whose constituency is of course part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which is run by Labour Mayor Andy Burnham, who has considerable powers, influence and devolved funding from the central Government.

Beth Winter *rose*—

Rachel Maclean: I briefly give way to the hon. Lady, who has been very persistent.

Beth Winter: Is the Minister aware that the devolved nations have been underfunded by billions of pounds? Going back to the point that the Minister made earlier, the local housing allowance is a reserved matter, and it has been frozen since 2020, since which time we have

[Beth Winter]

had a cost of living crisis. People are struggling. My question, though, relates to the report by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, which stated:

“If the Government believes the PRS is the right place for those on the lowest incomes, it should...make sure housing benefit...covers benefit recipients’ housing costs.”

The Committee is still awaiting a response from the Government. When will the Government respond?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We need to allow the Minister to respond and Andrew Western to wind up the debate.

Rachel Maclean: I am afraid that I do not agree with the premise of the hon. Lady’s question, which is that the devolved nations have been underfunded. Her Government in Wales is led by the Labour party, and it is up to them to deliver housing for people who live in Wales. I suggest that she address her comments to their door.

We recognise the struggles that renters have faced in recent months, which is why we have taken decisive action to offer vital support where it is desperately needed. More importantly, we are making the most significant change to the private rented sector in over 30 years to provide the stability and security that renters need, as well as continuing to build new affordable homes so that many more people can own their own home. I therefore look forward to working with Members from across the House to achieve that goal, which we all share. I thank all Members who have contributed.

3.53 pm

Andrew Western: I thank all colleagues who have taken the time to contribute to what has been an important and insightful debate into an issue that affects all our constituents very acutely. I will not speak to all the contributions from Opposition colleagues, but they have all accurately reflected the plight of private renters, both in terms of the impact of the cost of living crisis on their living standards and ability to pay for basics such as food, energy and rent, and in terms of the condition of the properties that many constituents have to live in. Many constituents are unable to afford to move and terrified to challenge their landlords on the need for repair.

I want to spend rather longer, though, on the comments of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). He is absolutely right to state that we need additional supply in the housing market. He seemed to suggest that I had not referenced that when I set out the need to scrap the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to build, build, build, to utilise the green belt, and to drive up housing supply in a way that delivers significantly more affordable and social homes. None the less, we agree on that point. I stress that because it was probably the only part of his contribution I agree with. He will appreciate that I am not in a position to comment on many of the changes made 40 years ago in the 1980s; sadly, I was not born until 1985. However, it is certainly the case that the interventions made back then have done nothing to ease the terrible situation for those at the sharp end of private rent, who are experiencing this cost of living crisis, often on very low incomes.

I also object to the suggestion that immigration, or indeed any form of demand issue, is driving the housing crisis. It is simply a fact that the biggest driver of demand for private rent is the 307,000 young people looking to move out of their parents’ homes in 2022, which was caused by many of them staying at home for longer during covid, as well as the impacts on their employment during that time and so on. Although that is the biggest aspect of demand, it is important to remember that the housing crisis is always fundamentally about supply.

I am sure the hon. Member for Christchurch will be aware of this, given that he has already subjected us to one history lesson. If I point to the history of house building in this country, we have not been building enough homes for the past near 70 years. In some of those years we had net migration out of the country, so to suggest that immigration is a driver of the housing crisis does not bear any alignment with the evidence before us. It was wholly unsurprising to hear that the hon. Gentleman stands against the Renters (Reform) Bill—not only from his contribution today, but from the significant delay in bringing the Bill forward for both First and Second Reading. We know now that it is the Tory Back Benchers who have caused significant delay to this important legislation.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for his comments. I am not going to speak to the merits of the system that has been brought forward in Scotland, other than to note the significant difference between the interventionist approach there and the inertia from the Government here in bringing forward their proposals.

Again, I thank the Opposition spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), who was absolutely correct to highlight the ONS data showing that private renters are five times more likely to be struggling, and that 2.5 million of them are struggling to pay their rent. I know he understands that, which is why he is pressing so hard for the Renters (Reform) Bill to come forward, as he did today.

In many ways, the Minister echoed that desire to see the legislation come forward, which leaves one wondering why there has been such a delay. I appreciate that we have had a number of Housing Ministers over the past few years; I can only hope that she is still in the job on Monday. The issue with that many changes, and with the number of Prime Ministers over the past few years, is that this legislation has been kicked down the road time and again. When people are in desperate need and struggling to pay their rent, that is simply not good enough.

I was interested by what the Minister said about the £1.9 billion not actually being clawed back, but reprofiled. I am sure that will be of great reassurance to the many people struggling to get on the housing ladder and to access social and affordable property, not least because the Minister promised that the money will be available from 2026. How wonderful!

Rachel Maclean: I did not say that.

Andrew Western: I believe that the Minister said it was from 2026 to 2030.

Rachel Maclean: What I said was that the programme is from 2016 to 2023. It is already delivering affordable housing. I will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of my speech, and he will find it in *Hansard*.

Andrew Western: I am grateful for that and I apologise if I misheard the Minister. However, the fundamental point is that there is still much work to do. Yes, we need to see the Renters (Reform) Bill come through urgently. We also desperately need to see the support package that is being brought forward to stop mortgage holders being evicted extended to renters. Of course, we also need to build, build, build social and affordable homes in a way that gets them back to the second largest form of tenure in this country, giving the housing security that people desperately need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost of living and the private rented sector.

Credit Unions and the Cost of Living

4 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call Hannah Bardell to move the motion. I shall then call the Minister to respond. As this is a 30-minute debate, there is no opportunity for a winding-up speech.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered credit unions and the cost of living.

It is a pleasure to move the motion, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this short debate and to the Minister for responding. I am sure that other colleagues will want to make an intervention along the way in this debate on the importance of credit unions during a cost of living crisis.

First off, I declare an interest as someone who saves and borrows with credit unions, including my own in West Lothian—the great West Lothian Credit Union. I start by paying a passionate tribute to West Lothian Credit Union, its chair, Nancy MacGillivray, and her team, who work and fight tirelessly to develop their services and support our local community through that local credit union. I also thank my own team for the work they have done to prepare for today and the work they do every day for our Livingston constituents throughout this cost of living crisis. I am sure all of us here in the House are very conscious of the pressures on our constituents and the work that our teams are doing for us—in particular Marcus, Yvonne and Adam, who have had a close hand in today's preparations.

Similarly, I pay tribute to my constituency colleague Angela Constance, the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Almond Valley, and her team, who have worked closely and fought for our local credit union over many years. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) was not able to stay for this debate, but he wanted me to mention the work that Pollok Credit Union does in his constituency and the fact that so much great work is being done by credit unions with affordable food larders and community supermarkets—particularly a programme in his Glasgow South West constituency.

The role that credit unions play in supporting hard-working families across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom during this unprecedented cost of living crisis is indisputable. Unlike the high street banks, credit unions are run and owned by their members and distinctly operate under a co-operative principle. While credit unions are a relatively new form of banking in historic terms—they were first established in the UK in the 1960s—their founding principles of mutual co-operation and collective benefit were born of the friendly society movement of the 18th century.

Credit unions even predate the creation of the welfare state. My own grandparents were active members in the co-operative movement in West Lothian and beyond, and its importance in our communities is a long-held tradition. As we become increasingly globalised and vested interests creep further and further into our lives, the role of credit unions and co-operatives is increasingly important and potentially under threat.

[*Hannah Bardell*]

The formation of the first credit unions in the UK was inspired by those in Ireland. The first recorded credit union in the UK was formed in 1960, in Derry, Northern Ireland; that union now has over 30,000 members. In Scotland and in other parts of the UK, several credit unions were established by immigrants who came to the UK with very little, but simply wished to tackle the inequalities and the financial hardship of others—what a worthy cause. Over the last 50 years, credit unions have grown to provide loans and savings to more than 1.2 million people across England, Scotland, and Wales. I am incredibly proud of West Lothian Credit Union and in awe of the work that it does in supporting my community. I have seen that first hand, and once again pay tribute. It offers a range of services, from banking to funeral plans. Its services are available to all those who live or work across West Lothian.

As colleagues will know, credit unions are regulated by both the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. The objectives of all credit unions are simply this: to promote thrift among their members by the accumulation of their savings; to create sources of credit for the benefit of their members at a fair and reasonable rate of interest; the use and control of members' savings for their mutual benefit; and the training and education of members in the wise use of money and the management of financial affairs.

Those objectives may sound simple, but many of the high street lenders and other financial service providers would do very well if they simply applied the same ethical standards. Not only would they be better viewed by the public, but they would be able to act in the public interest—rather than for private profit, as we so often see. Credit unions work with many employers to set up payroll saving schemes for their employees. Many credit unions operate school credit unions, encouraging a savings habit among young students, as well as giving them life skills in operating a cash collection. My own credit union has done fantastic work in my constituency.

These are fantastic initiatives that help foster better relationships between individuals and their employers. They also help create greater educational awareness about the importance of money for young people. Despite those successes, more employers could be encouraged to participate in payroll schemes for their employees. Similarly, operating school credit unions can be a costly process for which limited funding is available, and I hope the Minister can give some thoughts on that. There is a clear need to provide better support to our children and for financial education to be done not just by banks. It is one of many ways we should be doing more to ensure that every child has the best opportunity in life.

We are already seeing change for credit unions. For instance, the community banking platform Engage has partnered with 10 credit unions to deliver its faster payment service to nearly 100,000 customers. That is a great example of how technology can help, and I note with interest the article shared by Electronic Payments International. Sofia Dogan, CEO of Kingdom Community Bank, based in Glenrothes, highlighted that the cost for its service was less than 50% of the cost that its bank was preparing to charge and that payments could now be sent to members' accounts in minutes. The Bank of

England's latest report in April shows that the number of adult members of credit unions in the UK has risen to an all-time high of 1.98 million. The starkest increase was in loans to borrowers, which has jumped by a staggering 18.9% to £785 million last year in England alone.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is worth reflecting on the point my hon. Friend just made. The number of people borrowing with credit unions has increased, and one part of that is that we are seeing such high interest rates from high-street banks and those more typical lenders. Credit unions certainly play a far more vital role during this Tory-induced cost of living crisis.

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point—perhaps she has foreseen what I am about to say. It is an important point to highlight because although it is welcome that more people are using credit unions, the root cause is increasingly concerning. The cost of living crisis has placed a huge economic squeeze on hard-working families.

A report from Responsible Finance found that 41% of people borrowed to pay for essential bills and expenses, while 20% borrowed to pay for appliances and white goods. Analysis from Freedom Finance found that credit unions are lending record sums to UK borrowers following the surge in borrowing costs. Again, it is great news that people are getting their money through responsible borrowing from credit unions, but it is concerning that they are having to borrow such high levels just to get by.

Total loans exceeded £2 billion for the first time by the end of 2022—an annual increase of £251 million, or 15% over the course of 2022. Time and again, evidence shows that increases in the cost of living disproportionately impact the poorest in our society. Those individuals are often helped by credit unions, but some fall victim to unscrupulous lending practices, such as high-interest payday loans, simply to meet basic needs. The Freedom Finance credit monitor has revealed that the average household quoted on credit cards rose to its highest level last year since 1998, reaching 22.8% at the end of December. We can all reflect that if things worsen and interest rates go higher, more and more people will be tipped over the edge.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and making such a powerful speech. On that point, the *Barnsley Chronicle* stated that a report from the local council last week showed that one in five residents in Barnsley have debts that overtake their incomes. Obviously, people are really struggling with the cost of living. Food has gone up by 19%, and we have seen similar increases in gas and electric.

Given that situation—not just the rising cost of living, but the sheer rising level of debt—credit unions obviously play a huge role, but they are not always known about. I pay tribute to a fantastic credit union in my constituency in Wombwell, but residents do not always know they can access that affordable credit. Would the hon. Member join me in encouraging people to raise awareness of the issue?

Hannah Bardell: I agree with everything that the hon. Member says. Part of the reason for today's debate is to raise awareness of credit unions, as well as to recognise

the challenges that we and many of our constituents face. An estimated 20 million consumers in the UK are underserved and unable to access credit from high street banks. That is compounded by the number of bank branches that are closing. Everybody across the House has been outraged by the behaviour of some banks, the closing of local branches and the cutting off of so many of our vulnerable and rural communities.

The Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that credit unions continue to be able to carry out their vital role in supporting communities across Scotland. In 2020, the Scottish Government established the credit union resilience loan fund and the third sector resilience fund, which provided grants and loans totalling more than £20 million, made available to be shared with over 100 credit unions across the country. The Scottish Government also actively ran a “People, Not Profit” campaign in 2018, encouraging people to consider joining a credit union—those are examples of what we can do with the limited powers we currently have in Scotland.

In stark contrast, the UK Government have been slow to respond to the cost of living crisis, and many households are desperately struggling. Many low-income households still do not meet the affordability criteria for many lenders. I was struck by the comments of one of my colleagues in Prime Minister’s Questions the other day, when she spoke powerfully about her experience, when her income dropped, of not being able to access funding. That shows the scale of what people face. Respectfully, credit unions will never be able to plug the gap, and the UK Government need to take urgent action to address the cost of living crisis. There is an increasing need for these services, and the Government must recognise that the increased demand for credit unions has also been driven by the closure of banks and post offices, especially in rural areas.

The UK Government urgently need to support credit unions further and look at ways in which they can better support them. In particular, the UK Government should consider funding specific outcomes—for example, promoting financial education classes for schoolchildren more compared with what is already available and supporting individual credit union projects where they have a clear community focus. The Government should continue to fund and expand initiatives that increase access to affordable credit, such as the no-interest loan scheme being led by Fair4All Finance—not an easy one to say—empowering local communities to develop and deliver affordable and responsible finance.

My constituency team and I have seen the tragedy of financial ruin time and again, from our casework to the constituency advice surgeries we hold. I know that much work has been done by many people in this place and, indeed, the Government on irresponsible lending, but it is incumbent on us to ensure that credit unions can not only survive, but thrive. I hope that the Minister will say a few words about how his Government will do that.

Earlier this year, when he was responding in the Chamber about his position, the Minister said:

“There are exactly 650 constituencies; would it not be wonderful if every one of them had a thriving credit union?”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 426.]

I completely agree. I hope that Members present and all across this place continue to work towards achieving that goal by providing credit unions with the support

they need to better empower our local communities and to help address the many inequalities that our constituents face.

Once again, I pay tribute to Nancy MacGillivray and her team at West Lothian Credit Union for all they do to support our Livingston and West Lothian communities, and I look forward to continuing to support them and the work that they do.

4.13 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on a thorough and thoughtful contribution to this subject. She said that one of her objectives was to raise awareness, and she should feel that she has fully achieved that. I also congratulate the West Lothian Credit Union, which I understand will be celebrating a quarter of a century since its establishment this year. All my colleagues in the Treasury and I send our congratulations to that very important institution, which does great work.

As the Economic Secretary, I am committed to supporting the credit union sector. From helping people to set aside savings—the hon. Member talked about the work done with employers as well as in schools to help to promote the savings habit—to probably its most vital role of offering credit at affordable rates, the Government really value the unique role played by credit unions for all their members, and particularly the financial inclusion agenda. The reach of credit unions is significant. There are 385 of them—not quite enough for one for every constituency, but would that not be lovely? I share the hon. Lady’s goal of having more credit unions, seeing those we have being even more successful and wanting to grow the number of users. There are 83 in Scotland, which, in this respect, is punching above its weight. Together, credit unions represent more than 2 million members and have assets of more than £4.5 billion.

The hon. Lady is right that recent cost of living challenges have proven that the trust placed in the credit union sector by their members, the Government and regulators is well deserved. That trust will be vital as people across the country continue to face cost of living pressures and must stretch every pound as far as possible. People’s money needs to work hard for them.

We know that there are global challenges, and we are not alone in facing challenging levels of inflation: in May, core inflation was higher in more than half of the countries in the EU than in the UK. Inflation erodes living standards for households, and particularly for the most vulnerable in society. That is why it is right that the Government continue to make it one of our priorities—this is one of the Prime Minister’s priorities—to halve inflation by the end of the year, and we will not hesitate to do what it takes to achieve that. Access to affordable, inclusive credit, such as that provided by credit unions, can make a real difference.

Hannah Bardell: Does the Minister agree that when the chips were down during the financial crisis of 2008, the Government had no choice but to step in and save the banks, but that it is now time for the banks to step up and help people who need to borrow and those who need help?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Lady is right that people need help. Across the House, we all support that. The Chancellor has made it very clear, with the mortgage compact and in the conversations that he and I have had with all of the banking sector, that now is the time to ensure that people have fair products and that, wherever the banks are able to do so, they pass on the benefits of that.

That is one reason why it is important that we have genuine diversity and competition in the sector. Credit unions play such an important role, alongside co-operatives, mutuals and other forms of financial institution, because they are often rooted in place, people or the community. The Government are firmly on the side of credit unions, and I will try to support them. We are taking action to help them wherever there are legislative levers, although they are not the only answer. We amended the Credit Unions Act 1979 through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to allow credit unions across the United Kingdom to offer a wider range of products and services. That allows them to grow, diversify, build their resilience and offer more products to their customers.

We set out Vision 2025, in consultation with stakeholders, to deliver on the sector's priorities. That includes such things as offering hire purchase agreements, conditional sale agreements and distributing insurance services. The hon. Member for Livingston said that the West Lothian Credit Union offers funeral plans. Many people want to access that sector to give them some peace of mind, so I was genuinely interested to hear that. I will ensure that we seek the right legislative framework for that.

The 2023 Act also makes amendments to support best practice in corporate governance, including a legal requirement for credit unions to submit annual accounts to the Financial Conduct Authority. It gives credit unions permission to temporarily lend to or borrow from each other. That is about designing more financial resilience for a sector that we are on the side of and want to see grow.

The hon. Lady mentioned a number of initiatives. We are providing Fair4All Finance—that little tongue twister—which is an independent not-for-profit organisation, with significant amounts of money from the dormant assets funds. We are piloting no-interest loan schemes—another product that will be delivered hand in hand with credit unions. Credit unions, with their roots in the community and communities of interest, are a very good way of delivering that, and I will continue to work with them. There is about £145 million, in aggregate, from the dormant assets scheme.

The hon. Lady also talked about financial literacy, and a key priority as we go forward is what we can do about the real challenges of that. Wherever possible, it makes sense to work upstream and try to tackle problem

debt before people get into it, because it can be a terrible place to be trapped. We are doing a lot of work on that.

Finally, as well as providing credit, credit unions are obliged to focus on financial inclusion. They have a role of advocacy in helping their members to take steps to accumulate savings. Even a small amount of savings can provide the resilience for exactly what the hon. Lady talked about: unexpected bills, white goods that fail, or perhaps the cost of a child's uniform and a school trip falling in the same month. Even a small amount of savings can help to build financial resilience, and the Government are very supportive of that. We have the Help to Save scheme to try to help those in work and on universal credit to build a savings habit, and obviously the ISA programme is a strong part of that. Again, credit unions distribute cash ISAs as a very simple product that does not get anybody into difficulties with their tax.

I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady and those who contributed to the debate, including the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). Across the House, we can always challenge ourselves to do more on this issue.

Stephanie Peacock: The Community First Credit Union in my constituency raised some issues with me about the operation of the eligible loan deduction scheme by the Department for Work and Pensions and some of the work that the Government do with credit unions. I wonder whether I could write to the Minister, because he might be able to look into some of those issues for me.

Andrew Griffith: I would be happy to do so. I support anything that removes a point of friction and allows credit unions to do their important work. Regardless of whether it is me or one of my colleagues in the DWP, we will certainly take that forward and do what we can to support the hon. Member.

We value the work of credit unions. In seeking this debate, the hon. Member for Livingston has built a good level of awareness, and there is consensus that we can and should do more. That is the Government's policy, and we are very keen to engage with the sector. Maybe one day there will be an opportunity to meet or have a call with the wonderful West Lothian Credit Union, and I am certainly happy to do so. The hon. Lady has done a magnificent job of putting the credit union on the Treasury's radar, and I will be interested in following its continued success over the years.

Question put and agreed to.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

HIV Action Plan Annual Update 2022-23

4.30 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the HIV Action Plan annual update 2022-23.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I was pleased to be successful in my application for this debate, and I thank colleagues from across the House for attending. I start by thanking the Government for fulfilling their commitment to update Parliament on the progress they have made on the HIV action plan—which I fully support—as it is crucial that Members are given the opportunity to scrutinise the progress that we are making on tackling HIV.

We are the generation that has the golden chance to end new cases of HIV by 2030. It is vital that we do all we can to ensure that that becomes a reality. Positive progress has been made to that end, as highlighted in the report. However, there remain further opportunities to stop new HIV transmissions in this country. That would certainly be a lasting legacy the Government could be proud of.

Two measures, in particular, will help to ensure that the Government fulfil their mission to turn the tide on HIV once and for all. First, opt-out testing is the hidden tool in our armoury that is waiting to be unleashed. Last December, I spoke in the House during the World AIDS Day debate about how effective opt-out testing was in those places that had already introduced it.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): My hon. Friend will be aware of how health practitioners in Blackpool have led the way on opt-out testing to achieve great results. The focus on that in high-prevalence areas is of course particularly important, but does she agree that, although the NHS is making solid progress in this regard, it needs to up its game if it is to achieve its own targets by 2025?

Nicola Richards: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know that opt-out testing is already making improvements and that that will benefit his constituents in Blackpool. We have the blueprint for how to do this; we just need to roll it out further.

The numbers do not lie. The annual update revealed that more than 2,000 people have been diagnosed with HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C in 12 months alone. It is very likely that without opt-out testing many of these people would not have been diagnosed until a much later stage. That includes diagnoses in parts of London classed as having a “high” rather than a “very high” prevalence of HIV. Let us imagine what can be achieved if we now extend the roll-out to areas of high HIV prevalence, such as in my constituency of West Bromwich East.

The west midlands have several high-prevalence areas outside Sandwell, including Wolverhampton, Coventry and Birmingham. That is why, for World AIDS Day last year, West Midlands Mayor Andy Street joined the calls to fund this scheme in the west midlands. The way to end this virus is to find exactly these people—those who are unaware that they are carrying the disease but who are in fact passing it on to others—so that they can get the care they need and do not increase transmission further.

Opt-out testing in London, Blackpool, Brighton and Manchester has also revealed a quiet but growing crisis by identifying people who have previously been diagnosed with HIV but are not receiving the treatment they need. The UK Health Security Agency estimates the number of people who have fallen out of the HIV care system since 2015 to be an alarming 22,670. The Terrence Higgins Trust, which I take this opportunity to thank for all its excellent work, estimates the number of those who are alive and remain living in the UK as somewhere between 10,650 and 13,006. They are all at risk of becoming seriously ill and further transmitting the virus. In fact, hospitals in London are reporting that this has overtaken undiagnosed HIV as the primary cause of HIV-related hospital admissions.

This is totally preventable. Once someone living with HIV is on effective treatment, they can live a long, healthy life and do not pass on the virus. The annual update shows that more than a third of those found with HIV by opt-out testing were previously lost to care. That is another 473 people who can access treatment, prevent further serious illness and help to stop the spread of HIV. This is an important step forward, but we should not only be finding people when they need emergency care; we should be supporting them to stay in care in the first place. Without finding and providing treatment to those people, we cannot realise our ambition of ending new cases by 2030.

Opt-out testing is helping not only to save lives, but to save money in our health system. The initial investment to set up opt-out testing is dwarfed by the amount saved by providing treatment earlier and preventing serious illness. There is a huge saving to be made, and it is truly making a difference to health outcomes in the places in the country that already have opt-out testing.

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

Furthermore, the Elton John AIDS Foundation has done fantastic work with hospitals in south London on a pilot scheme that can inform a national programme to re-engage people who have been diagnosed with HIV but who are lost to care. Clearly, finding and restarting treatment for those lost to care is an urgent consideration and, at a cost of £3,000 per person, it would be significantly cheaper than providing emergency care if their condition worsened.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady highlights an important study from the Elton John AIDS Foundation, which found that, with a low amount of money, people can be returned to care. The problem is that sexual health and HIV services are under strain. That money needs to be ringfenced and provided by the Government so that we can spend now to save later.

Nicola Richards: The hon. Gentleman does a lot of work in this area and is a voice to be listened to.

I have shown that the key benefits of extending opt-out testing and further lost-to-care work are threefold: saving lives, saving money and reducing the pressure on the NHS at a time when every effort must be made to reduce waiting lists.

At the time of the World AIDS Day debate last December, I was assured that the Minister would look closely at the outcomes of the trial once 12 months of

[Nicola Richards]

data was available. I hope that he agrees that the trial has been a success, as the annual report states, and that we should extend the roll-out without delay.

We already have an excellent programme in place, ready to support the expansion of combined blood-borne virus testing. After the Government initially invested £20 million in opt-out A&E testing through the HIV action plan, funding from the hepatitis C programme made it possible to add hep B and hep C to the programme. The success of that has been remarkable, and the hepatitis C elimination programme is already funding opt-out hep C testing in further areas. However, without specific funding for HIV we are missing an opportunity to save even more lives by testing for HIV at the same time.

For example, a pilot programme that took place in the Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, where opt-out HIV testing was rolled out alongside hepatitis testing, found 25 people with HIV in just 17 months, along with a combined 297 people with hep B and C. After the end of that pilot, the hospital has been able to secure funding from NHS England to reinstate hepatitis C testing in the emergency department whenever blood is taken. However, it is disappointing that no funding has been provided for HIV testing to go alongside that, especially when the area is one in which there is a high prevalence of HIV. These opportunities to test are currently being wasted.

If we are to expand HIV testing further, it has to be combined with blood-borne virus testing—there is no hierarchy when it comes to the elimination of viruses, and it is important that we make progress against both. We are showing that combining testing is not just better; it is cheaper, more effective and de-stigmatising. I would therefore appreciate it if the Minister could confirm that a national expansion of opt-out hepatitis C testing would include HIV and hep B, as should be the case.

Another way in which we can stop the spread of the virus is by better utilising PrEP, which has been proven to be very effective at preventing the transmission of HIV. As part of the HIV action plan, we committed to an innovation in PrEP delivery to improve access for key groups, including provision in settings outside sexual and reproductive health services. However, we continue to await a date for when that will start, and I strongly urge the Department to outline when that will be as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister recently committed to making other prescription medications, including contraception, available directly from pharmacies. Please can the Government consider doing the same for PrEP, which would make a massive difference to so many? By making it easier to access, we can prevent those most at risk from ever being infected with HIV. PrEP needs to be available to people in GP surgeries, pharmacies and online to truly harness its potential to stop HIV spreading and to end the inequalities in access to the drug. I hope that that is something the Minister can provide an update on when responding to this debate.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Lady is dreadfully kind for giving way. I hope she will acknowledge to the Minister that many people end up buying PrEP online, anyway, so there is already a market for it where people

access it outside of clinics. The Government are taking a cautious approach, and the people have already marched two miles ahead. The Government should take a more reactive approach, follow where the people are and allow them to buy it over the counter, with advisory blood tests rather than compulsory ones.

Nicola Richards: I thank the hon. Member again for his intervention, and I totally agree.

I would also like to raise the plight of those who are living with HIV but who feel unable to access healthcare for a variety of reasons—mainly as a result of the stigma surrounding the virus and concerns over their mental health. Engagement with this group is an important part of the action plan. Can the Minister please use this opportunity today to reassure colleagues that people living with HIV have the opportunity to seek support, and that tailored measures will be introduced to combat the issues I have raised?

Finally, all parts of the health system are responsible for delivering on the action plan. Shortly this will change, with adult HIV services moving from NHS England to integrated care systems in April 2024. As may be evident, the lines of responsibility are somewhat blurred. For that reason, it is key that we clarify as soon as possible the exact lines of authority, so that work can be accelerated to deal with the disparity in HIV support across different areas of the country. Again, I strongly encourage the Minister to provide the House with information on what the Government are doing to deal with this issue.

It is vital that we deliver on the HIV action plan, which gives us a genuine opportunity to be the first nation in the world to end this epidemic, which has both taken and harmed so many lives. By working together and implementing the reforms the action plan sets out, some of which I have mentioned today, we can stop the spread of the virus and, instead of allowing transmission to go undetected, we can stop the virus in its tracks. Many of these measures are non-burdensome but highly effective, so it is vital that we act before it is too late. We have a social responsibility to do all we can now and not to delay the implementation of the plan. I look forward to hearing the Government's response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I plan to call the Front Benchers at 5.13 pm, to be precise. I do not think there is any need to impose a time limit at the moment, but we are looking at roughly six and a half minutes per Member, if everybody could self-edit.

4.41 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Dame Caroline, in this really important and timely debate. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for opening it so well and for outlining the importance of the action plan and what more the Government should do.

This issue is really important for me, because my constituency has one of the highest rates of HIV prevalence not just in London but in the whole UK. Forty years ago, the situation seemed hopeless, but we have seen life-changing improvements in treatment since then.

With today's medical advancements, someone on effective medical treatment cannot pass the virus on. That is vital, and we need to reiterate it loudly and clearly. What we have achieved is incredible and testament to the hard work of so many people in our life sciences industry and the NHS, and of the many charity and community groups that work behind and across the sector.

The HIV action plan, which was launched by the Government in 2021, is a comprehensive strategy aimed at tackling the HIV epidemic across the country. It focuses on four key areas: prevention; testing and diagnosis; treatment and care; and reducing stigma. However, the progress made in the last year is not equal across all areas—we have to be honest about that.

As part of the action plan, hospital emergency departments in London, Brighton, Blackpool and Manchester are testing people for HIV. I had the opportunity to visit Lewisham hospital a year and a half ago to see that work, to listen to the doctors and to see the results. The doctors told me that the oldest person tested for HIV in the A&E was an 85-year-old woman.

This programme has identified people living with HIV from groups who are less likely to test routinely, including women, heterosexuals and those of black ethnicities. That is crucial, as many people in those groups are currently experiencing poorer health outcomes due to late diagnoses.

The opt-out testing figures show that hundreds of people are being identified with HIV but are not currently engaged in treatment. Minister, that is simply not good enough. The longer that people are living with HIV, but without medication and support, the sicker they become, and they are still able to transmit the virus to others.

People are not able to engage in medical care for their HIV for a whole variety of reasons, but in each case more must be done to empower and support vulnerable people to access life-saving treatment that—most importantly—meets their individual needs. People should not be dying of HIV in the UK in 2023; that is the reality.

I want to echo the points made by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East on opt-out testing: it works, and the results are there. It is time to expand that programme to more hospital emergency departments across the country. Any further delay from the Government on expanding opt-out testing will mean missing the chance to diagnose hundreds of people across England. Everyone should have an equal chance to be diagnosed and to access treatment.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to my colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS. I am proud to be one of the co-chairs. The APPG has been at the forefront of work on this issue for 36 years, as one of the longest-standing APPGs, ensuring that this important subject is high on the parliamentary agenda for all of us, regardless of our political background. I am proud of the work done by the APPG in looking at how the UK will be one of the first countries to end the transmission of HIV, and on helping those 106,000 people currently living with HIV in the UK. The APPG's hope is that positive news from the HIV action plan galvanises the Government to go further with their HIV interventions. Our 2030 goals are achievable but by no means guaranteed.

4.46 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I, too, would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) on securing the debate and on her comments. She has already said much of what I wanted to say, so that will spare us some time.

I apologise if anyone thinks I am about to drift out of order—I am not—but I want to focus on the women's health strategy. We know that the HIV action plan has been incredibly effective in increasing the number of men diagnosed with HIV. We have seen a fantastic and sustained fall in HIV incidence for gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men, but not for women. That is because there seems to be a lack of joined-up thinking when it comes to breaking down some of the stigmas and taboos that still exist for women, and we need to do more to ensure that they are tested.

This is where I drift off into the women's health strategy, which is a comprehensive and excellent document, and I pay tribute to you, Dame Caroline, for ensuring we saw it get over the line. It clearly states:

"independent reports have shown, too often it is women whom the healthcare system fails to keep safe and fails to listen to."

The document contains some important and crucial points around tackling taboos and stigma and addressing disparities in outcome that might be affected by age, ethnicity or where the woman is from. It says clearly that those factors should not impact a woman's ability to access services, but they do.

We know that women are less likely to have access to PrEP and that they are the least likely group to have their need for it identified—only 33% in 2021 had their need identified. They are also the least likely to continue taking PrEP. The HIV action plan told us about making PrEP available from GPs, and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) commented on making medication more readily available from pharmacies. We have already done that for a range of conditions. Some contraception is readily available from pharmacies. For women, some forms of hormone replacement therapy are available from pharmacies. The morning-after pill is available from pharmacies. What we need to do, to break down the stigma and taboo, is to ensure that PrEP is more accessible from pharmacies. It seems to be a complete no-brainer.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The right hon. Lady makes some very good points about PrEP. But is this not also about a problem with sexual health and reproductive testing in clinics? In Britain, only one in 10 clinics offers online testing. That means that many people who cannot take time off work, or who cannot get away at the right time, are never able to get tested.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and one that I had completely forgotten about but that I wanted to highlight. Online testing and receiving test packets through the post is incredibly discreet, quick, easy and efficient. I know that because even I have availed myself of those services—that will send the Twittersphere into an absolute frenzy. It is a really important point: to be in control of their own health, a person needs to know. Annually, I have an

[*Caroline Nokes*]

HIV test provided to me—I believe it is Terrence Higgins Trust that does that, because it is a brilliant charity that does fantastic work, not least in providing us with up-to-date information. It also promotes relentlessly the need to make sure that testing kits are readily and easily available through the post and online. It is absolutely critical that we have that. We learned during the pandemic, did we not, the importance of test, test, test?

That moves me on to tests, tests, tests of the opt-out variety. My constituency in Southampton does not benefit from opt-out testing at present. It is classified as having a high prevalence of HIV, with 2.4 adults per every 1,000 living with HIV in the area. We know that opt-out testing finds people living with HIV and brings about an earlier diagnosis in many cases. We all know that earlier treatment is the most effective and that once somebody on treatment has got to the point where their viral load is undetectable, it is untransmissible. Of course, we have to do the maths backwards; we know that if people are not diagnosed and not receiving treatment, they are more likely to be transmitting HIV.

We know that opt-out testing works. We know that it works in Blackpool and London, but we know that in Southampton, more than a third of HIV diagnoses are late, which puts people at much greater risk of ill health and death and increases the problem of onward transmission. We also know that women, black Africans and older people are more likely to be diagnosed late. My plea to the Minister is to ensure that we have an expansion of opt-out testing so that we can identify those people from groups who are less likely to be identified. We know that opt-out testing means that a higher proportion of women and older women are also likely to be identified.

That takes me very neatly back to the women's health strategy, which puts people into three stages of life. There is the early stage, from puberty up to about 24; the mid-stage of life; and older people, such as me, who have passed their 51st birthday. The important thing about the women's health strategy is that it is absolutely explicit in saying that sexual health and wellbeing is relevant across all three of those age groups. I make a big plea that we do not forget older people; the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned a woman of 85 going through opt-out testing. It is absolutely, crucially important. Representing Romsey and Southampton North, it would be remiss of me not to make a quick plea for those living in rural areas, who wait an average of 19 days to get an appointment with a sexual health service. That is far too long to wait.

Much of this comes down to education and information. We know from the women's health strategy that there is a big emphasis on relationships, sex and health education and that the Department for Education is conducting a review into that at the moment. We must teach boys as well as girls about sexual and reproductive health. The best place to do that is via RSHE, yet a written answer from the Department of Health and Social Care tells me that there has not yet been any contribution to the RSHE review from the Department. That is remiss of the DHSC; it should feed into the review in the same way that every other Government Department that has even a passing interest in the wellbeing of our young people and their ability to respect themselves and each

other should. Notwithstanding the fact that I had a very negative answer from the Department, dated earlier this week—it might have been the latter end of last week—will the Minister take back to the Department how crucial that is if we are to hit the target of living HIV-free? Government Departments must work together to ensure that that happens.

4.54 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It really is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing this timely debate and for her thoughtful contribution, which laid out the principal issues. I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for making sure that the full gamut of issues was covered, because sometimes it is possible for the perception to be that this is just an issue about gay men, and it is not. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who, along with me and others, is a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, made it absolutely clear that this is a wider issue than for just that one group.

As the HIV action plan has put in print, we have already reached the UN's 95-95-95 target and are hopefully within touching distance of ending new transmissions by 2030. If that can be achieved, we should be clear that it is a milestone, equivalent to the eradication of polio in past years. I believe it is also a tangible example of British leadership in health and a testament to consistent and concerted efforts, which have produced incremental gains, giant leaps and, ultimately, a pathway that others have followed. As we have heard, however, we are not there yet.

The HIV action plan makes it clear that the goal will not be reached without PrEP. We know that PrEP works, with new transmissions of HIV dropping by over a third from 2019, but a recent survey by Prepster, the National AIDS Trust, the Terrence Higgins Trust, Sophia Forum and One Voice Network found that many people end up being diagnosed with HIV while waiting for PrEP. We need to close the gap between awareness of risk, accessing services and receiving PrEP, and I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) about the availability of PrEP. I could sit down after this speech, go on my phone and order PrEP to be delivered to me from India in the next few days, but I could not go to a pharmacy in the centre of London or, indeed, in my own constituency to receive that. Not only is that discriminatory, in the sense that people who can afford to buy it or access online services have an advantage; as the hon. Member suggested, it is putting the risk ahead of the reality that people are already accessing it. It is far better to get it from a pharmacy than from an Indian or other overseas supplier.

Our targets on new transmissions will not be reached if we have not identified those who are living with HIV, and we have heard Members speak about that. Many of these issues are devolved in relation to Scotland, but one thing that I would like to see there is a properly funded national testing week. To maximise its impact, it should work in tandem with that which already takes place in England, because having a UK-wide event—with a focus on national television, in the national media and

on social media—is a much better way to draw attention to the issue. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North; like her, I can confirm that even someone like me can use a test kit. I am grateful—this will interest the hon. Member for Vauxhall—that the funding is at least better now in Vauxhall, because people used to have to phone up at 3 am to get the kit. If someone tried to phone at about 9 am, all the kits for that day had been distributed, but now people seem to be able to get them 24 hours a day. Virtually anyone can use such a kit effectively.

As the action plan identifies, reaching those who do not know that they are living with HIV will mean targeting hard-to-reach parts of our society, and those who either do not see themselves at risk or ignore the risk because of stigma. Opt-out testing has proven to be a success in that regard, and it is also cost-effective. When I was in South Africa, I had the opportunity to hear directly from medical professionals that opt-out testing, where it applies, has had a remarkable effect on the identification of cases in women. There are issues with support and treatment, but in terms of identification of cases, South Africa demonstrates that opt-out testing has a proven record. We should not prevaricate before rolling out opt-out testing beyond the areas already identified. Agencies and charities are champing at the bit to partner the Government to do just that.

The position of no new transmissions is almost tangible, but, as with the progress we have already made, it will not come without consistent and concerted action. Like the hon. Member for Vauxhall, I commend the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, and the Members across both Houses who are part of it, for the continued commitment to action. As the hon. Lady did, I vouch that the group will continue to work with any charity, trust, health board or Government to get our country to the position of no new transitions and to highlight the issue globally.

5.1 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) on leading this important and timely debate. As I remarked in Prime Minister's questions in February, that month marked the 22nd anniversary of the death of a good friend of mine from AIDS-related complications. I am absolutely certain that had he been tested earlier and more regularly, he would have been given the right treatment and would still be alive today. It is because of people like him that this issue is so important to me.

I am entirely supportive of the Government's commitment made in 2019 to end all new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. Although we have made some progress, we cannot be complacent. We should rightly celebrate the successes in improving HIV treatment, prevention, management and care. However, without testing we cannot treat, and without PrEP we cannot prevent further infection. It is great that HIV-positive people now experience a similar life expectancy to people without HIV, but we still have a lot of work to do. Although new HIV diagnoses have continued to fall, late diagnoses remain stubbornly high in England, and progress across the UK is not equitable.

There are three key areas where we need to seek more action: access to PrEP, more HIV testing and care for people living with HIV. As we have heard, access to PrEP remains limited. The HIV action plan included a commitment to develop a plan for PrEP access beyond sexual health services. However, more than a year on from that commitment, it is still not possible to access PrEP at a pharmacy or a GP surgery. May I ask the Minister why that is, and whether he will look urgently at this point? This is an easy win in our fight against HIV.

The HIV action plan included a £20 million investment in opt-out testing in emergency departments in areas classed as very high prevalence. As a result of additional hepatitis C funding, the whole of London was included and the programme became a combined one to tackle bloodborne viruses. The annual report includes the first year of data, and the results have been quite remarkable across London, Manchester, Blackpool and Brighton, as other speakers have highlighted. The figures demonstrate the huge success that opt-out testing has had in rooting out cases of bloodborne viruses—not just HIV, but hepatitis C and B.

In February, as a result of campaigning from many colleagues here and stakeholders across the country, the Public Health Minister committed to consider the case for expanding opt-out testing to all areas with a high HIV prevalence. Will he tell us the outcome of that review? When will opt-out testing be rolled out to high prevalence areas? People do not live their whole lives in fixed locations. Simply because someone now lives in an area that is not high prevalence does not mean that they did not once do so or have not visited such areas in the past.

Opt-out is a win-win: it is good for public health and the public purse. It is essential that we meet our target of ending all new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. We have made progress, but I fear that without renewed impetus, greater access to PrEP and an expansion of opt-out testing, we will miss the mark. Our internationally significant position on HIV is in no small part due to the zeal of giants in the field, such as Lord Fowler, and the efforts of the Terrence Higgins Trust. I ask the Minister to rekindle that zeal and energy, and ensure we take up this mantle and race towards a day when we have no new infections. It can be done.

5.6 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Government's annual update on their HIV action plan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) for securing it.

The annual update makes it clear that progress has been made. The plan has set the stage for a transformative approach to prevention, testing, treatment and support but, as ever, there is still room for improvement, and the annual report highlights several key opportunities. First, there is scope for improving access to the HIV prevention drug PrEP, HIV testing and care for people living with HIV. As the Member of Parliament for Cities of London and Westminster, I know how important that is. Reports show that Westminster has among the highest HIV

[Nickie Aiken]

prevalence in the country: eight 15 to 59-year-olds per 1,000 are living with HIV. The action plan will change those statistics, and the Government's investment in opt-out HIV testing and emergency departments in areas classed by the UK Health Security Agency as having a very high HIV prevalence should be highly commended.

As a result of additional funding, in St Mary's Hospital in my constituency, three people were newly diagnosed with HIV, seven with hepatitis B and 14 with hepatitis C in the first 10 months of the Government's programme. Those figures from the first year of the programme have been broken down by the Terrence Higgins Trust. There have been more than 2,000 positive diagnoses across London, Blackpool, Brighton and Manchester.

Now that we are in the second year of the programme, it is only right that we consider expanding opt-out testing. I understand that NHS England has costed and prepared a plan for expanding HIV testing to 41 additional A&E units in areas with a high prevalence of HIV, and I hope that will go ahead. Modelling by the Terrence Higgins Trust shows that such an expansion has serious merit in supporting the Government's aims and ambitions.

Also important in supporting the aims of the action plan is increasing equal access to PrEP. That revolutionary drug has changed so many lives—including for many of my friends. I am proud that my constituency is home to the outstanding 56 Dean Street—the sexual health clinic that pioneered PrEP in England—which is recognised internationally for its innovation, particularly in regard to its engagement with London's higher-risk communities. More than that, it has been a haven for so many of the LGBT+ community over the decades. I pay tribute to the outstanding staff who work there today and have worked there in the past. They have always operated without prejudice, even in the face of systemic discrimination.

Nearly 60% of people wait more than 12 weeks for their PrEP. I am glad that the annual report acknowledges the publication of the first national PrEP monitoring and evaluation framework, but there is more to do. The framework is clear in showing that there are inequalities in who is able to access PrEP; we really need to push against that. The HIV action plan includes a commitment to develop a plan to expand access to PrEP through sexual health services, but there is a case to be made to have access through GP surgeries in particular, as well as pharmacies. We need to ensure equal access to PrEP if we are to meet our 2030 commitments.

In the remaining time I have left, I would like to pay tribute to the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust. From its policy to its fundraising efforts, it is second to none in its field. In fact, I have been to visit its brilliant team in Boutique, the only Terrence Higgins Trust charity shop in the UK, which happens to be based in Pimlico in my constituency. The shop recently reached £1 million raised for charity, which is utterly amazing. I pay tribute to all the volunteers who work there. For nearly 15 years, the shop has helped the Terrence Higgins Trust to fund its hardship grant, services for people living with HIV and its campaign to end new cases by 2030. I pay huge tribute to both the shop and the Terrence Higgins Trust.

The Government's HIV action plan is the first step in reinforcing the progress the UK has already achieved. Now Government, civil society organisations, healthcare

providers, researchers and communities must continue to work together to address the global challenge. By combining our knowledge, resources and expertise, we can develop innovative solutions, advocate for policy change and create a sustainable impact that will shape the future of HIV prevention and treatment.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I thank all Members for keeping to time so beautifully. I call Andrew Gwynne.

5.11 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) on securing this important debate. It has been a good debate, and we have had consensual contributions from Members across the House. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), the right hon. Members for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), and the hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson), for their thoughtful contributions. I thank them individually for the work they are doing here in the House of Commons on this important topic.

The publication of the first HIV action plan update in Parliament last month showed real positive progress in ending new HIV cases and HIV-related deaths in England by 2030. However, as the number of new HIV cases falls, it will become harder to find people living with undiagnosed HIV—something we have recognised in the debate. I therefore welcome the opportunity to press the Minister on some key points, particularly regarding the HIV action plan update. The first relates to opt-out HIV and hepatitis testing. The inclusion of opt-out testing in areas of high HIV prevalence—something for which Labour has called for some time—has been hugely successful. Across London, Manchester, Blackpool and Brighton, we have seen 343 people newly diagnosed with HIV, over 1,500 people newly diagnosed with hepatitis B and C, and 473 people previously lost to care found. Those are incredibly encouraging statistics, and they point to the effectiveness of opt-out testing. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what assessment the Government have made of opt-out testing being implemented in areas of high prevalence—and if not, does he have any plans to do so?

The second thing I want to focus on were those people lost to care. By "lost to care", we mean those previously diagnosed with HIV who have not attended an HIV clinic in the past year. In general, those people are disproportionately likely to be black women, and most likely to be from the most deprived parts of the country, to have caring responsibilities, or to be subject to the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

I also commend the Terrence Higgins Trust, which does brilliant work and I thank those there for their support for me in my role. The trust estimates that the number of people lost to care, but alive and still in the UK, could be as high as 13,000. That is extremely concerning and means not only that individuals are at risk of developing serious HIV-associated illness, but that they risk passing the virus on to others. What action is the Department taking to re-engage those individuals? What further work is the Minister planning nationally to support people back into care?

The third and final point I want to ask the Minister about is access to PrEP and sexual health services more generally. As we have heard in the debate, there are serious inequalities in PrEP identification and initiation. Even when people access care, they face extraordinarily long waiting times, with 57% of people waiting more than 12 weeks to receive PrEP. The Terrence Higgins Trust is aware of people who have, tragically, acquired HIV while waiting to access PrEP. That is clearly unacceptable. Such cases were entirely preventable and should seriously alarm Ministers.

The HIV action plan included a commitment to develop a plan for PrEP access beyond sexual health services. However, more than a year on from that commitment, there is no pharmacy or GP surgery in the country where PrEP is accessible. I know from responses to written parliamentary questions that the Minister is still committed to that aspect of the HIV action plan, so when can we expect it to be set out in detail? The Government initially promised their PrEP plan in the autumn of 2022. We are now three days away from summer recess in 2023. Where is the plan?

In closing, I want to raise the issue of sexual health services and ask the Minister about Government proposals to change schedule 1 to the Health Protection Notification Regulations 2010, which lists notifiable diseases. What guarantees will the Minister give that that will not impact the important anonymity of those accessing sexual health services or increase stigma?

Labour stands ready and waiting to support the Government in driving down HIV prevalence. I am sure that the Minister will agree that, across the House, we have a responsibility to redouble our efforts so that we can eliminate all new transmissions of HIV by 2030. I hope that, with cross-party action, we can make that a reality.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) and to all other hon. Members present. A number of them have played leading roles in campaigning on this issue.

This afternoon, we have had an excellent debate, hearing important contributions about particular aspects of the challenge: my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) on the dimension for women; the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on the opportunities for home testing; and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) on the importance to her constituency. We heard about the inspirational work of centres such as 56 Dean Street from my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and about the searing personal experience of friends and families of people suffering and dying of this terrible disease from my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson).

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I apologise, as I have not been present for the whole debate. May I mention one other clinic, 10 Hammersmith Broadway? I visited it recently and was hugely impressed by the staff and their partners in the community, such as the

Terrence Higgins Trust. It is clear, however, that they are under increasing stress. The problem is that it only takes an emergency like the outbreak of mpox, or STIs going up, and routine services such as providing PrEP go on to the back foot. Will the Minister look at that, particularly in high-prevalence areas, because the limited cost is not worth the great risk involved?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to look into that. We provided extra funding

in respect of mpox, but I will look into the issues the hon. Gentleman raised.

This debate is an opportunity to restate our joint commitment to tackling HIV and to reflect on the progress we have made since 2019, when the Government first announced our ambition to end new HIV transmissions, new AIDS diagnoses and new HIV-related deaths in England by 2030. As all Members know, 30 years ago AIDS was a fatal illness; today, when they are diagnosed early and have access to antiretrovirals, the majority of people with HIV in England can expect a near-normal life expectancy. People who are diagnosed with HIV can expect to receive HIV care that is world class, free and open access.

We have come a long way. Despite the unprecedented and challenging backdrop of the covid pandemic, England has seen a 33% fall in new HIV diagnoses since 2019, and fewer than 4,500 people live with undiagnosed HIV. The vast majority of those diagnosed are on high-quality treatment and are now unable to pass on the virus—still not enough people know that. Our successes have been possible only through clear national leadership and strengthened partnership working.

I am incredibly grateful to Professor Kevin Fenton, the Government's chief adviser on HIV, who chairs the HIV action plan implementation steering group, which has representation from the key partners involved in the delivery of the HIV action plan, including local government, the UK Health Security Agency, the NHS, professional bodies and our voluntary and community sector. The group has met quarterly throughout the year to monitor progress on our commitments and ensure that appropriate action is taken to help us to move forward on our objectives.

Within the steering group's remit, we have established a community advisory group, comprising representatives from a wide range of community and voluntary groups, from which we have a lot to learn, and four task and finish groups to support PrEP access and equity, workforce, HIV control strategies in low-prevalence areas, and retention and engagement in HIV care. The groups provide vital, comprehensive and timely advice and help us to remain on track to meet our 2030 goal.

Many areas of the country have replicated the national action regionally by providing leadership and oversight of the work that is under way within local systems. For example, we have seen the development of regional HIV action plans in areas such as the south-west, multi-agency working groups in the midlands, and stocktakes of testing activity and action via sexual health networks in the south-east, the north-east and Yorkshire.

Peter Gibson: I am interested to hear the stories the Minister is telling about regional action plans; do they include opt-out testing?

Neil O'Brien: I will come on to opt-out testing in a moment.

We are incredibly grateful for the work of the UK Health Security Agency, which is a world-class organisation that runs high-quality data-collection and surveillance systems to help us to better understand the scale of the challenge. In December 2022, the UKHSA published the first monitoring and evaluation report on the HIV action plan, which indicated that the achievement of our ambitious commitments, including the interim commitment to an 80% reduction in transmissions by 2025, is within our grasp, and we should be encouraged by the progress that has been made.

As various Members pointed out, progress in the UK is increasingly recognised internationally at different HIV global forums, such as the UNAIDS and WHO international boards. The proof of that is that the UK met the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets for the second time in 2021: 95% of HIV-positive individuals were diagnosed; 99% of those diagnosed were receiving treatment; and 98% of those receiving treatment were being virally suppressed and unable to pass on the disease.

Transparency and accountability are a key cornerstone of our plan, which is why we also committed to update Parliament each year on the progress made towards our ambition to end new HIV transmissions. In particular, we are committed to ensure that underserved populations benefit equally from the improvements made in HIV outcomes, including by scaling up our prevention efforts and increasing access to PrEP. We have already invested £33 million to roll out PrEP across sexual health services over the past two years, and PrEP is now being commissioned as a routine service through the public health grant. However, we know that there is more to do to improve PrEP access and equity for key groups, and we are in the process of developing a road map based on the input of the PrEP task and finish group that I mentioned, to improve PrEP provision and help us to reach those who are under-represented in PrEP access.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown raised the issue of the blood test, which I will absolutely take away and look at. On the specific point about timing made by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), the HIV plan implementation steering group is working to develop a road map based on the task and finish group's recommendations, to help to guide our movement forward. Our work will be informed by the findings of research on the use of HIV PrEP commissioned by the English HIV and sexual health commissioners group. In particular, we want to understand the barriers for underserved groups that access PrEP and how they can be mitigated.

It is expected that the research will be published this month—of which there is, of course, not much left. Members will see that very shortly, because we know the urgency of this issue, and I have been struck by Members' testimony today about what is happening in respect of private access and the need for people to access PrEP in a timely and smooth way.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members raised the issue of the opt-out testing programme. I have met some of the people who have already benefited from

that incredible programme, which powerfully underlines its huge benefits. Preliminary results from the pilot are promising, and we are still considering the full evidence from the first year of the programme, alongside the data on progress towards our ambition of ending new transmissions. Through the HIV action plan, DHSE is investing £3.5 million in our national HIV prevention programme from 2021 to 2024, to raise awareness of ways to prevent the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among the most affected communities.

As part of that programme, we deliver National HIV Testing Week in partnership with the Terrence Higgins Trust. In 2023, it distributed almost 22,000 free HIV testing kits ordered by the public. The self-testing kits provide instant at-home results and are available for the very first time. A targeted summer campaign is currently being delivered through the brilliant work of our partners at the Terrence Higgins Trust. The campaign has been carefully developed and tailored through strong audience insight evaluation to help us reach those most at risk, and it aims to increase testing among key groups, particularly young people and people of African heritage. It also aims to promote awareness of good sexual health practices to prevent transmission of other sexually transmitted infections. To reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, we are working with the Department for Education on its RHSE review, and have been doing so since March, so I absolutely recognise the importance of the point that she made.

Achieving our 2030 goal will require sustained commitment from many partners across the health system and beyond—in education, for example—and the HIV action plan describes the role that each partner will play in this vital endeavour. The success of recent years, and the scale of the task that remains, should give us the belief and the drive to go further in the years ahead. Let us continue working together to ensure that we are the generation that ends HIV once and for all.

5.27 pm

Nicola Richards: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for taking part in today's debate. We all said very similar things, and I hear from the Minister that the first year's data from the opt-out testing trial is still being analysed. I think he will agree with us that it looks very promising so far, and I want to reiterate that we have all the knowledge we need to end new transmissions of HIV in the UK by 2030. We have the tools and the knowledge to do it. We just need to get on and do it, so I urge the Minister to speed up the work on this issue, because it will be an incredible achievement if this Government can end new transmission by 2030 through the programmes we have set up. It is possible, we can do it and we have to get on with it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That his House has considered the HIV Action Plan annual update 2022-23.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 18 July 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK-Türkiye: Free Trade Agreement

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston):

The United Kingdom and the Republic of Türkiye are significant and close trading partners. We have a bilateral trading relationship that is going from strength to strength, worth £23.5 billion in 2022, up more than 30% from the previous year. The Government intend to build upon this success and are today confirming their intention to begin talks towards an enhanced free trade agreement.

The current agreement was signed in December 2020, and is based on the EU's trade agreement with Türkiye. It predominantly covers industrial goods and has provided continuity to businesses and safeguarded supply chains since our departure from the European Union.

A review clause in the current agreement committed the UK and Türkiye to review the trade relationship. That review began ahead of schedule last year and has now been completed, with both the UK and Türkiye concluding that there is value to our economies in broadening and deepening the trade relationship. The UK and Türkiye will today hold an officials-level Joint Committee, responsible for overseeing implementation of the current agreement and any other matter under the agreement to formally conclude the review and move towards renegotiation of the free trade agreement. The UK expects to launch a call for input in the autumn and, following consultation, we expect to start renegotiations next year.

An improved agreement with Türkiye is a key part of the UK's strategy to secure advanced modern agreements with international partners and upgrade existing continuity agreements. The Government are clear that any deal with Türkiye should be in the best interests of the British people and the UK economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the NHS, and the services it provides are not on the table. This is an opportunity to work towards an agreement that is fit for the 21st century and suited to the modern UK economy.

[HCWS963]

CABINET OFFICE

Afghan Resettlement Update

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer):

To date, the Government have resettled around 12,200 people through the Afghan relocations and assistance policy (ARAP), and over 9,100 through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme (ACRS). All those resettled through ARAP and ACRS are granted indefinite leave to enter or remain, meaning they have the immediate right to work, as well as access to the benefits system.

Given the unprecedented speed and scale of the evacuation from Afghanistan during Operation Pitting and the following months, we welcomed those eligible into bridging hotels and serviced apartments as a temporary solution until settled accommodation could be found. On Tuesday 28 March, I made it clear in my update to Parliament that the Government did not consider it acceptable that over 18 months after Operation Pitting, around 8,000 people remained in temporary bridging accommodation, over half of whom had been there for over one year. I announced our intention to step up our support, backed by £285 million of funding for local authorities, to help families make arrangements to leave their bridging hotels and serviced apartments, and to move into settled accommodation where they can put down roots and integrate into communities across the country.

Since my last update, we have issued legal notices to quit and individualised communications to households living in bridging accommodation, setting out when their access to that accommodation will end. Residents received at least three months' notice to leave their bridging accommodation, as well as clear guidance on the support they can access through local authorities to help them find their own accommodation. We have also ensured that enhanced, multidisciplinary case working teams have been present in every bridging hotel and serviced apartment, working closely with households to support them through the process. For local authorities, we have made £7,100 per person of flexible funding available to support move-on, including through providing deposits, furniture, rental top-ups and rent advances.

This Government remain committed to ending access to costly hotels and serviced apartments at the end of the notice periods that we have issued to Afghan households. However, as a final measure of goodwill, there will be a small number for whom time-limited interim accommodation will be provided, including where they have been pre-matched to settled accommodation and there is a need to bridge a short gap between the end of a notice period and that confirmed accommodation being ready for them to move into. Interim accommodation will also be provided in cases of medical need where a family member requires continued attendance at a specific hospital. Everyone else will be expected to have left bridging accommodation by the time their notice period expires. For some this will be at the end of this month.

Today I am writing again to all local authorities, reminding them of the extensive funding available from central Government to help find settled housing solutions, and strongly encouraging them to draw on these to support and match as many households as possible into settled accommodation.

This is the right thing to do—both for the taxpayer and for the Afghans we have welcomed to this country and who deserve the opportunity to live self-sufficiently here in the UK.

[HCWS973]

TREASURY

Finance Bill: Draft Legislation and Tax Documents

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): In line with the tax policy making framework, the Government are publishing draft legislation ahead of potential inclusion in the next Finance Bill. This

allows for technical consultation and provides taxpayers with predictability over future tax policy changes. Alongside this, the Government are making announcements in a small number of technical areas of tax policy to support the operation of the tax system. Draft legislation is being published to seek stakeholder views at this stage. The final contents of the next Finance Bill will be a decision for the Chancellor. The Government are also publishing a number of tax-related consultations and summaries of responses to consultations that have already been conducted.

Publication of draft legislation

The Government are publishing draft legislation and associated documents, further to previous announcements, including at Budget or on Tax Administration and Maintenance Day.

Additional tax relief for R&D intensive SMEs: The Government are publishing draft legislation that will introduce a new permanent rate of relief for the most R&D intensive loss-making SMEs from 1 April 2023. This additional support will be worth over £1.8 billion over the next five years, and will provide eligible R&D intensive loss-making SMEs with support worth £27 per £100 of R&D expenditure. The scheme would continue to operate alongside any merged scheme.

R&D: Merging RDEC and SME relief: The Government are publishing draft legislation on the proposed design of a merged scheme, alongside a summary of responses to the consultation. This would combine the SME and RDEC schemes into a single, simplified above-the-line tax credit. This legislation will keep open the option of implementing a merged scheme from April 2024. A final decision on whether to merge schemes will be taken at a future fiscal event.

Reform of audio-visual creative tax reliefs: The Government are publishing draft legislation to implement the modernisation and reform of the audio-visual tax reliefs into expenditure credits. The reforms include a higher rate of relief for animation and children's TV to provide additional support for this burgeoning sector. This higher rate of relief will also be extended to animated films.

Administrative changes to creative industry tax reliefs: The Government are publishing draft legislation to make a number of administrative improvements to the creative industry tax reliefs, alongside the introduction of the new expenditure credit regimes.

Technical clarifications to the cultural tax reliefs: As announced at spring Budget 2023, alongside the two-year extension to the higher rates, the Government are publishing draft legislation to make several changes to clarify what is eligible for the three cultural tax reliefs: theatre, orchestra, and museums and galleries exhibition tax relief.

Lifetime Allowance abolition: As announced at spring Budget 2023, the Government are publishing draft legislation to abolish the pensions lifetime allowance, following the removal of the lifetime allowance charge from 6 April 2023.

Pensions schemes relief at source: The Government are publishing draft legislation that will ensure that the legislative framework supports the modernisation of the relief at source (RAS).

Doubling maximum sentences for tax fraud: The Government are publishing draft legislation to double maximum sentences for the most egregious cases of tax fraud from seven to 14 years. This demonstrates the Government's intent to crack down on tax fraud and deter criminal actions, which reduce the amount of money available to fund vital public services.

Tonnage Tax: The Government are publishing draft legislation to permit third-party ship management companies to join the tonnage tax regime and to raise the limit on capital allowances to £200 million for lessors of ships into the regime. These measures will help to keep the UK tonnage tax regime competitive internationally.

Geographical scope of agricultural property relief and woodlands relief: The Government are publishing draft legislation that will restrict the scope of agricultural property relief and woodlands relief from inheritance tax to property located in the UK only.

Enterprise Management Incentives: This measure extends the time limit for a company to notify HMRC of a grant of an enterprise management incentives (EMI) share scheme option.

Improving the data HMRC collects from its customers: The Government are publishing draft legislation to improve the quality of data collected by HMRC. This will provide better outcomes for taxpayers and businesses, improving compliance and resulting in a more resilient tax system.

The Government are also publishing draft legislation and associated documents in the following areas that have not been previously announced:

Ukraine vehicle excise duty exemption: The Government are also publishing draft legislation to enable a vehicle excise duty (VED) exemption for Ukraine visa holders. Individuals in the UK under the family, sponsor and extension Ukrainian visa schemes, driving vehicles with Ukrainian number plates, will be exempt from VED and registration requirements for a period of 36 months (in line with the length of their visas). This will ensure that individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine who have not yet registered their vehicles in the UK do not have to face the costs associated with VED and registering their vehicles while they are temporarily in the UK.

Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs): The Government are publishing draft legislation to make further improvements to the operation of the tax rules for real estate investment trusts. As well as engaging on the detail of these provisions, the Government will continue to consider the case for other reform options.

OECD Pillar 2: The Government are publishing amendments to the pillar 2 rules to ensure that it functions as intended and reflects the latest internationally agreed guidance. Alongside this, the Government are setting out the draft legislation of the structure of the undertaxed profits rule (UTPR).

Post Office compensation schemes—corporate entities: The Government are publishing draft legislation that will provide an exemption from corporation tax on compensation payments made to corporate entities from the Horizon shortfall scheme or group litigation order compensation schemes.

Tougher consequences on promoters of tax avoidance: The Government are publishing draft legislation that creates a new criminal offence that will apply to promoters of tax avoidance schemes who fail to comply with an HMRC legal notice requiring them to stop promoting an avoidance scheme. The Government are also publishing draft legislation that will enable HMRC to apply to the court for a disqualification order against directors of companies involved in promoting tax avoidance.

All draft legislation is accompanied by a tax information and impact note (TIIN), an explanatory note (EN) and, where applicable, a summary of consultation responses document.

Policy announcements

Administrative Changes to the High-income Child Benefit Charge: The Government want to simplify the process for customers who become liable to the high-income child benefit charge, particularly for those who currently need to register for self-assessment to pay the charge. The Government will provide details in due course on how they will enable employed customers to pay through their tax code, without the need to register for self-assessment.

Exempting Payments Under the Department for Education's Family Network Support Package: The Government will legislate to ensure that payments made under the family network support package trialled in the family network pilot by the Department for Education will be exempt from income tax. This legislation will apply retrospectively from 31 July 2023, when payments start. HMRC will exercise its collection and management discretion and will not collect any income tax that may have been due on payments made from 31 July 2023 to the date the legislation takes effect.

Other publications

The Government are also publishing the following consultations:

Plastic Packaging Tax—mass balance approach: The Government are consulting on how a mass balance approach can be used for calculating the recycled content in packaging made from chemically recycled plastic for the purposes of plastic packaging tax.

Energy Profits Levy Energy Security Investment Mechanism: The Government are publishing a discussion paper to support engagement with the sector on the technical details of the ESIM's application.

Taxation of employee ownership trusts and employee benefit trusts: The Government are consulting on proposals to reform the tax treatment of two types of employee trusts: employee ownership trusts (EOTs) and employee benefit trusts (EBTs). These reforms ensure that the favourable tax treatment remains available to those who use EOTs and EBTs for the intended policy purposes, while preventing tax advantages being obtained through use of these trusts outside of these intended purposes.

Updating the VAT Terminal Markets Order legislation: As announced at Tax Administration and Maintenance Day, the Government are consulting on proposals to update the terminal markets order legislation to clarify the VAT treatment of exchange traded commodity transactions, ensuring the legislation reflects how the markets operate today and provides greater certainty in relation to the VAT treatment.

All publications can be found on the gov.uk website. The Government's tax consultation tracker has also been updated.

[HCWS972]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Video Game Loot Boxes: Improvements to Industry-led Protections

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): The Government have today published an update on improvements to industry-led protections for loot boxes in video games. Loot boxes are features in some video games that contain apparently randomised items. They may be purchased with money—including via virtual currencies—or accessed via gameplay.

The Government response to the call for evidence on loot boxes in video games—July 2022—found an association between loot box purchases and problem gambling, but evidence has not established whether a causal relationship exists. The Government response set out the view that:

Purchases of loot boxes should be unavailable to all children and young people unless and until they are enabled by a parent or guardian.

All players should have access to, and be aware of, spending controls and transparent information to support safe and responsible gameplay.

Better evidence and research, enabled by improved access to data, should be developed to inform future policy making on loot boxes and video games more broadly.

Since then, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has convened a technical working group of games industry representatives tasked with improving industry-led protections with regards to loot boxes. The output of the working group is industry-led guidance on paid loot boxes, co-ordinated and published by video games trade body Ukie. Academics, the Games Rating Authority (GRA), the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) have participated in the group, and DCMS has facilitated engagement with Ukie on its proposal, including through a players and parents panel.

The Government welcome this new guidance published by Ukie which, if fully implemented, has the potential to enhance player protections in line with the objectives set out in the Government response.

We are now calling on the games industry to work closely with players, parents, academics, consumer groups and Government authorities to adopt and implement the guidance in full, and continue to improve protections for players.

To meet the objective of improving the evidence base on loot boxes and video games more broadly, DCMS has collaborated with academics, industry, other Government Departments and Research Councils to develop a video games research framework, which was published in May. The Government welcome independent academic scrutiny, facilitated by the research framework, to assess the effectiveness and implementation of industry-led protections and, more broadly, how best to ensure player safety with regards to loot boxes.

The Government will keep their position on possible future legislative options under review, informed by the effectiveness of implementation of industry-led measures and academic scrutiny. We will provide further updates in due course, following a 12-month implementation period for this new industry guidance.

[HCWS964]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Nuclear Power: Technology Selection Process Launch

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Grant Shapps): In March this year, as part of the Powering Up Britain strategy, the Government set up Great British Nuclear (GBN). GBN will deliver the Government's long-term nuclear programme, driving forward nuclear projects in the UK. The organisation's first priority is to administer a competitive process to select the best small modular reactor (SMR) technologies from around the world.

This SMR Technology Selection Process (TSP) will underpin the Government's commitment to two nuclear Project Final Investment Decisions (FIDs) during the next Parliament. It will support the Government's ambition to deliver up to 24GW of nuclear power in the UK by 2050. This would mean nearly a quarter of Great Britain's total power demands being met by low-carbon, secure nuclear energy, supporting the UK's energy security, and contributing to our net zero targets. It would rebuild a UK industry that was the envy of the world following the opening of the world's first commercial nuclear plant at Calder Hall, Cumbria, in 1956, and can be again.

Nuclear power as a share of the UK energy mix has been reducing as older plants naturally retire. However, we are acting to reverse this trend. As a major first milestone, the Government invested £700 million in Sizewell C last year, representing the first state backing of a major new nuclear project in over 30 years. This builds on the significant EDF investment in Hinkley Point C since 2016 and the Government are now working in partnership with EDF to develop Sizewell C, towards our objective of achieving a FID this Parliament.

Beyond Sizewell, GBN will promote a programmatic approach both to nuclear technology selection and project deployment to drive further progress. This will not only

give the supply chain the long-term certainty it needs to invest in homegrown capability and skills, it will in time offset plant retirements and strengthen UK energy independence. GBN now has in place an experienced interim executive team, including Simon Bowen as Chair and Gwen Parry-Jones as Chief Executive Officer. Since April, swift progress has been made on the Powering Up Britain commitment to gather market intelligence to inform GBN planning.

Today GBN launches the next phase of the SMR TSP and invites SMR vendors to register their interest. This is an important next step in identifying those companies best able to reach a project FID by the end of 2029, which could result in billions of pounds of public and private investment in SMR projects. It demonstrates that the Government are delivering on their priorities to partner with the nuclear industry and jointly spearhead the future of nuclear technologies, to secure decarbonised and domestically-generated electricity to power the economy. The Government recognise the importance of moving quickly to uphold our energy security and net zero ambitions, and are seeking to deliver the fastest competition of its kind in the world.

The Contract Notice, published today, sets out an intention to enter into a development contract with those successful bidders, with the option of pursuing a project through FID to construction and subsequently operations, providing a route to market for successful bidders. In practice, this means offering chosen technologies an unprecedented level of support: funding to support technology development and site-specific design; a close partnership with GBN, which will be ready and able to provide developer capability; and support in accessing sites.

As a first step in this process, interested parties will be required to respond to a selection questionnaire. Once this stage is complete, GBN will down-select those technologies which have met the criteria, and then enter into detailed discussions with those companies as part of an invitation to negotiate phase. The Government will seek to decide as soon as possible which technology or technologies to support. This process is designed to afford Government flexibility in the number of projects they choose to support, and the ability to support successful projects through the construction phase subject to approvals and if this proves value for money.

This SMR TSP is a further significant step in the revival of nuclear power in this country. The Government remain strongly committed to the full spectrum of nuclear technologies and are continuing to consider how all technologies could further contribute to UK energy security and meeting climate change targets.

As we seek to increase diversity across the pool of nuclear technologies available in the UK and to strengthen our nuclear sector supply chain, I can announce today up to £157 million of grant funding awards across three existing nuclear programmes:

Up to £77.1 million from the Future Nuclear Enabling Fund, subject to due diligence of short-listed applicants, with details to follow shortly.

Up to £58 million to National Nuclear Laboratory, Ultra Safe Nuclear Corporation and the UK's Nuclear Regulators for the development and design of a form of Advanced Modular Reactors (AMRs) and their fuels; and

£22.3 million from the Nuclear Fuel Fund which will enable eight projects to develop new fuel production and manufacturing capabilities in the UK. The successful companies are Westinghouse, Urenco UK, Nuclear Transport Solutions, and MoltexFLEX.

The Government are going further by today committing to consult in the autumn on alternative routes to market for new nuclear projects, in addition to that provided by the TSP. Government are particularly keen to understand where GBN and the Government could support the private sector to bring forward projects, and to further explore the role of nuclear energy in industrial decarbonisation as well as low-carbon heat and hydrogen production. The evidence received will help shape future policy and ensure that the UK's nuclear programme is as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. Further details will follow on both this and the nuclear roadmap, which we have committed to publish by the end of the year and which aims to set out further next steps for civil nuclear.

[HCWS965]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Climate Adaptation Reporting: Third National Adaptation Programme and Fourth Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Yesterday I laid the Third National Adaptation Programme and Fourth Strategy for Climate Adaptation Reporting before the House. The document is available on www.gov.uk.

We are feeling the impact of a changing climate in our everyday lives in the UK, as well as witnessing its effects around the world. We are observing increases in the frequency and intensity of heatwaves, flooding, drought and wildfires. Even with successful actions in place to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, we still need to prepare for the way the climate is changing. This report sets out how we are strengthening our national security and resilience, from producing food and securing water supplies to maintaining critical infrastructure and supply chains.

The Third National Adaptation Programme (NAP3), laid before Parliament yesterday, outlines the UK Government's vision and programme of action for the NAP3 period—2023-2028—to respond to the impacts of climate change, safeguarding long-term investments and supporting Government priorities from energy and food security to economic growth and public health. The report addresses all 61 climate risks and opportunities identified in our Third Climate Change Risk Assessment.

As part of this, we have announced a brand new £15 million joint research initiative between DEFRA and UKRI to ensure research and innovation are informing action on adaptation across all areas of Government policy. Working together, researchers, policymakers and practitioners will be equipped with the data, skills and incentives needed to effectively adapt to a changing climate.

We are also establishing a new local authority climate service pilot scheme which will provide easy access to localised climate data.

The Third National Adaptation Programme will extend our existing action on climate adaptation. This includes our environmental land management farming schemes, protecting hundreds of thousands of homes with a record £5.2 billion investment in flood and coastal schemes, and safeguarding future water supplies through greater efficiency and new supply infrastructure outlined in our ambitious Plan for Water.

The report also includes the Fourth Strategy for Climate Adaptation Reporting, through which infrastructure providers and bodies with functions ‘of a public nature’ report on their plans to manage climate risk. The strategy, which follows a statutory consultation, includes reforms to make reporting more effective, address gaps, and expand its scope.

Together, the Third National Adaptation Programme and Fourth Strategy for Climate Adaptation Reporting mark a step-change in the UK Government’s approach to climate adaptation, putting in place an ambitious programme of decisive action for the next five years.

[HCWS966]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

International Development White Paper

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The Government will publish an International Development White Paper later this year. It will set out how the UK will lead the charge against extreme poverty and climate change in a changing world.

Yesterday, I updated the House on the FCDO’s ODA allocations for 2023-24 and 2024-25, showing a sharp increase, including a near doubling of the bilateral aid budget, and demonstrating our commitment to transparency.

As set out in my speech at Chatham House on 27 April, the White Paper will make the case for international action on development, and outline our plans for the next seven years. Therefore, it will chart the long-term direction for UK international development up to 2030.

In the month that the world recorded its hottest day, the White Paper must address the intertwined challenges of climate, nature and extreme poverty.

We need to find an approach fit for the 21st century, which understands that development and geopolitics go hand in hand, and that development is long term. Where development is dynamic and forward looking, and readily adapts to the pace and scale of global change. We need new solutions—that can drive more resources—whether sweating the assets of the international financial institutions further, as the Bridgetown initiative has called on us to do, or drawing in more private finance. The White Paper will consider how to use all the levers at our disposal—in government but also outside it: diplomacy to strengthen international relations and regulation; trade and investment fostering prosperity and resilience; new technology, science and innovation; research and knowledge.

The White Paper will be built on extensive consultation. Here, in the UK with assistance across the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the International Development Committee and the many all-party parliamentary groups working on international development issues; with our charity sector, but also with academia, with business, and with ordinary people. This must be about listening to and drawing on the voices of our friends and partners all around the world, drawing their evidence and perspectives in. Even where they are critical, or difficult to hear. Only by listening and acting can we strengthen trust.

The Government will be launching a call for evidence, opening soon and closing in mid-September to which we invite a broad range of response. My officials will be happy to engage with those who have a contribution to make. I look forward also to engaging with the Opposition Front Bench. I firmly believe that we must work together to bring the sustainable development goals back on track.

This approach—founded on partnerships—is what will secure progress and build shared prosperity. There are no quick fixes in development, we are in it for the long haul. The challenge is formidable, but the need is immense.

[HCWS969]

HOME DEPARTMENT

CONTEST: United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): The first duty of this Government is to keep the United Kingdom and its people safe. I am therefore pleased to today publish an updated version of CONTEST, the United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism. The strategy has been laid before Parliament as a Command Paper (CP 903), and copies are available in the Vote Office and on www.gov.uk.

This year marks 20 years since we launched CONTEST. The core framework that underpins the strategy—Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare—has stood the test of time and remains a strong foundation on which to base our counter-terrorism efforts.

However, the threat we face from terrorism is enduring and evolving and it is right that we update our strategy to stay ahead. I have already announced an overhaul of the Prevent pillar in response to the Independent Review of Prevent, to ensure that it recognises the central role of ideology in encouraging people to turn towards extremism and that Islamism remains our greatest threat. Since the last version of CONTEST was published in 2018, nine terrorist attacks have been declared in the UK, in which six people died and 20 people were injured. Overseas, 24 UK nationals have been killed in 11 terrorist attacks. The majority of these attacks were Islamist in nature. We judge that the risk from terrorism is rising, and we must do everything within our power to reduce it.

We must also review our counter-terrorism efforts in response to external scrutiny: since 2018 there have been numerous inquests, inquiries, reviews, and exercises which have helped us learn lessons and improve our counter-terrorism system. Most recently we have received and are implementing recommendations from the Independent Review of Prevent and the Manchester Arena Inquiry.

The Home Office has updated CONTEST via comprehensive evidence-gathering and thorough consultation. This has included input and challenge from other Government Departments, devolved administrations, the police, the security and intelligence agencies, frontline practitioners, independent advisers and commissioners including the Commission for Countering Extremism, victims of terrorism and their families, the private sector, academia, and our international partners and allies.

The strategy sets out a need to respond to a domestic terrorist threat which is less predictable and harder to detect and investigate, a persistent and evolving threat from Islamist groups overseas, and an operating environment where accelerating advances in technology provide both opportunity and risk to our counter-terrorism efforts. It also includes a greater focus on the pivotal role of ideology in encouraging extremism.

In response, building on its established foundations, the updated version of CONTEST sets out how we will place greater focus on using all the levers of the state to identify and intervene against terrorists, build critical partnerships with the private sector and international allies to keep the public safe, and harness the opportunities presented by new technology.

Through this updated strategy, and by taking a more agile, integrated and aligned approach, we will do everything within our power to keep the public safe.

[HCWS967]

JUSTICE

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme Review: Additional Consultation 2023

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): Today I have laid before Parliament a public consultation on two elements of the statutory Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2012 (the scheme). This consultation follows through on the Government's commitment in response to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (the inquiry) to consult on two of the inquiry's recommendations for changes to the scheme.

The scheme exists to compensate victims of violent crime in England, Scotland and Wales, with the core purpose of recognising, through compensation, the harm experienced by victims injured by violent crime, including sexual assault. The scheme focuses on compensating those most seriously injured, providing awards for physical and mental injury, as well as loss of earnings, bereavement and funeral payments. In 2021-22 the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) paid out £158 million in compensation.

In October 2022, the inquiry published its final report—a landmark moment in the Government's efforts to tackle child sexual abuse. The report made two new recommendations for the scheme: that its scope be amended

“to include other forms of child sexual abuse, including online-facilitated sexual abuse”;

and that the time limit be increased to seven years (from the current two) for applications relating to child sexual abuse.

In the Government response to the inquiry, we committed to consult on these recommendations. This will allow us to give due consideration to the important work of the inquiry and to consider whether or not to make changes to the scheme as a result. This builds on our consultations in 2020 which sought views on proposals to make the scheme simpler and easier for people to understand and engage with following a review of the scheme, and in 2022 when we considered the scheme's unspent convictions rule in the light of another of the inquiry's recommendations.

We are consulting on the following two options for changes to the scheme's scope:

Amending the definition of a “crime of violence” to include other forms of child sexual abuse, including online-facilitated sexual abuse, as recommended by the inquiry.

Amending the eligibility criteria to also bring serious non-contact offences, such as grooming, coercive control, revenge porn and stalking within scope of the scheme.

We are also consulting on the following four options for changes to the scheme's time limits:

Amending the time limit to seven years for child sexual abuse applicants, as recommended by the inquiry.

Amending the time limit to seven years for all applicants to the scheme.

Amending the time limit to three years for all applicants who were children under the age of 18 on the date of the incident giving rise to the injury.

Amending the time limit to three years for all applicants to the scheme.

We will consider carefully all views and representations made by respondents, in order to inform our conclusions. Ministers will decide if any changes should be made to the scheme and set these out in a single response covering all three consultations on the scheme that we have held since 2020.

The consultation is available in full at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/criminal-injuries-compensation-scheme-review-additional-consultation-2023>.

The consultation will close on Friday 15 September.

[HCWS968]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Intergovernmental Relations Quarterly Transparency Report: 1 January-31 March 2023

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): Today, the Government published the first quarterly report for 2023 of our engagement with the devolved Administrations on gov.uk. The quarter 1 report follows on from the most recent annual report published on gov.uk in March 2023.

In keeping with a previous written statement on transparency reporting commitments, we have evolved the way in which we demonstrate the engagements between the Government and devolved Administrations by publishing a dashboard of infographics and executive summary highlighting key engagements from quarter 1. We will continue to publish our transparency reports in this format going forward with the exception of the annual report, which will be of a similar structure to previous years.

The report continues to show that across the UK we share the same challenges and are working towards the same goals for the future. This report covers a period of engagement between the Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland civil service between 1 January to 31 March 2023. During this reporting period the Administrations worked together on a number of key areas, such as ways to tackle the cost of living, NHS capacity and other issues

such as the deposit return scheme. The report highlights that our collective strength is why we are able to face and tackle big changes and challenges.

The report is part of the Government's ongoing commitment to transparency of intergovernmental relations to Parliament and the public. The Government will continue with publications to demonstrate transparency in intergovernmental relations.

[HCWS970]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Action Plan: Consultation Publication

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): This Government set out in their manifesto a commitment to transform the everyday lives of disabled people across the country, working to make this country the most accessible place in the world for disabled people to live, work and thrive. We remain committed to this goal, and today I am proud to announce another important step in this direction: the launch of our disability action plan consultation.

The launch of the disability action plan consultation marks a significant milestone, further demonstrating this Government's ongoing commitment to implementing changes that will make real, tangible improvements to the lives of disabled people.

Ensuring that the voices of disabled people are properly heard is a priority for this Government. The disability action plan will set out the immediate action the UK Government will take in 2023 and 2024 to improve disabled people's lives and lay the foundations for longer-term change. But this consultation is not meant to be the end of a journey. Rather, it is a first step—and a chance to make sure that we are heading in the right direction.

The disability action plan consultation document brings much of the Government's work to better support disabled people together into one place, highlighting what has been achieved in recent times and what we plan to do in the coming years. To this end, chapter 2 highlights the Government's achievements over the last year. Chapter 3 builds on this, setting out what more the Government plan to undertake in 2023 and 2024. Chapter 4 proposes new areas for action, with proposals for work

that would be led or co-ordinated by the disability unit. Finally, chapter 5 asks some overarching questions about the proposed disability action plan as a whole, and sets out our next steps following the consultation period.

Proposals in the disability action plan consultation document cover a variety of issues, ranging from access to elected office; the wellbeing of, and opportunities for, disabled children; raising the profile of assistive technology; and exploring and promoting disability inclusion in climate adaptations and mitigations. Proposed actions focus on areas that would benefit significantly from targeted cross-governmental collaboration, where meaningful changes can be delivered quickly in 2023 and 2024.

Proposed actions complement significant reforms being undertaken in other Government Departments, in areas that we know disabled people care about deeply—for example, the Department for Work and Pensions' "Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper"; strategies to improve health and social care via the Department of Health and Social Care's "People at the Heart of Care White Paper"; and bold proposals to deliver a more inclusive education system via the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care's "Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan".

Throughout and beyond the development of the disability action plan, we will continue to listen to, and work with, disabled people, organisations, charities and experts, to ensure that the voices of disabled people remain at the heart of our work.

This Government are fully committed to implementing change that supports our goal of improving the lives and inclusion of disabled people—and the disability action plan will be complementary to, and sit alongside, the longer-term national disability strategy, which will be progressed in parallel. I look forward to seeing the results of the consultation and then moving forward into delivery of the actions within the final disability action plan.

I encourage all those who may be interested—disabled people themselves, their families and carers, disabled people's organisations and disability stakeholders—to contribute to this important consultation. Together, we can change disabled people's lives for the better.

[HCWS971]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 18 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	745	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—continued	
Afghanistan: Rights of Women and Girls.....	751	Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories	745
British Nationals Detained Overseas.....	758	Kashmir: Human Rights.....	756
Climate Finance Commitments.....	750	Sri Lanka: Alleged War Crimes.....	749
Food Security: Developing Countries	756	Strengthening NATO Unity	753
Hong Kong Nationals Living Overseas: Arrest Warrants	754	Topical Questions	760
Indo-Pacific Region: Diplomatic Relations.....	751	Ukraine: British Council	757
Iran: Human Rights Violations.....	759	UN Convention against Torture.....	753
		Western Balkans: Stability	760

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 18 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	53WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	62WS
UK-Türkiye: Free Trade Agreement	53WS	CONTEST: United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023	62WS
CABINET OFFICE	53WS	JUSTICE	63WS
Afghan Resettlement Update	53WS	Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme Review: Additional Consultation 2023	63WS
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	57WS	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	64WS
Video Game Loot Boxes: Improvements to Industry-led Protections.....	57WS	Intergovernmental Relations Quarterly Transparency Report: 1 January-31 March 2023	64WS
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	58WS	TREASURY	54WS
Nuclear Power: Technology Selection Process Launch.....	58WS	Finance Bill: Draft Legislation and Tax Documents	54WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	60WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	65WS
Climate Adaptation Reporting: Third National Adaptation Programme and Fourth Strategy	60WS	Disability Action Plan: Consultation Publication ..	65WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	61WS		
International Development White Paper	61WS		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 25 July 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 18 July 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 745] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

Post Office Horizon IT Scandal: Compensation [Col. 767]

Answer to urgent question—(Kevin Hollinrake)

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership [Col. 776]

Answer to urgent question—(Nigel Huddleston)

Defence Command Paper Refresh [Col. 785]

Statement—(Ben Wallace)

Afghan Resettlement Update [Col. 805]

Statement—(Johnny Mercer)

High Income Child Benefit Charge (Report to Parliament) [Col. 820]

*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Jim Shannon)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill [Col. 824]

*Programme motion (No. 3)—(Steve Double)—agreed to
Lords amendments considered*

Environmental Protection [Col. 860]

Motion—(Dr Coffey)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 878]

Transport Infrastructure: Warrington [Col. 880]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Radiotherapy: Accessibility [Col. 215WH]

Electronic Travel Authorisation: Northern Ireland [Col. 234WH]

Cost of Living: Private rented sector [Col. 243WH]

Credit Unions and the Cost of Living [Col. 268WH]

HIV Action Plan Annual Update 2022-23 [Col. 275WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 53WS]
