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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 16 October 2023

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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

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Monday 16 October 2023

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

SECOND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 738

TWENTY FIFTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Oral Answers to Questions

Monday 16 October 2023

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

The Secretary of State was asked—

PRAYERS

Brownfield Land: Development

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

1. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What his policy is on the use of brownfield land for new developments.
[906509]

Mr Speaker: I know that Members across the House will have been shocked by the recent terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas. I invite the House to stand with me and observe a minute's silence in recognition of all those innocent Israelis, Palestinians and others who have lost their lives, all those taken hostage and all those affected by the conflict in the region. Please join me now in standing.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): The Government strongly encourage the reuse of suitable brownfield land. Our national planning policy framework makes it clear that local authorities should give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for homes and other identified needs. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will further empower local leaders to regenerate urban centres by strengthening and adding to existing measures.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Michael Shanks, for Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

Henry Smith: Homes England proposes to build up to 10,000 houses on greenfield sites west of Ifield in my constituency. What directive has my right hon. Friend's Department given to the executive agency Homes England on the Department's brownfield-first building policy?

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. I cannot go into individual planning cases, but Homes England is leading a programme of urban regeneration. The work that we are doing in London's docklands and in Leeds, Sheffield, Wolverhampton and other areas demonstrates our commitment both to levelling up and to making sure that, for environmental and economic reasons, we develop brownfield land first.

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Lilian Greenwood be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Holly Lynch be added.—(*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My I help out the Secretary of State? He is aware of the Grove Lane site on the Sandwell-Birmingham border, in which the West Midlands Combined Authority and its Mayor are also interested. It is opposite the new Midland Metropolitan University Hospital site and it is an ideal brownfield site for housing. Will his Department get on with it?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who refers to the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, the only metro Mayor to significantly exceed housing targets in the delivery of new homes. He is that rare thing: a Labour MP who welcomes house building in his own constituency. Of course I will support him.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My right hon. Friend may know that, in Durrington in north-west Worthing, more than 1,000 new homes have been built. Will he ask his inspectors—and the Leader of the Opposition—to recognise that Chatsmore Farm and Lansdowne Nurseries should not be built on? We must have some green fields between one habitation and another.

Michael Gove: The Father of the House makes a very important point. Of course, his beautiful constituency—situated as it is between the sea and areas of outstanding natural beauty—has already seen significant development and we do need to ensure that settlements have the green belts around them protected.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On developing brownfield sites, will the Secretary of State consider giving powers to councils such as Westmorland and Furness, and to planning authorities such as those in the Yorkshire dales and the Lake district, to ensure exclusive provision for affordable and social rented housing so that we do not see communities such as ours dying out because all the houses built end up being sold for second homes?

Michael Gove: From his perspective as an assiduous constituency Member, the hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, but may I commiserate with him? At the recent Liberal Democrat conference, I am afraid he was defeated, and his party adopted a housing policy that he describes as Thatcherite. It is a source of sadness to me to be outflanked on the right by the Liberal Democrats, but may I welcome more defections to the Thatcherite cause from those who once embraced my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) as one of their own?

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): My constituents are frustrated with the planning system in that, although sites are allocated and protected in neighbourhood plans, when applications come in, their concerns about those sites are not listened to by local planning committees and by the inspectorate. Will the Secretary of State tell my constituents in Witham what measures are in place in local neighbourhood plans and local development plans to protect these sites from being built on, so that the focus is on brownfield sites first and foremost?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. If her local authority has an up-to-date plan, that is the best protection against speculative development. If, however, a local authority does not have a plan in place, there can be a presumption in favour of sustainable development and that can be upheld by the Planning Inspectorate, which could mean development on sites where local communities do not wish to see it. That is why it is so important for local authorities to adopt plans.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is a very clever man, and he must know that if there had been a large amount of brownfield land, it would have been built on. The fact of the matter is that we in this country must bite the bullet and build on land other than brownfield, because there is not enough of it. Does he agree that courage along with intellect would help us solve the housing problem?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is a man of independent mind, and he is straying from Front-Bench policy by decreeing me a man of intelligence—that is not the official Labour party position on these issues—but I should say that he is right. It is not only brownfield land that can be developed, but it must be brownfield first, and there is significant room for additional brownfield development if we invest in urban regeneration, which we are doing.

Regional Inequalities: Coastal Communities

2. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Government's levelling-up policies in reducing regional inequalities. [906510]

17. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting coastal communities. [906525]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. May I use this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), who bravely used this moment to raise the challenges faced by people with chronic migraine? I thank her for her work and wish her the best of health. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

We have established 12 levelling-up missions principally aimed at tackling regional inequality and ensuring that, wherever someone lives—in cities, towns, island, rural or coastal communities—their opportunities are the same. Progress on the missions will be formally reported through an annual report as set out in our landmark Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which returns to the House of Commons tomorrow.

Bill Esterson: The Secretary of State says that we must have infrastructure that allows us to move towards zero-emission vehicles as quickly as possible, but the biggest 14 cities in the north of England have fewer electric vehicle charge points than the City of Westminster

alone. How does the chasm between the number of charge points in London and those elsewhere demonstrate levelling up?

Jacob Young: The hon. Gentleman will know of the £20 billion reserved for transport investment in the north, and I am sure that some of that can be dedicated towards electric vehicles.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: A conservative think-tank recently reported that coastal communities such as mine have lower life expectancy, inadequate transport links and people who are comparatively poorer. After repeated rejections for towns and levelling-up moneys, are my constituents not right to blame the Government of the last 13 years for this deliberate levelling down?

Jacob Young: The hon. Lady, like me, represents a north-east coastal community, and she will be aware of our devolution agreement with the North East Combined Authority, which hopes to address some of the challenges in her area.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Jake Berry.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) sit down, please?

Sir Jake Berry: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his new post. May I remind him of the huge opportunity and pent-up potential in former industrial mill towns such as those in my constituency? One of the most gratifying things about the Government's levelling-up programme has been how it has seen the potential in towns such as Rossendale, Rawtenstall, Bacup and Darwen and supported that with real money, with £120 million of town deal money for Darwen and £17.8 million for Rossendale. Does he think that this is the right Government to drive forward the ambition of people who live in mill towns?

Jacob Young: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. This morning, I met the leaders of Lancashire County Council, Blackburn with Darwen, and Blackpool, and they all agree with me that a devolution agreement in Lancashire will be fantastic. I am sure that you agree as well, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the Minister should meet the district leaders as well.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new job. Several months ago, Essex MPs met his predecessor to talk about the possibility of a combined authority for Essex. We were overwhelmingly against it. The people of Essex do not want this ridiculous white elephant; there is no demand from them. This is all being brought about by some highly ambitious Essex county councillors and some officers who think they would do well out of it. As most people in Essex do not even know that it is going on, will he and his boss meet me and other Essex MPs to hear our objections?

Jacob Young: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the Prime Minister's recent announcement on High Speed 2, when will local government leaders and Metro Mayors in the midlands and north of England get to know what additional resource they will get as a consequence?

Jacob Young: That question is best answered by the Department for Transport, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman when I have further details.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I am absolutely delighted to hear that the Minister met the leaders of Lancashire County Council, and Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool councils this morning to discuss the enormous opportunity that devolving transport and skills responsibility to Lancashire presents. Will he and the whole of the Treasury Bench look favourably upon this? It is an opportunity that we are keen to take to deliver for people in Lancashire and South Ribble.

Mr Speaker: Maybe we could have a meeting with Lancashire MPs as well as district leaders.

Jacob Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question and to you, Mr Speaker, for your point. I hope to meet Lancashire MPs next week to discuss devolution. I hope that we are able to announce a devolution deal in advance of Lancashire Day at the end of November.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I welcome the new Minister to his place. In the Secretary of State's address to his party conference there was barely a mention of levelling up, and no mention whatsoever of the Government's 12 missions, which were central to the original White Paper designed to tackle regional inequalities across England. There now exists a gaping chasm between a transformative change promised by the rhetoric of levelling up and the actual reality. Is the truth of the matter not that Downing Street has totally lost interest in that agenda, while the Department's leadership bumbles on directionless and toothless, its bold promises unfulfilled and, in many cases, utterly disregarded?

Jacob Young: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words and her question, though I completely disagree with her. At the party conference we announced £1 billion for our long-term plan for towns, which will help us level up towns right across the country. I hope she welcomes that.

First-time Buyers

4. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support first-time buyers. [906512]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): The Government have a range of schemes available to first-time buyers, including First Homes and shared ownership. The mortgage guarantee scheme helps to increase the supply of 95% loan-to-value mortgages. We have also doubled the threshold at which stamp duty land tax becomes due to £250,000, and expanded first-time buyer relief.

Chi Onwurah: In West Fenham recently, Mr and Mrs Joyce told me how their daughter and prospective son in-law had lived with them for five years while they tried to realise their dream of home ownership. Even after saving a deposit, the failure of the Minister's Government to build houses meant that they were constantly outbid on the few homes available. Labour has set out plans to get Britain building again. Will the Minister match our ambition, or is living with the in-laws the new Tory dream?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady asks whether we will match Labour's ambition. I have news for her: from what I picked up from the Labour party conference, it announced the same targets that we are getting on with. I draw her attention to the fact that more than 860,000 households have been helped to purchase a home since spring 2010, through Government-backed schemes including Help to Buy, Right to Buy and First Homes.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the new "young" Minister to his post. I want to attach myself to tributes to his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), who is sitting next to me.

Last week, a freedom of information request showed that the Lib Dem-Labour controlled Greater Cambridge Partnership, which handles city deal money in my constituency, spent £4.7 million developing plans for a congestion charge that was then dropped because it was opposed basically by everyone. It also spent £16.5 million on the Cambridge South East Transport bus route, also now dropped, and £18 million on new car parks, none of which are actually open. That is a total so far of £160 million on transport projects, and virtually none of them functioning. It is now asking the Government for £200 million more. It is no wonder that in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, people think that the Greater Cambridge Partnership is unelected, unaccountable and a waste of public money. Does the Minister agree that we have to ensure public value for money? Will he meet me to talk about the details?

Mr Speaker: Order. That question is too long, and I am not quite sure how it fits in with first-time buyers.

Anthony Browne: I will ask the Minister later.

Mr Speaker: I don't think you will.

Green Spaces: Protection

6. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [906514]

7. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [906515]

13. **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [906521]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): Through the Levelling Up Parks Fund we have made available £9 million for local authorities in areas of high deprivation

to create or significantly refurbish green spaces. The fund also includes the planting and maintaining of trees and encourages projects to work towards green flag award status.

Andrew Jones: I thank the Minister for that answer. What steps is she taking to ensure that proposed sites for housing that are completely unsuitable for reasons of biodiversity or lack of access or proximity to a site of special scientific interest are not taken forward and built upon? Although this is a national, not local, question, I am thinking particularly of a contentious application on Water Lane in Knaresborough, which has previously been refused.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend will, I hope, understand that I cannot comment on that specific case or situation, but it is really important that local authorities make decisions according to their local plans, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out earlier. If local authorities have a plan in place, it allows them to set out where they would like to see development that benefits their natural environment take place.

In England, we have also set out that from January 2024 biodiversity net gain will apply to mitigate the impact of major development. That requires developers to deliver 10% biodiversity net gain.

Robbie Moore: In 10 days' time Bradford Council is likely to give the green light to yet more houses to be built in Silsden on valuable green space. If approved, the additional 140 houses will follow many hundreds of houses currently being built in Silsden, and many more are awaiting planning approval. Silsden's infrastructure simply cannot cope. Does the Minister agree that Bradford Council should prioritise Silsden's infrastructure first, rather than seeing the area as a quick win for achieving its housing targets?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is completely right. As ever, he champions his constituents over the actions of Labour-run Bradford Council, which obviously has a detrimental impact on his constituent's lives. Local authorities have an obligation to spend section 106 receipts in line with the purpose for which they were agreed, for exactly the reasons he gives. We are committed to introducing new measures through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill that will give greater certainty to local communities about the infrastructure that will be delivered in their area.

Aaron Bell: Newcastle-under-Lyme is going through its local plan process at the moment. I welcome the fact that the Conservative-led administration has reduced the overall number of new homes to 7,000, from the 11,500 in the previous, Labour-led local plan, which would have carpeted over our green spaces, as the Leader of the Opposition seemingly wants to do everywhere. Nevertheless, some people are unhappy. Would the Minister join me in urging the council in its next draft to further prioritise brownfield development, which is the key to regeneration?

Rachel Maclean: I can assure my hon. Friend that it is the Government's policy to strongly encourage local authorities to make the most of brownfield land first, especially for new homes. It is right that if local authorities

want to alter a green belt boundary, they have show exceptional circumstances. We Conservatives believe in preserving our green spaces, and it is interesting to hear the proclamations from the Opposition. I will be very interested to see whether they propose concreting over the green spaces surrounding their own constituencies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I chair the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings. We have undertaken an inquiry and sent the report through to Ministers. The recommendations from that were clear: while it is good to have healthy, energy-efficient homes, it is really important to have green space around those houses. Has the Minister had an opportunity to read the report from the APPG? If not, I will ensure that she gets a copy, and I hope that she will then come back to me on the recommendations.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman so much for his comments, and I would be delighted to read the report from his APPG and respond to him. I fully agree with his broader point that green spaces are vital for mental health and wellbeing, as well as physical health.

Towns Fund: Project Delivery

8. **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the delivery of projects supported by the Towns Fund. [906516]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): We are supporting 101 towns through our £6.1 billion towns fund, helping to level up across the country. I thank my hon. Friend for all his efforts locally in ensuring that the £25 million Dewsbury town deal delivers the positive outcomes that we all wish to see for his constituents.¹ My Department proactively engages with local authorities through our monitoring and evaluation process to determine the delivery support they require, including specialist support from the Department where needed.

Mark Eastwood: On behalf of the people of Dewsbury, I thank my hon. Friend for the additional £20 million announced for our town centre, on top of the £24.8 million I secured after being elected. In light of Labour-run Kirklees Council's financial mismanagement and failure to deliver regeneration projects in the past, how can we ensure that the towns fund monies are used to transform the town centre and not squandered because of the council's inability to deliver anything on time or within budget?

Jacob Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being such a fantastic champion for Dewsbury. My officials are monitoring the town deal and working closely with Kirklees Council and the town deal board to ensure that projects are delivered quickly. Like my hon. Friend, I was pleased to see that there is an extra £20 million for Dewsbury as part of our long-term plan for towns, and I look forward to hearing more about Dewsbury and its ambitions soon.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Fifty-five towns receive support from the towns fund in England, Scotland and Wales, but none in Northern Ireland do. The excuse has been given that the Executive is not formed, although that is as much the responsibility of the Government as that of people in Northern Ireland, but given that the

criterion has already been set, why has it not been possible to select towns in Northern Ireland to benefit from the towns fund?

Jacob Young: We want to see the Northern Ireland Executive up and running as soon as possible, and I think that that is an ambition shared across the House. I hope that when it is up and running, we will be able to help it with the funds that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): We all know that this Government claim a lot, but now they are claiming that they have a long-term plan for towns while continuing to build them without any of the infrastructure that people want and need. Residents of Mid Bedfordshire know that all too well: like many others, they struggle to see a GP or get a dentist, and the council's budget is half what it was in 2015. The Tories have gutted the elements that make a town a home. Can the Minister please explain why they persist in prioritising developers in our towns over the people living in them?

Jacob Young: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I completely disagree with her. Members need only look at the measures that we are introducing in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which will come to the House tomorrow, to see the huge changes that we intend to make to high streets to allow them to work better for local people.

New Homes

9. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to help increase the number of new homes. [906517]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): We have announced £10 billion of investment in housing supply since the start of this Parliament, and we are also investing £11.5 billion in the latest affordable homes programme to provide thousands of new homes across the country for people to rent or, of course, to buy. In July we set out our long-term plan for housing, with regeneration programmes in Cambridge, London and Leeds.

Andrew Lewer: When the Department tried to change the nutrient neutrality rules, the Labour party fell at the first hurdle, showing that it had changed since its claims to be the party of house building. It blocked that, so will Ministers commit themselves to pushing through these essential changes afresh?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. We have just heard from the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) a crude nimbyist appeal to the voters of Mid Bedfordshire, a week after the leader of the Labour party said he was in favour of

“the builders, not the blockers”

—but who could be surprised, given that, as my hon. Friend has rightly pointed out, when we put forward legislation for 100,000 new homes, Labour blocked it? It is unbelievable that the crew of gangsters over there are peddling the same nonsense week in, week out.

1. [Official Report, 25 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 8MC.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we are going to moderate our language a little bit.

Michael Gove *rose*—

Mr Speaker: So sit down, and we will move on.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): For all the sound and fury from the Secretary of State, he knows that the maths does not lie and that the Government have failed on their targets. They have downgraded their affordable housing targets, and have still failed on those. When will the Secretary of State bite the bullet and provide more properly affordable social housing for people in my constituency and others who simply cannot afford to buy their own homes?

Michael Gove: I withdraw the word “gangster”, Mr Speaker; I should have said “huckster”.

I will tell the hon. Lady who has downgraded their social housing targets: it is the hon. Lady herself. When she was running for the deputy leadership of her party, she said that she wanted 100,000 new social homes every year. What is the target now? Zero.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is essential that we boost the number of new homes built each year for private sale, but just as important is the need to significantly increase the supply of new affordable homes to buy and rent. The National Audit Office has confirmed that the Government’s target for its flagship 2016 to 2023 affordable homes programme was 250,000 starts by March 2023. Can the Secretary of State explain how on earth the public can trust this Government to address the housing affordability crisis when recent figures reveal that they have failed to deliver on their share of that target outside London?

Michael Gove: The significant increase in the affordable homes programme that I outlined earlier is the means for that to be done, but the difference between us is that we have a target for social and affordable homes, while Labour has none.

Leaseholders: Residential Building Remediation

10. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on supporting leaseholders with (a) cladding and (b) non-cladding remediation to residential buildings. [906518]

16. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on supporting leaseholders with (a) cladding and (b) non-cladding remediation to residential buildings. [906524]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): The Government expect those who have caused defects to step up to solve them. As the House is aware, 50 developers have now signed contracts to resolve cladding and non-cladding defects in more than 1,100 buildings. For other properties, the Government are making extensive

taxpayer subsidy available to support cladding remediation, along with other mechanisms to pursue those who are responsible.

Janet Daby: Help for people living in under-11 metre buildings that have fire safety defects does not go far enough, because of the huge amount of money involved. One of my constituents has described her experience as a “never-ending nightmare”. Will the Minister bring that nightmare to an end for constituents such as mine who are forced to pay to fix the mistakes of others?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising a specific question about under-11 metre properties. Every property, be it over or under 11 metres, needs a fire risk assessment, and I encourage her constituent to ensure that a fire risk appraisal of external walls is undertaken against that property. If the FRAEW indicates that extensive work is necessary, I would be happy to receive a copy of it and look into it personally in order to deal with this.

Vicky Foxcroft: I have written to the Minister about a constituent of mine who is a leaseholder living in an under-11 metre property and so is not protected by the Building Safety Act 2022. The cladding costs alone will be well over £100,000 and any non-cladding costs will be substantial. That is completely unaffordable for my constituent and it will bankrupt him. So when will the Minister provide a full update, which was promised to me back on 18 August?

Lee Rowley: As I say, if the hon. Lady wishes to raise the case of this individual building once again with me or talk to me separately outside, I will be happy to enable that. For every under-11 metre building we are made aware of as requiring additional remediation, we are going through and checking things, and compiling audits, where necessary, to get to the bottom of it. The Government strongly believe that under-11 metre buildings do not need extensive remediation, and we will be happy to talk more about any buildings where these issues have been raised.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the necessity for the Government to take that sort of action show the danger that leaseholders are under from the abuse of freeholders’ power? May I, through him, gently remind the Secretary of State of an assurance he gave me when talking about leasehold? He said:

“We need to end this feudal form of tenure and ensure individuals have the right to enjoy their own property fully.”—[*Official Report*, 20 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 3.]

Is that still intended to be in the King’s Speech?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend knows that I am not able to anticipate what will be in the King’s Speech. We are clear that, particularly with regard to remediation, some freeholders have stepped up and should be credited for doing so, but others have absolutely not done so. The Secretary of State and I will not hesitate to call out that activity where it occurs.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the action he and the Secretary of State are taking against developers that refuse to remediate tall buildings. What action will he now propose to take

against developers that deliberately do not carry out this work and leave leaseholders with their lives in peril and potentially not able to sell or even insure their properties?

Lee Rowley: As my hon. Friend is aware, we are ensuring that developers uphold the promises they have made, through the developer contract and through the responsible actors scheme, which makes sure that if they fail to do so they could, in extremis, be banned from building in this country again. If there is any indication what he describes is occurring, we will be happy to take action and I will be happy to receive any information from him or others in the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): More than six years on from the Grenfell disaster, where 72 people lost their lives, Sam, a disabled resident in a Galliard Homes building, is one of the hundreds of thousands of people still trapped in buildings that have not been remediated. Is this the new “do nothing” approach from the Department to building safety that was highlighted in *The Guardian* today, an approach that forced the resignation of a senior civil servant from the Department?

Lee Rowley: I think that question is somewhat beneath the hon. Gentleman, but let me state clearly what the Government are doing. They have recognised that there is an issue and have legislated to resolve that. They are working extremely hard to ensure that developers are held to account for that, and over the past few months, they have had success in ensuring that that process takes place. Where developers are no longer around, they are also stepping up and making sure that the cladding defects are covered. Hundreds of buildings have concluded their remediation over recent months, which demonstrates the progress that is being made.

Levelling Up across the UK

12. **Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support levelling-up policies across the UK. [906520]

21. **Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con):** What steps he is taking to level up across the whole of the United Kingdom. [906532]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Levelling up is a UK-wide project. That is why we have delivered city and growth deals across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; why we have launched our investment zones programme, including zones in the north-east of Scotland and Glasgow; and why we are investing £4.8 billion through the levelling-up fund in projects ranging from the transformation of Burnley’s historic mills to the development of a cultural quarter in Peterhead.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. However, as he develops these policies further, will he remember that even in apparently affluent areas, there are pockets that would benefit significantly from levelling-up investment, especially across Basildon

and Thurrock? Will he therefore tell the House what plans he has to include those areas in the next round of investment?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and in particular, it is vital to make sure that we level up that community in Thurrock. Our plans to extend the economic development of Docklands east to make the Thames estuary a powerhouse for economic growth have been inspired by my hon. Friend’s work and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price).

Antony Higginbotham: It was a pleasure to welcome the Prime Minister to Burnley two weeks ago, when he announced that Burnley was one of the many towns getting money as part of the long-term plan for towns, on top of more than £32 million from the levelling-up fund. I was particularly pleased to see that a key part of the long-term plan for towns is community engagement. Will the Secretary of State set out what that community engagement will look like? In particular, will it be a one-off, or can communities expect to be consulted throughout the decade for which the £20 million is allocated?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right to point out that this is a decade-long investment in 55 towns across the United Kingdom. We will work with people in Burnley, with its excellent Member of Parliament and with other representatives to ensure that we can tackle antisocial behaviour, revive high streets and make sure that the pride that people have in Burnley is reflected in investment from Government.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of the economic sectors that provides levelling up across the whole of the United Kingdom is the creative industries, whether that is film production, theatre, the arts, video games or modern high tech. Will the Secretary of State have conversations with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Treasury about the proposals to change business rates, which may have a dramatic effect and curtail the opportunities for the creative industries?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. The vital role that our creative industries play across the United Kingdom in levelling up is one we need to not just protect, but enhance.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The delivery of local services is so important to levelling up all areas of Britain. The Secretary of State will be aware that in rural areas, the cost of delivering public services is much higher than in their urban counterparts. In rural counties such as Shropshire, for example, the cost of providing social care is much higher and the proportion of people who need that care is higher, because there are older residents. Will the Secretary of State consider taking into account the cost of providing those services when determining the local government settlement in the future?

Michael Gove: It is a very fair point, and absolutely, on the Government side of the House, we understand that rural communities need additional investment, not least when it comes to the cost of adult social care.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) has said, there are pockets of deprivation even in wealthier areas, including Lichfield. Will the Secretary of State give some indication of what sort of timescale there is for the next round of applications?

Michael Gove: I simply cannot believe that there are any pockets of deprivation in Lichfield, given who has been representing that constituency since 1992. The idea that there is any home unvisited by its Member of Parliament or that there is any hearth where there is a chill seems to be inconceivable. But nevertheless, we will make sure that levelling-up fund round 3 is brought forward just in advance of the autumn statement, and Staffordshire, I hope, will have its voice heard.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We understand that the Secretary of State is planning some rushed, back-of-a-cigarette-packet devolution deal with Hull and the East Riding. Can I urge caution? After 13 years of deliberate, sustained and savage cuts to our city, the last thing we need now is a botched deal ahead of the general election. The very least I expect the Secretary of State to guarantee is proper consultation, so that the people of Hull, who have been badly let down by this Tory Government, get the opportunity to understand the implications and to speak on the issue. Will he guarantee that?

Michael Gove: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but we are not rushing or embarking on any botched process. We are talking to representatives from both the East Riding and Kingston upon Hull councils in order to ensure that we can get a devolution deal that works. We have devolution in York and North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire; as far as we are concerned, east Yorkshire should not be left out in that progress, but it is important that we get that right. In the meantime, we are developing a levelling-up partnership with Hull, in order to ensure that vital investment, not least in transport, matches the investment that we have already secured on the south bank of the Humber.

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

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Prior to Scotland's being dragged out of the European Union against its will, EU regional development policies allocated up to £827 million from 2014 to 2020. Crucially, the Scottish Government played a key role in directing the funding, in stark contrast to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which bypasses Scotland's Parliament and undermines devolution. Will the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues stop playing politics and devolve levelling up to Holyrood?

Michael Gove: We are devolving levelling up—we are devolving it to local government. That is why our recent towns fund announcement was welcomed by all councils, including SNP-led councils. I say to the hon. Lady, with respect, that the SNP conference, meeting in Aberdeen today, has decided that if the SNP gets 29 MPs, that is a mandate for independence. Given the rate at which the SNP is losing MPs to defection and by-election, it will be at 29 by Christmas, so let us discuss it then.

Voter Identification: Minority Groups

14. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's voter identification policies on the turnout of minority groups at elections. [906522]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): As we committed to doing in legislation, we are conducting an evaluation of the impact of voter identification at the May polls. We will publish that evaluation no later than November this year.

Gill Furniss: The Electoral Commission's report into voter ID is utterly damning. It found that awareness of the new rules was lowest among black and minority ethnic communities, and take-up of voter authority certificates was minimal. Even the Government's own MPs can see the reality of this failed experiment. The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) said:

"Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding their clever scheme comes back to bite them".

Does the Minister agree with her own Conservative colleagues?

Felicity Buchan: I remind the hon. Lady that 99.75% of the electorate were able to vote successfully. I also remind her that it was the Electoral Commission that called for voter identification. It has existed in Northern Ireland for two decades and was introduced under a Labour Government, and it exists in most European countries.

On the hon. Lady's point about ethnic minorities, everyone deserves fair and free elections, and it has been ethnic minorities in areas such as Tower Hamlets and Birmingham who have been the victims of electoral fraud.

Social Housing: Accountability to Tenants

15. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Whether his Department is taking steps to help ensure that social housing providers are accountable to tenants. [906523]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): We are taking action to improve the quality of social housing. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, which received Royal Assent in July, will deliver transformative change across the sector, introducing proactive consumer regulation and rebalancing the relationships between landlords and tenants, ensuring that landlords are properly held to account for their performance.

Elliot Colburn: I welcome the steps the Government are taking to support people living in social housing, but many people in Carshalton and Wallington who live in social housing are still concerned about the level of service they receive from their providers. I have received complaints about a number of housing associations, including Liberal Democrat-run Sutton Council's housing arm, Sutton Housing Partnership, and Metropolitan Thames Valley, which provides housing in Roundshaw. Will the Secretary of State assure those residents that they have somewhere to go when things go wrong?

Michael Gove: Yes, those residents absolutely do have somewhere to go. My hon. Friend, the excellent Member of Parliament for Carshalton and Wallington, stands up not just for his constituents, but for the most vulnerable in society, with clarity and moral authority. Our legislation will make sure that Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and, indeed, Liberal Democrat-led Sutton Council are held to account for any failures.

Topical Questions

T1. [906534] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Last Thursday, I was privileged to be invited to join a meeting chaired by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary at which we heard from the Community Security Trust about the deeply unfortunate rise in antisemitic incidents following the terrorist attack that we marked at the start of today's sitting. The increase in antisemitic incidents recorded by the Community Security Trust and its partner, Tell MAMA, is 494%. It is a melancholy trend, and I know that everyone in this House will join me in doing everything we can to defeat antisemitism and to promote peace and justice.

Dame Diana Johnson: I welcome the comments that the Secretary of State has just made, but may I take him to task about some of the comments that he made earlier? He talked about having conversations with Hull City Council about transport. This comes after the Government's decade-long refusal to back the electrification of a line to Hull. It also comes after the exclusion of the northern Mayors in the decision to scrap the northern leg of HS2. Why should any of the people in Hull and East Riding—

Mr Speaker: Order. Topicals should be short and sweet. The right hon. Lady should just finish her question very quickly.

Dame Diana Johnson: Why should the people of Hull and East Yorkshire trust what this Government ever say?

Michael Gove: I am a huge fan of the right hon. Lady. The proof of the pudding will be in the continued engagement that we have with the people of Hull and, indeed, with their Liberal Democrat council.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I have been running a "fair deal for new estates" campaign in my constituency to ensure that new estates are completed in a timely manner. I am talking about not just the housing, but the play areas, the planting, the drainage and the pavements. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss this campaign, which is important locally and is achieving progress for residents in Harrogate and Knaresborough?

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): My hon. Friend is doing an excellent job in raising the concerns of his constituents on the Floor of the House. I know

that those concerns are also raised with many other colleagues. That is why, in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, we are strengthening planning enforcement powers, including powers to tackle uncompleted developments. I hope his constituents will welcome that, and I would be pleased to meet him and discuss it in more detail.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to face the right hon. Gentleman for our first questions. I hope he enjoyed his party conference, cancelling a meat tax that nobody had planned, abolishing seven bins that do not exist and announcing that they would build a series of transport links that already do exist—not so much conference season as panto season. I shall keep my question to a problem that definitely does exist. One million families are waiting for social housing. How can he justify handing back to the Treasury billions of pounds that are desperately needed to tackle the housing crisis?

Michael Gove: It is because we spend our money effectively. The affordable homes programme—the £11.5 billion investment that we are making—will lead, and has led, to investment in social and affordable housing across the country. The right hon. Lady has a challenge when it comes to credibility on social housing. She secured the deputy leadership of her party by saying that the Labour party should be building 100,000 social homes every year, and yet its current target is zero. Why did she retreat?

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman just comes out with flannel—I think he is auditioning for panto season this afternoon. He can dress it up however he likes, but the truth is that he could not spend this vital funding quickly enough in the middle of a housing crisis. It is clear that the Prime Minister shares his disregard for struggling families. In his hour-long speech in Manchester, the Prime Minister did not mention housing a single time—not once—but the Housing Minister did tell conference that renters are not all weed-smoking gangsters, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows all about, as he mentioned gangsters earlier today. Can the Secretary of State assure us that, despite the tone of those remarks, the Renters (Reform) Bill will not be scrapped before the King's Speech?

Michael Gove: Yes, we are bringing reform to the rental market, but I note that at her own party conference the right hon. Lady shared with the public not just her policies but her recipe for a cocktail called *Venom*, which apparently contains a bottle of vodka, a bottle of Southern Comfort, 10 Blue WKDs and a litre of orange juice. We know what the real lethal cocktail from the Labour party is: a mix of unfunded spending commitments, massive borrowing, greenbelt development and hypocrisy on housing.

T7. [906541] **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the amazing Hope Centre in Northampton, which for 50 years has been turning the lives around of people who have been homeless, getting them into a home of

their own and into a secure job. Will the Minister join me in congratulating all the staff and volunteers at that amazing charity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I am delighted to congratulate the staff and volunteers at the Hope Centre on 50 amazing years of supporting venerable people in Northampton. That work is critical in meeting the Government's commitment to reduce homelessness and to end rough sleeping for good, which is backed by a Government investment of £2 billion over three years.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Antisemitism is abhorrent and hateful, and there must be meaningful legislation to protect Jewish people. I appreciate that the Department introduced the anti-boycott Bill to help to tackle that, but as the Minister may recall, in Committee the Bill was not supported by many human rights organisations and no Opposition amendments were accepted. We need to work on a cross-party basis, so will the Secretary of State and the Minister meet with me to discuss what support the SNP can provide to tackle the hatred of antisemitism?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the way in which she couched her question. I take this opportunity to thank the First Minister of Scotland who, in his visit to a synagogue in Edinburgh last week, I think spoke for all of Scotland in expressing his solidarity with the pain being felt by Scotland's Jewish community. I look forward to working together on a cross-party basis if we can.

T9. [906543] **Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con):** The new Levelling Up Minister has got off to a flying start by awarding £20 million to Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan. Barry is Wales's largest town and has been ignored by the Welsh Government for decades. What reassurance can my hon. Friend give me that local priorities will determine how that money should be spent?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is a persistent champion of Barry in his constituency. I am delighted that Barry has been chosen as one of the 55 towns and will receive £20 million to deliver its plan. I look forward to working with him to see Barry's potential realised.

T2. [906535] **Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab):** Chester, like city centres up and down the country, as well as rural and coastal areas, is seeing rents going up and the supply of long-term private rented lets going down. The Government consulted on short-term lets earlier this year. What progress has been made in tackling the issue?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that question. As she rightly points out, the abuse of short-term lets is a significant issue in rural and coastal areas, and we will respond to the consultation shortly.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Over 200 of my constituents at the Mill development in Ipswich have been living in a cruel form of limbo for over 10 years. The building has deep cladding and structural problems. RSM, the administrator, could run out of money next March or April. My constituents fear that they could be turfed out of their homes. What steps are the Government taking to support my residents, give them clarity over their future, and come to a lasting settlement that funds the problems of the building and allows residents to move on with their lives?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): Like my hon. Friend, the Department and the Government want to see a resolution to the Mill, which is complex and challenging. We accept the points that he makes. I look forward to continue meeting with him, and we will try to find a positive resolution.

T3. [906536] **Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD):** Local authorities are struggling to retrofit ageing rural council housing stock, which has allowed mould to set in. What will the Minister do to avoid councils having to spend huge sums of council taxpayers' money on positive input ventilation units to provide mould-free homes?

Michael Gove: The scourge of damp and mould, particularly but not exclusively in the social and private rented sector, is an issue that the Government recognise that we need to tackle. That is why we are providing additional support to local government and to housing associations in order to deal with that issue. I look forward in particular to dealing with the hon. Gentleman to assess the situation in Tiverton and Honiton.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for the tremendous support he has provided to Blackpool, with more than £140 million in levelling-up moneys allocated so far. Is he able to provide an update on the plans for further housing-led regeneration in the Bond Street and Revoe areas of my constituency?

Jacob Young: I fully recognise the importance of supporting Blackpool and places across the country in their ambitions for regeneration. Homes England and my Department are continuing to work closely with Blackpool Council to level up the town and improve the quality of housing. I look forward to my Department's saying more about that in the future.

T5. [906539] **Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** The Secretary of State, in our consideration of his Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill tomorrow, intends to remove reducing child poverty as a levelling-up mission. Does he think it is possible to level up without reducing child poverty, or is it just the case that the Government do not care?

Michael Gove: That is a fair question. Of course we care about reducing child poverty; that is why the steps we are taking across 12 levelling-up missions, including on education and welfare, are designed to reduce poverty across the United Kingdom.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Berkeley Town Council has created a much-needed regeneration plan that will make the town worthy of the tourist attractions nearby, such as Berkeley castle and the Dr Jenner's House museum, but we have little faith that the Green and Labour-led district council will get the levelling-up bid over the line. It failed before and its local plans have also been withdrawn. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the issue?

Jacob Young: I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and visiting her constituency.

T6. [906540] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Some 4,240 households in London alone were evicted last year using the no-fault possession grounds that the Government first promised to scrap four years ago. How many more households will be evicted before the Government meet their promise?

Michael Gove: We are committed to introducing our Renters (Reform) Bill, which will end section 21—something that, when Labour were in government, it did not do.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Levelling up is about levelling up all parts of the United Kingdom—north, south, east and west, including areas that did not get levelling-up funding in rounds 1 or 2 or the recent announcements, such as Gillingham town

centre. Will the Secretary of State visit Gillingham with me and ensure that we get our fair share and allocation of resources?

Michael Gove: Either I or one of my junior Ministers will join my hon. Friend in Gillingham.

T8. [906542] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Some 54 months ago, the Government promised the Renters (Reform) Bill. Since then, 10,000 Londoners have been threatened with eviction and renting is simply too insecure. We are trying again to ask this: when will the Government be bringing in the Bill?

Michael Gove: That is a good question; I liked it even better when the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) asked it. As I explained, we will be bringing forward our legislation shortly.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): As he is reforming the national planning policy framework and introducing a new infrastructure levy, how will my right hon. Friend ensure that our constituents get the doctors and dentists capacity that must go with new homes?

Michael Gove: The infrastructure levy that we are bringing forward will ensure, through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, that the money is there to provide services when new development takes place. We will work with the NHS to ensure that GP and dental provision is part of that. We have a plan for an infrastructure levy; Labour has no plan.

Israel and Gaza

3.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): The attacks in Israel last weekend shocked the world. Over 1,400 people murdered one by one; over 3,500 wounded; almost 200 taken hostage; the elderly, men, women, children and babes in arms murdered, mutilated, burned alive. We should call it by its name: it was a pogrom. The families of some of the missing are in the Public Gallery today. We call for the immediate release of all hostages, and I say to them, “We stand with you. We stand with Israel.”

The murdered and the missing come from over 30 countries, including the United Kingdom. The terrible nature of these attacks means it is proving difficult to identify many of the deceased, but, with a heavy heart, I can inform the House that at least six British citizens were killed. A further 10 are missing, some of whom are feared to be among the dead.

We are working with Israel to establish the facts as quickly as possible, and we are supporting the families who are suffering unimaginable pain. We are also helping British citizens who want to leave Israel. We have organised eight flights so far, bringing out more than 500 people, with more flights leaving today. We are working with neighbouring countries on land evacuations for our citizens in Gaza and the west bank. I have spoken specifically to President Sisi about supporting civilians to leave Gaza by the Rafah border crossing, which remains closed at present, and we have a Border Force team in Egypt working with our embassy to help citizens when they are able to cross.

I will come back to the grave humanitarian situation in Gaza in a moment, but I want first to address the British Jewish community directly: as I said at Finchley United synagogue last week, and at the Jewish school I visited this morning, we stand with you now and always. This atrocity was an existential strike at the very idea of Israel as a safe homeland for the Jewish people. I understand why it has shaken you to your core. I am sickened that antisemitic incidents have increased since the attack. We are doing everything we can to protect you. We are providing an additional £3 million for the Community Security Trust to protect schools, synagogues and other Jewish community buildings, and we are working with the police to ensure that hate crime and the glorification of terror are met with the full force of the law. I know that the whole House will support that and join me in saying unequivocally that we stand with the Jewish community.

I also recognise that this is a moment of great anguish for British Muslim communities, who are also appalled by the actions of Hamas but are fearful of the response. We must listen to those concerns with the same attentiveness. Hamas are using innocent Palestinian people as human shields, with the tragic loss of more than 2,600 Palestinian lives, including many children. We mourn the loss of every innocent life, of the civilians of every faith and every nationality who have been killed, so let us say it plainly: we stand with British Muslim communities, too.

Israel was founded not just as a homeland for the Jewish people, but as a guarantor of their security, to ensure that what happened in the holocaust could never happen again. Through its strength and resilience, Israel

gradually achieved some of that longed-for security, despite the strategic threats on its borders, including Hezbollah in the north with Iran at its back. Israel normalised relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain through the Abraham accords, and moved towards normalising ties with Saudi Arabia—steps that were considered unthinkable not long ago.

One reason this attack is so shocking is that it is a fundamental challenge to any idea of co-existence, which is an essential precursor to peace and stability in the region. The question is: how should we respond? I believe that we must support absolutely Israel’s right to defend itself, to go after Hamas and take back the hostages, to deter further incursions, and to strengthen its security for the long term. That must be done in line with international humanitarian law, while recognising that Israel faces a vicious enemy who embed themselves behind civilians.

As a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every possible precaution to avoid harming civilians. I repeat President Biden’s words: as democracies, we are “stronger and more secure when we act according to the rule of law.”

Humanity, law, decency, respect for human life—that is what sets us apart from the mindless violence of the terrorist.

There are three specific areas in which the United Kingdom is helping to shape events. First, we are working to prevent escalation and further threats against Israel. On Friday, RAF surveillance aircraft began patrols to track threats to regional security; I have deployed a Royal Navy task group to the eastern Mediterranean, including RFA Lyme Bay and RFA Argus, three Merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines, ready both to interdict arms and to support the humanitarian response; and we are bolstering our forces in Cyprus and across the region. Let me be clear: we are not engaging in fighting or in an offensive in Gaza, but we are increasing our presence to prevent broader regional instability at this dangerous moment.

Secondly, I am proud that we are a long-standing and significant provider of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. I can announce today that we are increasing our aid by a third, with an additional £10 million of support. An acute humanitarian crisis is unfolding, to which we must respond. We must support the Palestinian people, because they are victims of Hamas too. Like our allies, we believe that

“Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people, or their legitimate aspirations to live with equal measures of security, freedom, justice, opportunity and dignity.”

Hamas simply do not stand for the future that Palestinians want, and they seek to put the Palestinian people in harm’s way. We must ensure that humanitarian support urgently reaches civilians in Gaza. That requires Egypt and Israel to allow in the aid that is so badly needed.

We also need to keep the situation in the west bank at the forefront of our minds at this moment of heightened sensitivity. Earlier today, I spoke to Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, to express our support for his efforts to provide stability.

Thirdly, we will use all the tools of British diplomacy to sustain the prospects of peace and stability in the region. Ultimately, that requires security for Israelis and Palestinians and a two-state solution, so we are increasing

our regional engagement. I have spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu twice in the last week, along with the US, France, Germany, Italy and others. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was the first to visit Israel after the attacks. I met His Majesty the King of Jordan yesterday—a long-time voice of reason and moderation. I have spoken today with the leaders of Turkey and, previously, Egypt, and I will speak to others in the coming days. Our partners in the region have asked us to play a role in preventing further escalation, and that is what we will do. However hard it is, we need to ask the tough questions about how we can revive the long-term prospects for a two-state solution, for normalisation and for regional stability, not least because that is precisely what Hamas have been trying to kill.

In conclusion, unequivocally backing Israel's right to defend itself, stepping forward with humanitarian support, working to protect civilians from harm, and straining every sinew to keep the flame of peace and stability alive—that is our objective. It is the right approach for the region, and it is the right approach for Britain. I commend this statement to the House.

3.42 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement and for the updates the Government have provided to Labour Front Benchers over the past few days.

Last Saturday, Israel was the victim of terrorism on an unimaginable scale: the senseless murder of men, women, children and even babies; the horrors of hostage taking; music festivals turned to killing fields; innocent Jews slaughtered within their own kibbutz—an attack with no cause other than bloodshed. I am sure that over the last few days, every Member of the House has seen images from this crisis that will never be unseen: tiny bodies, wrapped in bundles, in Israel and now in Gaza; mothers and fathers grieving—Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim, Jew; the innocent, dead.

As in any time of grave crisis, it is crucial that this House speaks with one voice in condemnation of terror, in support for Israel in its time of agony and for the dignity of all human life, because Hamas do not wish to see peace in the middle east; they just want to see Israel wiped off the map. But Hamas are not the Palestinian people, and the Palestinian people are not Hamas.

Labour stands with Israel. Britain stands with Israel. The attack is ongoing, terrorists are at large and hostages are still being held, some of them British citizens. Israel has the right to bring her people home, to defend herself and to keep her people safe. While Hamas have the capability to carry out attacks on Israeli territory, there can be no safety. As Secretary of State Blinken said last week:

“We democracies distinguish ourselves from terrorists by striving for a different standard—even when it's difficult”.

He is right.

As the Prime Minister has said, there is an acute humanitarian crisis unfolding. Israel's defence must be conducted in accordance with international law, civilians must not be targeted and innocent lives must be protected. There must be humanitarian corridors and humanitarian access, including for food, water, electricity and medicines, so that hospitals can keep people alive and so that

innocent people do not needlessly die. And there must be proper protection for all those who work selflessly so that aid can be delivered to victims.

There can be no doubt that responsibility for this crisis lies with Hamas. They have no interest in Palestinian rights and no interest in the security of the people of Gaza. They unleash terror and then hide among them—women and children used as human shields; hostages held, who should be released. Hamas are destroyers of lives, of hope and of peace. And we cannot give them what they want.

We must keep striving for a two-state solution: a Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel. We cannot give up on that hope. We cannot let Hamas brutality be a catalyst for conflict in the wider region. Engagement between Israel and Arab nations must be strengthened, not abandoned. International co-operation, the rule of law and a political road to peace—Hamas want us to abandon all three. In defiance, we must be resolute on all of them.

These attacks are having a huge impact on communities across the United Kingdom. Many in this House will have heard devastating stories from people who have lost friends and family, and from people who are deeply worried about the future of those they know in Israel or Palestine—including the First Minister of Scotland, who I spoke to at the weekend. We stand with all of them. We stand against the worrying rise in Islamophobia and against the antisemitic abuse, threats and assaults that we have seen on British streets, because we must never underestimate the burden of history that Jewish people carry with them.

I do not want Britain to be a place where Jewish schools are closed, where Jewish children stay at home out of fear and where Jewish families feel compelled to hide their identity. I do not want Britain to be a place where British Muslims feel they have to apologise for the actions of people who do not act in their name. We cannot allow community cohesion in our country to be destroyed. We all bear a responsibility to do all we can to stamp out hate, and we fully support police action to provide extra assistance for our communities.

The events of the past week have seen horrors beyond our imagination, so let us send a strong message that Westminster is united, and Britain is united: with Israel, against terror, for international law and for the protection of innocent lives. There are difficult days ahead, but our values cannot be compromised. Terror cannot win.

The Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his remarks. Let me say at the outset that this is an unprecedented and extraordinarily difficult situation. It is likely to remain difficult for all of us in the days and weeks ahead, but we must always have at the forefront of our mind that responsibility for this crisis lies with Hamas, and with Hamas alone. It was a barbaric act of terrorism that has inflicted untold suffering and misery on so many people, and we have felt that acutely here at home.

We have seen the impact on our streets over the past week, and it has sickened all of us. We stand united in saying that antisemitism has no place in our society. Let me be unequivocal that those who incite racial or religious hatred on our streets, or who inflict violence and cause untold suffering to people, will be met with the full force

[*The Prime Minister*]

of the law. I know the whole House will join me in making sure that happens: that the police have all the tools, resources and powers they need to bring that about.

In conclusion, let me say that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right that this House stands united: united in condemning unequivocally this terrorist attack by Hamas, and united in saying that we will be steadfast in our support for Israel, and steadfast in our support for the Jewish people—not just today, not just tomorrow, but always.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will be grateful to both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for the lead that they have given in today's statement. This is not the time to point out the faults of Benjamin Netanyahu. What we have to say is that the inexcusable terror attack on Israelis was intended to bring awful harm to the Palestinians.

Rather than quote international leaders, I want to quote a senior constituent, who said: "This is a very harrowing time for Jews all over the world. There are about 16 million of us worldwide. Why can't they leave us alone?"

If we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, we want to try to bring security, both to the people of Israel and to the Palestinians in Gaza. Does the Prime Minister know that he will have our support as he tries to do that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Father of the House for what he has said, and I simply agree with his constituent in saying that all of us will pray for peace in the region, but especially for peace for those families who have been so tragically affected by what has happened over the past week.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Rabbie Burns once poignantly wrote that

"Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!"

It is with those words echoing in all our hearts that we send our thoughts and prayers to all those suffering in the middle east. The abhorrent terrorist attack by Hamas on the Jewish people and the Israeli state was a crime against our common humanity, and it must be condemned unequivocally. What more powerful response can we have than to seek to protect the shared innocence and shared humanity of both Israeli and Palestinian civilians?

That will require a lot. It will require the defeat of Hamas; it will require the safe return of all those hostages who have been taken; it will require the opening of humanitarian corridors, so that people can escape Gaza and aid can get in; and it will require medicine, water and electricity for hospitals, so that people who are injured can be treated. It will require no collective punishment. Making all of that happen will require international leadership and diplomacy. On these isles, that responsibility will fall to the UK Prime Minister, and I very much wish him well in making that happen.

Right across this Chamber, we all need to be very conscious that history will judge us on our response not just to these abhorrent attacks but to the humanitarian crisis that is undoubtedly unfolding in Gaza. Let us not be on the wrong side of history.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and I agree that this crisis demands that the United Kingdom steps up diplomatically to make a difference—to bring about peace and stability. That is what we have done over the past week, as I alluded to in my statement. The Foreign Secretary was the first person to visit Israel and has spoken to multiple counterparts. In the same vein, I myself have been working with allies across the region to make sure that we can work together to bring about a successful and peaceful resolution. We also recognise the scale of the humanitarian situation that is unfolding and are playing a leading role in helping to alleviate it, not least with our announcement today of considerably more aid for the Palestinian territories, building on our strong track record as one of the leading providers of aid to the region. That will continue.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): The attack on Israel by Hamas terrorists was barbaric. Terrorists must be defeated, whoever they are and wherever they are. I commend my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary for the stance that the Government have taken in support of the Jewish community here in the UK, and in support of Israel and its right to defend itself. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that action must be taken in line with international humanitarian law, but will he give a commitment today that the Government will leave no stone unturned in their efforts to prevent regional escalation of the conflict? In doing so, will he reflect on the role of Iran?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that reassurance. It is not only something that we have discussed extensively with partners in the region, but why last week I deployed surveillance aircraft and assets to the Mediterranean, and they are already engaged in ensuring that arms shipments do not find their way to people such as those in Hezbollah, and that Iran does not see this as an opportunity to escalate the conflict. The support that we have put into the region has already been welcomed by our partners, who share our aim to ensure that action is constrained to dealing with Hamas and what they have done. No one wants to see any escalation. Again, that is something that Prime Minister Netanyahu and I discussed, and he very much agrees that his objective is to deal with Hamas and not to see the conflict spread more widely.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The scale of Hamas's terrorist attacks has been utterly horrifying and the atrocities they have committed are truly sickening. We stand with the people of Israel and with the Jewish community, who are grieving and afraid. We call for the unconditional release of all hostages and urge the Government finally to proscribe as a terrorist organisation the funders of Hamas: Iran's revolutionary guard.

Israel unquestionably has the right to defend itself and its citizens. That means targeting Hamas, not innocent civilians, in line with international law. I am concerned about the forced evacuation of hospitals in Gaza, which means death for innocent Palestinians who will not

survive being taken off life support. The World Health Organisation has said that this may be a breach of international humanitarian law, so will the Prime Minister set out what advice he has received on the matter?

The Prime Minister: Unlike Hamas, the Israeli President has said that the Israeli armed forces will operate in accordance with international law. Israel's attempt to minimise civilian casualties by warning people to leave northern Gaza has been further complicated by Hamas terrorists telling the local population not to leave and instead using them as human shields. We will continue to urge Israel, as I have done when I have spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu, that while it exercises its absolute right to defend itself and ensure that such attacks can never happen again, it should take every possible precaution to minimise the impact on civilians.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Saturday's terror attack on Israel constituted crimes against humanity—crimes so heinous that they violated our understanding of the depths of human depravity. That depravity continues today, as innocents remain held hostage by Hamas terrorists and their patrons, the state of Iran.

Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence and to defeat Hamas. We can support Israel and grieve with its people while recognising that how a counter-terrorism operation is conducted matters. It matters because Israel's actions as a rule-of-law nation, and our words as its friend, shape our ability to be a legitimate arbiter in future conflicts and to have the right to call out abusers such as Russia. It matters because although there is an imperative to defeat Hamas in the immediate term in order to secure Israel's future, how they are defeated will shape the region's future, and because the people of Gaza are not Hamas—1.2 million children bear no collective guilt for Hamas's terror.

So today I repeat my call for the creation of a special envoy for the middle east peace process. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House more about what actions are being taken to prevent conflict and loss of life on the west bank and in East Jerusalem? When will we finally proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

The Prime Minister: With regard specifically to the west bank, this is something about which I spoke to Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority this morning. I also spoke yesterday to His Majesty the King of Jordan. We discussed the measures that are necessary and the support the UK can provide to ensure the strong stability of the west bank. No one wants to see the situation escalate. I assure my hon. Friend that we are in active dialogue with both partners to see how we can help bring that stability to the west bank. Indeed, it is something I will also continue to discuss with Prime Minister Netanyahu. It is important that the west bank remains calm, and that is what we will help to bring about.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): On Saturday, I went to shul and sat next to a constituent whose cousin is one of the hostages. My thoughts and prayers go out not only to him, but to all families and hostages currently detained.

While conflict escalates in the middle east, we see the effects on the streets here in Britain. I welcome the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition standing behind Israel's right to defend itself and the £3 million increase in funding for the Community Security Trust. However, unfortunately, in the past week we have seen an increase of around 500% in antisemitic incidents and an 850% increase in suspicious behaviours, and even this weekend glorification of Hamas and genocidal chants on the streets of our cities, in some cases mere feet away from police officers. Will the Prime Minister join me in applauding the efforts of the CST in keeping the Jewish community safe, but also commit to ensuring that anyone found to be preaching this hate speech on our streets faces the full extent of the law?

The Prime Minister: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I met the CST and police chiefs last week, in Downing Street, not just to provide extra funding, but to reiterate that there is zero tolerance in the United Kingdom for antisemitism. It is tragic that we have seen a significant increase in incidents over the past week, but those who perpetrate these crimes will be met with the full force of the law.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I want to add my voice to all those who stand with Israel and her inalienable right to defend herself against an unspeakable crime. As someone born in the middle east, as a father and as a human, it was too painful to watch. Israel has to take the necessary steps to root out this evil virus of fundamentalism that has so clearly infested those in Hamas and, of course, destroy it. Just as we stood together against ISIS, we will stand together again. My request to my right hon. Friend is that, when this has been done, the UK encourages Israel to set out for all to see the positive actions it will take to change the reality in Gaza once and for all. Gaza and the world will need Israel to show her best self after this war.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his powerful statement and also agree with him, We must think about the future, and in spite of this awful tragedy, we cannot lose sight of the better future that we all want to strive for. Indeed, in my conversations with leaders we have already been thinking about that, and it is something I raised with the Prime Minister of Israel as well. We all want that better future for the Israeli and Palestinian people, and hopefully out of this tragedy we will find a way to move closer towards it.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The massacre of Israeli civilians was a heinous act of terrorism that we all utterly condemn and the hostages must be released immediately. In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General,

“the horrific acts by Hamas do not justify responding with collective punishment of the Palestinian people.”

But that is what we are seeing in Gaza, with civilian areas bombed and food, electricity, water and medicines all cut off. Such collective punishment is a war crime under the Geneva conventions, so will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to make it clear to the Israeli Government that this collective punishment of Palestinian civilians must end immediately?

The Prime Minister: I would say gently to the hon. Gentleman that I actually believe that we should support absolutely Israel's right to defend itself and to go after Hamas, recognising that it faces a vicious enemy that embeds itself behind civilians. Of course, Israel will act within international humanitarian law—and, as a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution in avoiding harming citizens—but we must acknowledge always that the responsibility for what is happening here is with Hamas and Hamas alone.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the step that you took at the beginning of last week in lighting up this Palace in the colours of blue and white as an act of solidarity with the Israeli victims of Hamas terrorism? I know that it was appreciated by those British families mourning loved ones who were slain in that action as well as by families living with unimaginable fear right now because they have family members who have been taken hostage in Gaza. Some of those family members are with us in the Gallery.

Does the Prime Minister agree that after the acts of barbarism by Hamas, there is no going back to the situation before where, right under the noses of the international community, Hamas were allowed to rearm time and again? They were allowed to misappropriate aid into terrorist infrastructure, building those tunnels, amassing armaments and hiding them behind civilian families. Does he agree that the international community must take a stand and not allow the Gaza strip to go back to becoming a terrorist statelet?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for everything he does to support the Jewish community here and overseas. I agree that no country can or would tolerate the slaughter of its citizens and simply return to the conditions that allowed that to take place. Israel has the right—indeed, the obligation—to defend itself and to ensure that this never happens again.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, “No stone can remain unturned in finding a political solution.”

Those are not my words, but those of the Israeli and Arab mothers' collective Woman Wage Peace, echoed in recent days by survivors from Kibbutz Be'eri, the family of those murdered at Netiv Ha'Asara, organisations such as B'Tselem, Omdim Ben Yachad, and thousands of peace activists and ordinary Israelis who are desperately praying for the cycle of violence to end and a lasting peace to be secured. What will the Government be doing to heed that call and mobilise international actors to find the political solution, however far away it feels right now, so that there may be a way out of the nightmare that Hamas has unleashed for all in Israel, Palestine and the wider region for good?

The Prime Minister: We must provide an alternative to the vision of violence, fear and terror presented by Hamas, and that is what the United Kingdom will do, standing with Israel but also working together with its people and our allies across the region—all of those who remain committed to a vision of a more peaceful, more integrated, more secure and more prosperous middle east. That is what we will work towards.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I welcome in particular his urging of the state of Israel to act in line with international humanitarian law and his call for Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians. May I ask him to press upon our Israeli friends the principles of distinction and proportionality in their action to avoid any sense in which it looks like a collective punishment is being meted out on the Palestinians in Gaza, as well as ensuring that we do nothing that will leave the democracies worse off at the end of this, which is not in line with the principles all of us would wish to hold?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we support Israel's right to defend itself, but, as a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians. That is something that I specifically discussed with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and we will continue to do so.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): A six-year-old Palestinian child was murdered in Chicago because of his Muslim faith, and as a response to the war between Israel and Hamas. In the last week, we have seen a sharp rise in Islamophobic rhetoric and the dehumanisation of Palestinians. Tragically, yesterday, we saw the consequences in the murder of that little boy. Will the Prime Minister review his statements about the conflict and ensure that he does not add to the further vilification of Palestinians and Muslims when condemning the actions of Hamas?

The Prime Minister: I gently urge the hon. Gentleman to examine what I said earlier from the Dispatch Box, particularly about standing with the British Muslim community at this difficult time. We will not tolerate anti-Muslim hatred in any form, and we will seek to stamp it out wherever it occurs. I am pleased to say that, in June, the Security Minister confirmed additional funding of £24.5 million available this financial year to provide protective security at mosques and Muslim faith schools as a demonstration of our intent to deliver on what I said. But I say to him: please see what I said earlier from the Dispatch Box. We stand with all communities at this difficult time.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): In the long litany of attacks against Jews around the world, this is the single most murderous since the end of the Holocaust in 1945. The Prime Minister's support for the Jewish community in this country and for Israel has been heroic. This is an historic moment, and the response of His Majesty's Government has been all anyone could have asked. Does the Prime Minister agree that Israel has acted entirely in accordance with international law, despite Hamas using human shields and every type of horrific provocation? Israel has not only a right to defend itself but a duty to defend its people from sadistic and vicious murderers.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an excellent point that Israel has not just the right but the duty. One only needs to imagine, if a similar incident had occurred in our country, what we would do to secure the safety and security of our citizens. That is what Israel is doing, it has every right and duty to do so, and it will have our support as it does.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I condemn unreservedly the actions of Hamas and the horror that has unfolded in the region, and I ask that the hostages are returned safely as soon as possible. However, from speaking to aid workers based in Gaza, the reality on the ground is that despite the evacuation order, people who are ill, frail, in hospital or just getting old cannot get out. This morning, I spoke to aid workers who told me people are returning from southern Gaza to northern Gaza because they have no water and there is nowhere to go. They cannot escape. Will the Prime Minister urge the Israeli Government to bear in mind the reality for ordinary Palestinian people living in the nightmare that is unfolding around them through no fault of their own?

The Prime Minister: As I said, I have spoken to President Sisi about the importance of the Rafah crossing being open for humanitarian purposes and I will continue to do so, and about the importance of allowing humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza. Today's announcement of more support will hopefully make a difference. Again, I contrast Israel's attempt to minimise civilian casualties by warning people to leave Gaza with Hamas, who are urging the local population to stay to use them as human shields. It is unacceptable, and we should call it out for what it is.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Every tragic loss of life in Gaza is the responsibility of Hamas alone. Some people in this place would do well to remember that fact. A week on from the pogroms, what do we have on the streets of Britain? We have some people attending pro-Palestinian marches, holding up banners in support of terrorists, whether it be hang-gliders, chanting anti-Jewish chants, supporting the racist boycott, divestment and sanctions movement or, in the case of a protest in Glasgow, reminding Jews where they were in 1940. Jews need no reminder of where they were in 1940. Those scenes are deeply distressing to British Jews, many of whom do not believe that the police will take action. Could I urge the Prime Minister to look at what some of our European partners are doing, and to take stronger action against some of those marches?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for everything he does to support the Jewish community in our country. I join him in saying that these acts are appalling. I want to make sure that we provide security and relieve the anxiety in the Jewish community here in the United Kingdom, which is why I quickly took steps last week to provide that reassurance. I am clear that where people incite racial or religious hatred, or where people's conduct is threatening, abusive or disorderly or causes distress to others, we expect the police to take action, and those committing such crimes should face the full force of the law.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I join this House in its condemnation of the bloodshed in Israel and Palestine. The 2 million Palestinians in the open-air prison of Gaza faced a dire humanitarian emergency long before today, yet indiscriminate airstrikes and siege tactics have turned what was a critical emergency into a devastating catastrophe. Will the Prime Minister make it clear to the Israeli Government that laying siege to civilians in Gaza by cutting off food, water, power and

medical supplies and through indiscriminate airstrikes killing civilians is in clear violation of international law? Just what is the international community doing to stop the horrific and inhuman treatment of Palestinians?

The Prime Minister: I again point out gently to the hon. Gentleman that Hamas are the entity responsible for the suffering we are seeing, and Hamas alone. Of course we in the international community will do our best to alleviate the impact on innocent people, which is why we have today announced further aid to the region. We will make sure that we provide as much humanitarian support as we can and indeed, in all our conversations with leaders around the region, we are discussing the humanitarian situation and finding ways to work together to alleviate the impact on innocent lives, and that is what we will continue to do.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that what Hamas did was not terrorism for its own sake, but an act of calculated barbarism with a strategy behind it? The present war will not feature Egypt and Jordan as enemies of Israel as was the case in previous wars, so does he agree that that strategy is to try and prevent similar peace agreements with countries such as Saudi Arabia? Does he accept that Hamas are a creature of a client state of Russia, and while we are talking about this we must remember that Russia is still at war in Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, and he is right to point to the broader situation and welcome the progress that had been made on normalisation between Israel and other countries in the region, which speaks to the brighter future that we all hope we will see one day. Let me reassure him on our support for Ukraine: we remain committed to that, and just this Friday I was at the Joint Expeditionary Force summit in Sweden talking with our northern European, Scandinavian and Baltic partners and hearing directly from President Zelensky about how we in the JEF will continue to support Ukraine in the coming year. My right hon. Friend can rest assured that we are able to do both.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Noam Sagi, his wife Michal and their son are here today to watch you give your statement, Prime Minister.

Ada Sagi, Noam's mum, was taken hostage from her home by Hamas on Saturday 7 October, and is currently being held hostage in Gaza. Ada booked a ticket to the UK to celebrate her 75th birthday. Noam has written to the Prime Minister to ask for his immediate intervention and assistance. Joe Biden has made personal calls to his citizens. I ask the Prime Minister if he will please—remember, the family are watching—spare just five minutes to have a quick conversation with them.

The Prime Minister: Of course I am happy to have a quick conversation, but I am also engaged actively with our partners in the region to try to ensure the safe release of our hostages, which I am sure the House will support me in doing any which way we can. We will use all the tools at our disposal to ensure their safe return, not just for the hon. Lady's constituents but all those British nationals and others who were taken by Hamas in that appalling act. They should know that we are doing absolutely everything we can to try to bring them back home as quickly and safely as possible.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): We in this House are all absolutely horrified by the terrorist atrocities in Israel and the appalling way in which the Hamas terrorists have murdered, tortured and kidnapped men, women and children. I thank the Prime Minister for his important and significant statement today, and for the way in which—as he has just said—we are giving all the support to the grieving families right now. That is paramount. Can he explain from his conversations with President Sisi how the opening of the border crossings between Gaza and Egypt on humanitarian grounds will be undertaken in a way that prevents Hamas terrorists from leaving and potentially creating further atrocities in the region?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has made an excellent point. That is why there is complexity to opening the Rafah border crossing, but she should be reassured that we are engaged in those conversations with the Egyptians and with other partners, including the Americans, to find a safe way to open the crossing—ideally, for the evacuation of British nationals who may be in Gaza, but also to send humanitarian support into Gaza, which I know we would all like to see happen.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The International Committee of the Red Cross has stated that “hospitals in Gaza risk turning into morgues without electricity.” The Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has said that the agency’s colleagues in Gaza are no longer able to provide humanitarian assistance, and the number of people seeking shelter in UNRWA facilities in the south is absolutely overwhelming. Some civilians have no choice but to stay in the north of Gaza, and must be protected at all times. What conversations has the Prime Minister had with his Israeli counterpart about creating safe zones and humanitarian corridors in Gaza? Has the Prime Minister raised the urgent need to prevent the perpetration of atrocities on all civilians? Will he increase financial support for UNRWA, and the surrounding host nations, given that the increasing needs of refugees from Palestine will only, sadly, increase further for many years?

The Prime Minister: I am proud that over the past few years we have been one of the leading donors to UNRWA, accounting for about 10% of all its support for the region. Today we announced an increase of about a third in our humanitarian support, and we will work with the relevant partners to see how best to ensure that those funds can make a difference in the region as quickly as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing us a one-minute silence to reflect on the victims of what has taken place in the middle east.

There can be no greater contrast between the actions of the Israel defence forces, which attempt to prevent the loss of civilian life, and the sheer brutality of the terrorists who kill and maim as many people as they possibly can. There can be no comparison between those two aspects of what is happening. This operation by the terrorist group Hamas was clearly well planned, well resourced and well equipped, and had clearly been planned for many months. It is beyond belief that the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which funds and supports Hamas, was not behind this whole operation. Will my right hon. Friend now take the action that the whole House has asked him to take, and proscribe the IRGC in its entirety?

The Prime Minister: We have already taken strong action against the Iranian regime, including the sanctioning of 350 individuals and entities including the IRGC in its entirety. Furthermore, the National Security Act 2023 implements new measures to protect the British public, including new offences of espionage and foreign interference and tougher powers to arrest and detain people suspected of involvement in state threats. As the House knows, the Government have a long-standing policy of not commenting on whether specific organisations are being considered for proscription, and our approach, as currently stated, is completely in line with that of our allies.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Israeli Government have the right, indeed the duty, to protect their civilians against these bloody terrorist attacks, and we wish the Prime Minister well in his advice and guidance to the Israeli Government to enable them to achieve the aims that they need to achieve in protecting their citizens. His statement indicated that we would not tolerate the glorification of terror, which would be met by the full force of the law. Will he therefore join me in condemning the Irish language-speaking school in west Belfast whose students held pro-Palestinian demonstrations this week, which were facilitated within the school? Does he agree that schools should be places where pupils are taught that it is morally wrong to support terrorism, and they should not facilitate such demonstrations?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I do not know the details of the incident that he has described, but he is right that this malicious activity should not be happening in schools. We are absolutely clear about the fact that under the Terrorism Acts 2000 and 2006 it is an offence—there is a range of offences—to encourage terrorism, glorify and support groups that have been proscribed as terrorist organisations under UK law. The police will use all the tools at their disposal to stamp that out and arrest those who perpetrate such acts.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): One of the many things Bournemouth is known for is its large Jewish community; indeed, our first citizen and mayor, Councillor Anne Filer, is Jewish. Those people in my constituency will have heard and drawn comfort from the calm and measured words of not just the Prime Minister, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, this afternoon. What we have seen is not just an attack on the territorial integrity of Israel, but an attack on Jews and those of the Jewish faith. Will my right hon. Friend join everyone else of good will in this House to make it clear—not just this week, last week, this month, next month, but always—that antisemitism has no place in our society?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend. This was an attack on Jews and we should call it out for what it was. That is what Hamas believe and what they have tried to do, but they will meet firm resistance from us. We will not tolerate antisemitism in any form on our streets, not just today or tomorrow, but always.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): The Prime Minister has reaffirmed his commitment to a two-state solution. Why, then, have his Government failed to recognise the state of Palestine when 138 United Nations member countries have done so? Israel has absolutely every right to defend itself, but Palestinians need to have that right as well. If recognised as a state, Palestine will be able to root out terrorism and defend its territory. Do the unjustifiable actions of Hamas—a group that do not represent Palestinians—justify the collective punishment of innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza by the Israeli defence forces?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom Government's long-standing position under both parties has been that the United Kingdom will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when it best serves the object of peace. We are committed to the objective of a sovereign, prosperous and peaceful Palestinian state living side by side with a safe and secure Israel. As last week's attack demonstrates, right now we must ensure that Israel has that security.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that to conflate Hamas and the Palestinians is not only wrong but dangerous? Hamas have abducted, tortured and executed Palestinian members of Fatah, they have broken the arms of children who have worn Fatah colours to school, and they do not want a two-state solution because they do not believe Israel should exist as a state. But if the fingers on the trigger were Hamas's, the strings were being pulled from Tehran. With £100 million of investment going from Tehran to the terrorists of Hamas, is it not time that we in this country asked again why Iranian banks are operating from the City of London, why Iran Air is operating from Heathrow airport and why we have not proscribed the IRGC, as I believe we should have?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend that, crucially, the Palestinian people are also the victims of Hamas, as he said. Hamas do not represent the Palestinian people or their legitimate aspirations to live with security and dignity. They do not stand for the future that the Palestinian people want, and he is right to highlight that. That is why we have taken the approach that we have, and we will continue to make sure that our sanctions regime is effective. Where we have sanctioned entities, including banks, we will ensure that those sanctions are complied with. The new economic deterrence initiative that we have established with funding will help to ensure that that happens.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I join others in condemning the atrocities of Hamas, and my thoughts are with all those affected by the conflict in Israel and Gaza. One of my constituents, a UK national, is trapped in Gaza, having travelled there on Friday 6 October. I thank the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff and those on Labour's Front Bench for the work they have been doing to try to bring my constituent home. I wrote to the Foreign Secretary on Friday to update him on my constituent's whereabouts. I ask the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to redouble their efforts to bring my constituent home, to ensure the safe passage of all other UK nationals trapped in Gaza and to work to support people both in Gaza and Israel who are caught up in this terrible conflict.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady and express my sympathies to her constituent and their family. We are in touch with all the families who have registered with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to provide consular assistance to them. Obviously the situation in Gaza is difficult, but we are doing everything that we can, not least through our conversations with the Egyptians about the Rafah crossing. We have pre-emptively deployed a Border Force rapid deployment team to Egypt, so that when and if the crossing is opened, we are able to extract our citizens and bring them home. That is something I have explicitly discussed with President Sisi, to receive assurances from the Egyptians that they will allow the safe passage of British nationals when the time allows. The hon. Lady can rest assured that we will continue to do everything that we can to support her constituent and all others who are trapped.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Modern media have brought the full horror of the profoundly evil crimes committed against state of Israel into our homes, and they are now bringing the unfolding horror of the human catastrophe taking place in Gaza into our sitting rooms as well. In his statement, the Prime Minister indicated that Israel and Egypt are denying access for humanitarian aid into Gaza. What possible reason could there be for that?

The Prime Minister: As we heard previously, there are complexities with ensuring the safe opening of the Rafah crossing. We are having conversations with the Israelis, the Egyptians and other partners to see how best we can provide humanitarian assistance to the region, not least through the deployment of our Royal Navy assets, which will arrive over the course of the coming week, and the increase in aid funding, which we announced today, that will provide support to people in the region.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The use of white phosphorus in densely populated areas against civilians is illegal. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have reported the use of white phosphorous against civilians in Gaza. Has the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office received confirmation of those reports? If such weapons have been used against civilian populations in Gaza, what will the Prime Minister's response be?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we keep everything under review, but I am not going to comment or speculate on reports where we do not have full access to information or are unable to verify facts.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the three-step approach. Terrorism is terrorism. As somebody who comes from a Muslim background, I say this: the actions that we saw with regard to Hamas were clearly terrorist and barbaric, and therefore everything must be done to confront that terrorist organisation.

As the former special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I worked with people from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths. We worked together to tackle intolerance against all people of all faiths. On the specific point about conversations with King Abdullah, Hamas will be defeated, but the question is who replaces Hamas in Gaza. Has the Prime Minister had conversations

[Rehman Chishti]

with King Abdullah with regard to whether President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority are prepared to step in, with the support of international partners and humanitarian assistance? Everything must be done to preserve human life and find a two-state solution in this matter.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question and reassure him that exactly that was part of the conversations I had both yesterday, with the King of Jordan, and today with President Abbas. We need to provide stable leadership in Gaza once Hamas have, hopefully, been removed. That thinking is already happening among us and our partners.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On behalf of Plaid Cymru, I condemn the atrocities of Hamas. Our thoughts are with all the Israeli and Palestinian civilians killed, injured or bereaved in this horrific conflict.

International humanitarian law exists for a reason: to safeguard all civilians, universally. Among the rights under that law is the right to water. Fuel is necessary for many people in Palestine to have safe drinking water. Without clean water, people will die. The Prime Minister has announced humanitarian support today, which I welcome. As a close ally of Israel, what steps is he taking to urge Israel to comply fully with international law, including by supplying essential fuel to Gaza?

The Prime Minister: As I said previously, as a friend we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians, and we will continue to do everything we can to provide humanitarian support to those affected.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend the calm leadership of my right hon. Friend over the past few days, as well as that of the Leader of the Opposition.

Some people forget that the reason we defend Israel's right to exist and its security is that 6 million Jews were murdered due to a perverted ideology, and we must never return to that. That is why we stand with Israel in its time of absolute need.

I have a Jewish sister-in-law. She is quite clear that she has never felt more threatened than she did this weekend when she saw people take to the streets waving flags bearing Hamas's crest—I do not know whether the Prime Minister saw this—and calling for Israel to be swept “from the river to the sea”. This is all about getting rid of the Jews in Palestine; there is no question about it. We must be clear about this: we have to protect the Jewish people here, who are British citizens, and we must stamp out antisemitism. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend whether we will redouble our efforts to ensure that, if ever such scenes were to happen again, the people bearing those flags and hurling that abuse would be arrested and prosecuted with the full strength of the law.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent contribution. He is right: there is no place for demonstrations, convoys or flag waving on British streets that glorifies terrorism or harasses the Jewish community. That is why, last week, I met police chiefs and people from the Community Security Trust in

Downing Street to discuss how better we can protect the Jewish community at this time and police these protests appropriately. I am pleased that that work is ongoing, but of course we will remain engaged with all partners. As my right hon. Friend said, anyone who breaks the law should be met with the full force of the law and be swiftly arrested. Many people will have seen incidents online and footage of scenes that are simply unacceptable. I can reassure him that the police are currently reviewing that footage and, where possible and where they can, they will arrest those responsible.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The acts of terror that were committed by Hamas were horrifying, and our prayers go out to everyone affected, both in Israel and across the world, and those who are here in the House today. Israel is seeking justice, but innocent Palestinians must not collectively pay the price. I urge the Prime Minister to seek guarantees from the Israeli Government on four crucial points: first, that incendiary weapons will not be used in civilian areas; secondly, that hospitals and medics will not be targeted; thirdly, that food, water and electricity supplies must be immediately restored; and, finally, that we must not see military occupation and annexation of Gazan land.

The Prime Minister: I am confident that the Prime Minister of Israel does not want to see any regional escalation beyond dealing with Hamas. As a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Since the Hamas terrorist attack, the unequivocal Government support and concern for the safety and welfare of the UK Jewish community has been extremely well received by those in that community, and no one has shown greater care than my right hon. Friend, whom I would like to thank. Over the coming days, as Israel takes the remedial and self-defence action that it has been forced to take, can my right hon. Friend confirm that he will work with our international allies to ensure continued support for Israel, such that Israel is not left out on a limb, on its own, to be picked off by enemies?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and agree that we will continue to support Israel's right to defend itself. We remain engaged in the region, talking to our partners, so that we can provide Israel with all the support that we can, defend its position and also provide humanitarian support to alleviate the impact as best we can.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My thoughts and prayers are with all the families who are grieving following the horrific terrorist attacks by Hamas, which I unreservedly condemn. These atrocities were committed by terrorists who do not seek peace, and they have set back the just cause of Palestinian freedom and statehood, which I, along with many across this House, have long supported.

Over a million Palestinians in Gaza have been told to flee, highlighting the scale of the impending humanitarian disaster, which will only inflame tension in the region. There are grave concerns about the escalation of the conflict in the wider region. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what particular steps our Government are

taking to help de-escalate the conflict, which risks turning into a wider regional conflict, drawing in Lebanon and Iran?

The Prime Minister: Both the Foreign Secretary and I are speaking extensively to all our partners in the region to urge everybody to put pressure on those who would seek to take advantage of the situation not to. As I said, we have deployed surveillance aircraft to the Mediterranean, not least to ensure that Hezbollah is not in receipt of extra arms shipments, because that would be damaging to regional stability. We will continue to make sure that that does not happen.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In 2013, I took a group of schoolchildren from the Beit Shvidler Primary School in Edgware to the Hanukkah party at No. 10. A leading voice of the choir was Nathanel Young, one of the first people to be killed in the terrorist attack in Israel. Will the Prime Minister advise the House what actions have been taken for the bereaved families and the families of the 17 hostages who remain in Gaza, and what consular support that will entail?

The Prime Minister: I express again my sympathies to all those families who have been impacted by the appalling situation in Israel in this terrorist attack. I was in my hon. Friend's constituency this morning and saw at first hand the impact that this was having on the community there. I assure him that the Foreign Office is providing extensive consular support to all families who are impacted, and we will continue to do so throughout this crisis.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I wish to put on record my utter condemnation of the Hamas attacks. Israeli hostages must be released. Over the last week, we have all seen horrific images of innocent Israelis and Palestinians on our screens—it has been awful. What struck me was a quote that I have seen from an aid worker in Gaza from Medical Aid for Palestinians. Mahmoud Shalabi said:

“I've seen kids write their names on their palms, because when they die they want people to know who they are.”

That is because in Gaza, families are being wiped out.

Across the globe, there has been a collective outcry for the people of Gaza, most of whom, as the Prime Minister has said, have nothing to do with Hamas. Has the Prime Minister pledged funding or support for the safety of children and their access to healthcare in hospitals? What is he doing to facilitate the opening of the border for aid? Humanitarian access is so important, so that foreign nationals can leave Gaza.

The Prime Minister: I have specifically spoken to President Sisi about the importance of opening the Rafah border crossing, both for humanitarian purposes and to provide for the safe evacuation of British nationals. Today, we have announced an increase in our aid funding to the region by around a third, and we will figure out how best that money can help those who need it as quickly as possible.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On international law and media impartiality, will the Attorney General be asked to provide a legal note, if not a full opinion, given, for example, that one of Ofcom's directors—Ofcom

having full statutory and regulatory responsibility for all visual and oral media, including the BBC—is reported to be supporting posts this week arguing that the Government's support for Israel is a “vile colonial alliance”, and referring to

“ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians”?

Ofcom must surely be told that it must deal with this at once as a matter of impartiality, quite apart from any criminal action that may be needed under terrorist or criminal law.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I will ensure that the Attorney General looks into it, and more generally, I will just say that I absolutely endorse those describing these attacks as what they are, which is acts of terror by a terrorist organisation. Obviously the BBC is editorially and operationally independent of Government, but the Culture Secretary raised that specific issue with the BBC director general last week.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hamas's kidnapping of 200 Israelis is a stark reminder that the terrorist group have learned from their paymasters, the Iranian regime, who for years have promoted state hostage taking, including, of course, of UK nationals. Will the Prime Minister say a bit more about the steps that the UK Government are taking for the release of the British nationals who are currently held in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we are providing consular support to the affected families. We recognise that this will be a very difficult time for them. We have, for a long time, maintained Foreign Office travel advice that people should not travel to Gaza, because we know the situation is dangerous. We are working as hard as we can to open the Rafah crossing, and the Border Force team has already been deployed to Egypt so that, if and when the crossing is opened, we will rapidly be in a position to be able to bring people home.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's most powerful statement in robustly standing with Israel in its mission to defeat Hamas after their brutal terrorist offensive last week. This has rightly been called Israel's 9/11, but we now appreciate that, following those attacks on America in 2001, grave operational and strategic errors were made, however well-intentioned, in the name of defeating terrorism. That led to significant escalation and, indeed, radicalisation.

How events play out in the next few days will have severe repercussions across the middle east and beyond for years. With no emergency governance, security or humanitarian plans yet confirmed, does the Prime Minister agree that, if we are a true friend of Israel, we should counsel against a full-scale ground invasion at this time, as it will see this conflict spill into the west bank, East Jerusalem and southern—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are still many Members standing. I want to get everyone in, as I think that is right, but I ask that Members please consider each other in both questions and answers.

The Prime Minister: Of course every country has the right to defend itself, and it would not be appropriate for the UK to define that approach. I thank my right

[*The Prime Minister*]

hon. Friend for his remarks. We will continue to stand with Israel and, as a friend, we will urge them to take every possible precaution to minimise the impact on civilians.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As you are aware, Mr Speaker, my immediate family are from the west bank, but I have extended family in Gaza city. Their house was bombed by the IDF, so they went to seek sanctuary in a church—we are Christian Palestinians—and I am afraid to say that they are still there, because they are too old to leave. They say to me that they have nowhere to go.

Because of this, not despite it, I attended a vigil in Oxford organised by the Jewish community. Between our communities, we now share profound emotions, loss and grief. When the Prime Minister says never again, I agree with him. Will he give his assurance that it will be never again and that, whenever we get through whatever happens in the next few days, he will keep the promise he made to my great-grandfather that there will be a Palestinian state to call our own at the end of it?

The Prime Minister: I start by expressing my sympathies to the hon. Lady and her family for what they are going through. I know this will have been an incredibly difficult time for them. I also pay tribute to her, because her presence at the vigil, in spite of everything, will have meant an enormous amount to many people, and the courage she shows in talking about that experience here today is admirable. She looks forward to a more positive future, which is an ambition I share.

This is an unspeakably difficult situation, a tragedy, but we must find a way to move forward to secure a more stable, peaceful settlement for those living in the middle east, because this tragedy has reminded us all of the horrors of war and the horrors of terrorism. We must find a way to bring peace and stability to the region, and that is what I will strive very hard to help bring about.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As a child of Northern Ireland, I will never forget how frightening it is to be in a schoolroom when a bomb goes off across the road. The Hamas atrocities of last weekend rewrote the definition of evil. The Prime Minister is right to have condemned Hamas, he is right to have stood beside the Jewish population and he is right to have stood by Israel's duty to defend itself. But our history also tells us that terrorism is rarely defeated by further terror, so he is right also to be concerned for innocent Palestinians caught in the crossfire and who are being used as human shields. I thank him for what he said about the need for Israel to stay within international law, and for the additional aid we have pledged today. May I urge him to try to get that aid to the people who need it as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution, and I can give her that reassurance. I know that she will have advice for us on how best we can do that. We are keen to make sure that that aid makes a difference to as many people as quickly as possible, and we will be working with partners to make sure that that happens.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Hamas knew what would happen to the people that they purport to represent after their atrocious terrorist actions. They knew that it would rain down fear and pain and killing in the region. Anybody in our country who purports to support them deserves, as the Prime Minister says, the full force of the law. I thank the Prime Minister for saying that more aid will be going to Gaza, but I want to know, from conversations that he has had with Israel, which he said he has had today, what progress has been made to ensure that that aid—medical supplies, fuel and water—will actually reach the people of Gaza? As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) said, people have nowhere to go. Nothing is getting through, so what is Israel going to do to ensure that British aid can reach Gazans?

The Prime Minister: It is also important that Egypt is involved in that conversation because the Rafah crossing is one of the primary routes for aid to reach Gaza. That is why we have spoken specifically with President Sisi about that, and we will continue to talk with him and other regional allies to find ways to bring humanitarian aid to the region as quickly as possible.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his unequivocal condemnation of calculated acts of murder and hostage taking, which are deliberately designed to provoke a response that plunges the entire region, if not the wider world, into greater conflict. What assessment are my right hon. Friend and the Government making of current escalations on the northern border of Israel and Lebanon? We heard this afternoon of an evacuation of Israeli citizens within 2 km of the border. Does he think that that might well be a further escalation of the situation, and all part of a calculated plan to plunge the region into chaos?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely do not want to see regional escalation. One of the ways that we can help to ensure that that does not happen—my right hon. and learned Friend specifically mentioned Lebanon—is the deployment of our surveillance assets, which went into the region last week, with further to follow by the end of this week. One of the things that they can do is track and interdict armed shipments that might be going to Hezbollah, for example. That is something that none of us will want to see, which is why we have deployed those assets. Partners are grateful for our intervention, because no one wants to see an escalation of this conflict.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Some of the most vulnerable citizens in the event of war are people with disabilities, so what representations have the Government made for the protection particularly of people with disabilities in northern Gaza who are unable to move?

The Prime Minister: In all our conversations we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians, and we will do everything that we can to bring humanitarian support to the region.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): During the Prime Minister's school visit this morning we heard incredibly powerful speeches from students about the situation, showing the anguish felt about the worst

attack on Jewish people since the holocaust. In the light of that, will he ensure that the unequivocal support for Israel that he has expressed today is maintained and does not weaken in the difficult days ahead as Israel does what it has to do to remove the capacity of Hamas ever to do this again?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for welcoming me to her constituency this morning, and for joining me on what was an incredibly powerful visit to one of her local schools. I praise the courage and eloquence of the students we heard, who were incredible in explaining how this has affected them and their families. She has my assurance that we will continue to stand with Israel, as I said this morning, not just today, not just tomorrow, but always.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that the unspeakable actions of Hamas mean that Israel has not simply the right but a duty to protect its own citizens. However, Israel also has a duty to protect innocent Palestinians. How does Israel cutting off food and water seriously bring the hostages home and help to defeat Hamas?

The Prime Minister: It is not right for us to prescribe how another country can best exercise its lawful right—indeed, it is a duty—to self-defence, but as a friend we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): On Saturday, I met in Rawtenstall representatives of the British Muslim and British Palestinian communities of east Lancashire. They were united in one voice condemning the appalling actions of Hamas in the barbarous murder of Jewish people. They will have been heartened to hear the Prime Minister say that we stand with both the British Muslim community and the British Jewish community at this very difficult time. They want to see Israel comply with international law; they want humanitarian corridors to remain open to enable innocent Gazans to escape. How will the deployment of the Royal Navy help to ensure that that happens?

The Prime Minister: I know that this is important to my right hon. Friend. Like him, we recognise that this is a moment of anguish for British Muslim communities, who are appalled by the actions of Hamas but fearful of the response. As I said, we mourn the loss of every innocent life—of the civilians of every faith and nationality who have been killed. Our Navy assets can help, as I have said, to ensure that illegal arms shipments do not find their way to people such as Hezbollah. Also, the assets that we are deploying next week will be there as a contingency and can provide humanitarian assistance if and as required, which will be a valuable contribution to the role we play.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We in Walthamstow stand in solidarity with our neighbour, who is in Parliament today pleading for help to get her elderly parents back after they were brutally taken hostage by Hamas. We are also desperately worried about families from our community who are stuck in Gaza—UK citizens trying to get home. We believe that every life deserves the protection of international law, and that anyone who breaks it should be held to account.

My constituents are also asking what more we can do by using our international connections. As the Prime Minister will have seen, it has been reported today that the Qataris have brokered a deal to ensure that Ukrainian children kidnapped in Russia are returned home to their families. What conversations has he had with the Qataris about whether they might play a similar role, stopping the violence in Gaza accordingly?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Some Members will be disappointed but there is no way that we will get everybody in. The questions are far too long, which is not helping. I hope the answers will also be brief.

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Lady that we are talking to all leaders across the region. Indeed, I am due to speak to the Qatari leadership—maybe even today—so that we can work with them and others to ensure the safe return of hostages and to de-escalate the situation.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests relating to my visit to Israel and Palestine in May this year. The median age of a Palestinian in Gaza is 18 years. In the west bank, the median age is 21 years, and in Israel it is 29. If we do not sort out this long-term conflict quickly and permanently, we will have generations of young people affected in both Palestine and Israel, more radicalisation, and more tragedy for families living in those countries. Can my right hon. Friend elaborate further on his comments about a peace process that will have a lasting impact, and on a two-state solution?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because Hamas have tried to kill off that notion of a peaceful settlement for the middle east—peace, stability and security for both the Palestinian and Israeli communities—that we must redouble our efforts to bring it about. That has very much been the subject of the conversations that I have had and will continue to have with leaders from around the region. If we can contribute to that in any way, we will.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister and my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition for their statements. What role does the Prime Minister see for the United Nations in providing much-needed humanitarian relief in the region, particularly in Gaza, and in trying to get a new peace process off the ground? I know that that will be difficult, but it is badly needed.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. The United Nations can play a significant role when it comes to the humanitarian side. Indeed, around three quarters of our existing aid to the region is channelled through the UN, particularly the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which was referred to earlier. I am sure that it will continue to play a valuable role going forward.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Leeds has a proud Jewish community, including in my own constituency. It is not just the barbarity that we saw in the Hamas attack—burning, murdering, mutilation and

[Alec Shelbrooke]

rape—that is making my Jewish constituents fearful, but the fact that we came through several years where antisemitism had been given a safe space in this country and that there are now protests on the street pushing forward the antisemitic message. Every day, they are worried about how they go about living their normal life. As such, I thank my right hon. Friend for the £3 million of investment he has announced for security, but ask him to keep a close eye on whether more is needed. I cannot emphasise enough that the Jewish community in my constituency, and probably across the country, is fearful all the time.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments—he is rightly a champion of the Jewish community in his constituency. Like him, I am clear that there is zero tolerance of antisemitism in the UK. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure the security and safety of our Jewish citizens.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I stand with this House in condemnation of Hamas's appalling killing of innocent Israeli civilians and call for the immediate safe return of all the hostages, but I am very concerned about the increasing numbers of deaths of innocent Palestinians. The forced mass displacement of Gazans is leading to a massive humanitarian crisis, so can the Prime Minister explain what the Government are doing to prevent this? Has he demanded an immediate ceasefire to end the collective punishment of civilians?

The Prime Minister: I believe that we must absolutely support Israel's right to defend itself and to ensure that attacks like this cannot happen again, but as a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians, and we will provide humanitarian support.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This morning, I was contacted by a constituent who, on visiting London on Saturday, was deeply disturbed by the pro-Hamas chants that were being shouted, the destruction of national monuments, the fact that the main stage for the protest was right next to the Cenotaph, and media reports of somebody with a Union Jack being detained and led away. What representations are going to be made to the Mayor of London and the Metropolitan police so that future protests are policed appropriately?

The Prime Minister: We have ensured that the police have the tools, powers and guidance they need to police these protests appropriately. Obviously, this is a difficult situation. I am thankful to them for what they did over the weekend: they have made, I think, over 20 arrests, and as I said, they are currently reviewing footage of some of the things we have seen after the fact. Where they can, they will make further arrests, but we are clear: people may be free to express their views, but where they are inciting racial or religious hatred, that is against the law and they will meet the full force of the law as a result.

Mr Speaker: I am going to finish the statement at 5.30, so let us help each other.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Over the weekend, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that

“The price of evil cannot be paid by the innocent”,

yet in Gaza, Palestinians have had no access to food, water or electricity for over a week. We have seen an evacuation order that has left people with an impossible choice. Constituents in Luton North have spoken to me about their pain and anguish at the unimaginable loss of lives in Gaza, so many of which are children, all following the despicable attack of terror carried out by Hamas. Even at times of war, there are still laws, so as well as the urgent and desperate need for humanitarian aid and corridors, what are Ministers doing to counter breaches of international law that risk the further loss of innocent life and threaten the possibility of peace in the middle east?

The Prime Minister: It is Hamas alone who are responsible for this conflict, and we support Israel in taking action against terrorism and to defend itself. Hamas have also enmeshed themselves in the civilian population in Gaza and are using them as a human shield. We will continue, as a friend, to call on Israel to do everything it can to reduce the impact on human life, and we will continue to support the area with humanitarian support.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Is it not the case that Israel's best hope for its future security in its justified response to Hamas's atrocity is to treat the civilian populations in Gaza and the west bank with the full respect that the laws of war and civilised nations demand, or else this tragic cycle of violence will simply repeat itself in the years to come?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we must support Israel's right to defend itself—to go after Hamas—and recognise that it faces a vicious enemy who are embedding themselves behind civilians, but it will do so in accordance with international law. As a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I join the Prime Minister in strongly condemning the despicable, horrendous acts by Hamas last week. It was and is an ongoing war crime. Of course, though, one war crime does not excuse another, so will the Prime Minister please speak to Prime Minister Netanyahu and ask him to stop dropping bombs on innocent children in Gaza? Some of us know all too well that unspeakable violence should not be met with unspeakable violence. We know in Ireland that the only option is to relentlessly pursue peace through dialogue.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Israeli President's words, where he has been clear that the Israelis are working operationally according to the rules of international law. They will exercise their lawful right to defend themselves, and as a friend we will continue to call on them to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The barbaric terrorism at the hands of Hamas saw babies and children robbed of their futures in the most brutal way. The victims were

male and female, young and old. One of the victims was Bernard Cowan, who moved from Newton Mearns to Israel. Last week, his mother, Irene, joined many others at a service of solidarity and lit a candle in his memory. We grieve and think of all the victims, and indeed of all the families of the hostages. Jewish communities in Scotland are worried about their safety, so I ask the Prime Minister, what action can and are the UK Government taking to ensure that Jewish communities in every part of the United Kingdom feel safe at this terrible time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for everything he is doing to support the Jewish communities in Scotland. I agree with him that there is zero tolerance in our society for antisemitism, which is why we have provided extra funding to the Community Security Trust to ensure the safety and security of Jewish institutions, schools and synagogues, and clear guidance to the police so that they can step in and take action where someone is breaking the law.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After the brutal terror atrocities carried out by Hamas, which tragically led to the deaths of over 1,000 Israelis, the Israeli Government of course have a duty to defend their citizens, but that must be proportionate and in line with international law. We must also condemn any indiscriminate killing or forcible eviction from their land of the Palestinian people, who have suffered so much for several decades and are now facing horrors on an unimaginable scale. Does the Prime Minister agree that there must be no collective punishment of Palestinians, that we must strive for peace and that there must be a humanitarian effort by the international community to avert furthering a crisis?

The Prime Minister: We are working with our partners to bring humanitarian support to the region. Again, today we announced a significant increase in our humanitarian funding for the region, which comes on top of what is strong support already. We will continue to talk to partners about how best to ensure that humanitarian aid finds its way to the people who need it.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly commend the Prime Minister for the strength and clarity of his statement and for his support for Israel, his condemnation of Hamas and his deep concern for the humanitarian situation in Gaza. I also thank him for being so strongly supportive of the Jewish and Israeli communities in Britain, but is he aware of an organisation called Palestine Action, which has this weekend listed a series of companies and the directors of those companies whom it believes to be legitimate targets for terrorist action? Will he now name this outfit, Palestine Action, and condemn what it is doing, and will he ask the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to act without further delay to deal with it?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I am sure he will understand that arrests are an operational matter for the police, but obviously what he has said, on the face of it, sounds concerning. The police have powers, under the Terrorism Acts of 2000 and 2006, to arrest people who are supporting either terrorism or proscribed terrorist organisations, and I would expect them to use the full powers available to them to prosecute people under the law.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Our thoughts at this time must above all be with the Israeli and Palestinian civilian dead and injured, and with the hostages. According to Medical Aid for Palestinians, over 2,700 Palestinians have been killed so far in air attacks, more than a quarter of them children, and this is before any ground invasion. What practical help can the Government offer the 2 million people of Gaza, and the UK citizens such as my constituents who are trapped at the Rafah border and under constant threat from bombing and shelling?

The Prime Minister: We continue to be in dialogue with partners, notably with the Egyptians about the Rafah crossing, and in anticipation we have deployed a Border Force team to Egypt to bring people safely home if and when that crossing is opened. In the meantime, the FCDO is providing consular assistance to all those families who are in contact with it and are currently in Gaza.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his powerful statement and, like colleagues across the House, I join him in condemning the acts of Hamas. Hamas, Hezbollah and a multitude of other terrorist organisations get their logistical, administrative, financial and armament support from Iran. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that he will act with our international partners to do everything to isolate Iran and to increase economic sanctions?

The Prime Minister: Hamas are fully responsible for the appalling act of terror that has taken place, but Iran does pose an unacceptable threat to Israel, including through its long-term support for Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. I reassure my hon. Friend that we are working with our allies, as we have been for a while, to decide how best to deal with the destabilising actions of the Iranian regime in the region.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I echo the Prime Minister's unequivocal condemnation of Hamas and their appalling acts of terrorist violence. International humanitarian law demands that any Israeli response must be legal and proportionate. Does the Prime Minister agree that, regardless of the circumstances, the collective punishment of an entire civilian population—one that involves forced displacement and the cutting off of water, food, fuel and medicine—can never be legal or proportionate?

The Prime Minister: I believe that we must support absolutely Israel's right to defend itself, to go after Hamas and to ensure its security in the long term and that such acts cannot happen again. As a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Greater Manchester is home to a large and vibrant Jewish community. They are our neighbours, our friends and our families. It is also home to a sizeable presence of the BBC which, when faced with child murder, rape and torture, decided that Hamas should be called militants rather than terrorists. The political leaders of this country and our royal family can decide that they are terrorists; why cannot our national broadcaster?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I absolutely endorse those who, in describing these attacks, call them what they are: attacks of terror by a terrorist organisation. My hon. Friend will know that the BBC is editorially and operationally independent of the Government, but the Culture Secretary has raised this issue directly with the director general and we wait to see.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): My thoughts go out to everyone affected by the terrible violence in Israel and Palestine. I thank the Prime Minister for his announcement of additional funding for humanitarian aid. I press upon him the need to integrate a framework of atrocity prevention into the UK's strategy, to ensure that UK officials are able to properly centre its treaty and ethical obligations throughout its response to the crisis, and to resource UK country teams and relevant officials with urgent atrocity prevention and response training, expertise, guidance and leadership.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The existing support that we provide to the region ensures the stability of the Palestinian Authority, for example, and helps to build capability there. We will work with partners to make sure that the new money we announced today can be used in the most effective and quickest way possible.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): Two weeks ago at conference, we were brought to tears listening to Hannah Lewis, a holocaust survivor, describe watching, at the age of seven, her mother get shot in the head—a scene that broke her heart, and that broke ours, too, as she spoke. Five days later, holocaust survivors were kidnapped or killed, babies were slaughtered, women my age were raped next to the bodies of their friends and then killed, and hostages were paraded through the streets of Gaza and spat on. That was the reality that unfolded in front of holocaust survivors and their families. My own staff member shared the story of his 10-day-old cousin, who was surrounded by Hamas trying to murder them. Will the Prime Minister join me in utterly condemning the acts of Hamas and in saying that we will never forget and that “never again” really does mean never again?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful statement and for all the work she does to support this cause in the country. I agree with her wholeheartedly in unequivocally condemning this act of barbarity as well as saying that there is no place in our society for antisemitism. She is right: we must never forget. I praise her work and that of the Holocaust Educational Trust and others for making sure that we never will.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wish that the horrific terrorist attacks by Hamas last week had been truly exceptional, but the truth is that they reminded me of what the Russians did last year in Bucha in Ukraine. They also brought to mind how the first place the Russians targeted in Kyiv was a Jewish cemetery. There is a pattern here, and actually there is a network around the world. So while of course we must ensure that Israel is able to do everything it can to defend itself—and we stand with every single person in this country who has a friend or family member either in Gaza or in Israel, who

will be terrified about what will happen to them in the next few days—we also have to tackle this network, do we not? Does that not mean having some tough words with Qatar in particular about why it has hosted so many people from Hamas over recent years?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his powerful words. We will continue to speak to all leaders in the region to find ways to de-escalate the crisis and ensure that we can bring about an end to the evil that Hamas represent. He is right that it is not just limited to this particular conflict; it is much more widespread. That is why we need to work with our allies to stamp it out across the world.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Hamas are an Iranian proxy terror organisation, designated as such under the Terrorism Act 2000. Credible reports indicate that the 7 October attacks were planned in concert with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. For many years, hon. Members have been calling for the IRGC to be proscribed as a terrorist organisation, and those calls have been repeated today. While I understand that the Government do not indicate in advance what action they intend to take under the Terrorism Act, may I assure my right hon. Friend that if hon. Members were to wake up tomorrow morning and hear on the news that it had been so designated today, they would be extremely relieved and grateful to him.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend that Iran both poses an unacceptable threat to Israel and has a destabilising influence throughout the region. That is why we have sanctioned more than 350 Iranian individuals, including the entirety of the IRGC. The new National Security Act 2023 also gives us the powers that we need to keep us safe here at home. I assure him that we will continue to work closely with our allies in finding the best possible way to contain Iran's pernicious activities.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I represent one of this country's biggest Jewish communities, in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn. Following Hamas's brutal attack on Israel, there has been an increase in antisemitic incidents in my local area. Most heartbreakingly, I have had emails from local parents who are very worried about their children going to a local Jewish school because aggressive men have been standing outside taking photos. Some of the parents have had their car tyres slashed. The Prime Minister has pledged support to Jewish institutions, but will he commit publicly to ensuring that the support actually reaches local Jewish schools? Will he provide some much-needed reassurance to parents in Hampstead and Kilburn?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. This morning I visited a Jewish school in north London to ensure that the community there knew that I will do everything I can to keep them safe. That is why last week I met with the Community Security Trust, which does an excellent job. We have provided it with extra funding, which it will ensure gets to the frontline, whether that is to schools, synagogues or other institutions. We will continue to do everything we can to keep our Jewish communities safe. What is happening to our schoolchildren is simply unacceptable and sickening, and we will work very hard to bring it to an end.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I think it is disgusting to choose the day after the massacre to start waving Palestinian flags outside the Israeli embassy. I also find what happened at the Cenotaph disgusting, but those who are explicitly pro-Hamas are on a different level. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important to work with the Home Office and, where possible, to deport these individuals, because they do not share our values and they are not welcome in this country?

The Prime Minister: The military wing of Hamas has been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK for some time, in addition to the political wing more recently. Once a group is proscribed, it is a criminal offence for people in the UK to do various things in support of that organisation, under the Terrorism Act 2000. Furthermore, the Terrorism Act 2006 created the offence of the encouragement of terrorism, which gives the police the powers and tools they need to arrest those individuals who are perpetrating that kind of support. I will ensure that they face the full force of the law.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I utterly condemn the barbaric attacks by Hamas and call for the unconditional release of all those taken hostage. These are horrific acts of terrorism and constitute war crimes. Israel does have a right to self-defence, but the collective punishment of the people of Gaza is also a war crime. Those two things can both be true. The killing of over 2,600 civilians by the IDF is not only a humanitarian catastrophe but risks driving the deadly cycle of violence still further. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that he is straining every sinew to keep the flame of peace and stability alive, so will he listen to those UN experts calling for a ceasefire? What more will he do to promote a renewed international effort towards two legally recognised separate states, safe within their own borders?

The Prime Minister: It is that vision of a safe and secure two-state solution that Hamas have tried to kill off with their terrorist atrocities over the past week. That is why I absolutely support Israel's right to defend itself. It must be able to go after Hamas to take back hostages, to strengthen its security for the long term and to ensure that this cannot happen again. As a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians, and we will continue to work with international partners to bring humanitarian support to the region.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Given the appalling terrorist atrocities and wider events of the past 10 days, not to mention the division we are now seeing in our streets, does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for cool heads, dialling down the rhetoric, restraint and objective leadership right across the political community, with a view to providing humanitarian support in Gaza, defeating Hamas and bringing people home?

The Prime Minister: Those are all the right objectives, and we are working on all three, particularly working with regional partners to de-escalate violence, but also bringing humanitarian support to the region and thinking about a brighter future where people can live peacefully and securely side by side.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As well as the discussions that the Prime Minister has had with his international counterparts, can he tell us what discussions the Government have had with international aid organisations, particularly on ensuring that if the Rafah border crossing is opened to allow a humanitarian corridor, the aid is successfully co-ordinated? Have there been discussions about who will take responsibility for displaced Palestinian civilians, who will have nowhere to go? Does he support the principle that those Palestinian civilians have the right to return home at the earliest opportunity?

The Prime Minister: I am proud that we have been a long-standing, significant supporter of aid to the region, and have regular dialogue with agencies such as the UN. Our support to the UN directly helps around 5.8 million Palestinians refugees every year over the past few years. We have announced an increase in that funding today by around a third, which is significant. We will work with partner agencies to find the most effective and quickest way to get that aid to the people who need it.

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): In unequivocally condemning the barbarity of Hamas, I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) a few moments ago about the IRGC and Iran. May I ask specifically about the aid that we have pledged today for Palestinians? Clearly, we have seen that Hamas have been misappropriating aid, including using piping designed for water to fire missiles at Israel. How will we make sure that aid that goes into the Gaza strip is not used to strengthen Hamas?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question from my right hon. Friend, and it is something we review and monitor very carefully. We channel the vast majority of our aid for the Palestinian territories through the UN, and it is almost overwhelmingly on humanitarian purposes—health, education and the protection services for Palestinians. We do not provide any bilateral financing aid into the region, which should give him some reassurance. With the new investments announced today, we will of course ensure that it goes on the things we care about and to the people we care about.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister that Israel's response needs to be constrained by international humanitarian law. What steps will the Government be taking to monitor compliance with those constraints in the coming days, and how many days does he think it will now be before urgently needed humanitarian relief can be taken into Gaza?

The Prime Minister: We are doing everything we can to support humanitarian efforts, moving aid into the region as quickly as we can. We will continue to have conversations with all our counterparts in the region to make sure that that aid gets there as quickly as humanly possible.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I stand with my constituents in Bolton in condemning the acts of terror committed by Hamas, who have targeted not only innocent adults but, even more barbarically, children.

[Mark Logan]

At the onset of the horrific atrocities, the Government rightly reach out their hand to the victims of unspeakable terrorism. Does the Prime Minister agree with me and my constituents that the people of Gaza must be treated fairly, within the bounds of international law, and that we refuse to accept an all-out humanitarian crisis?

The Prime Minister: We do support Israel's right to defend itself and, as a friend, we will continue to call on Israel to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians. We will do everything we can to bring humanitarian support to the people of Gaza as quickly as practically possible.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The targeted killing of civilians, whether Israeli or Palestinian, must be condemned, as must the kidnapping of hostages. The civilians of Gaza should not be made to pay the price for the atrocities of Hamas. Blocking children's access to food goes beyond self-defence; it is a violation of international law. The World Health Organisation has described forcing patients to relocate from hospitals as tantamount to a death sentence for some. Will the Prime Minister do anything he can to convince the Israeli Government to cancel the relocation order, lift the siege and end indiscriminate bombing?

The Prime Minister: I must gently point out to the hon. Lady that it is not Israel that is deliberately targeting civilians in Gaza; it is Hamas who are enmeshing themselves in the civilian population and using people as human shields. She talks about people moving but, again, Israel is attempting to minimise the impact on civilians by asking people to leave northern Gaza, and it is Hamas who are telling people to stay and using them as human shields.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): We should all have no time for those who express sympathy for the terrorists of Hamas, and we should have no time for those who amplify their horrible messages either. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the actions of the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology in trying to call the social media giants to account, and will he join me in encouraging them both to co-operate with the police in this country in their investigations and to do the same to try to minimise their impact abroad?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent point. More broadly, I want to make the point that online offending is as serious as offline offending. We have robust legislation in place to deal with threatening and abusive behaviour or behaviour that is intended or likely to stir up hatred, and it applies whether the behaviour takes place online or offline. We are working closely with the police and the internet companies to make sure that those who break those rules meet the full force of the law.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Following the horror of Hamas's appalling terrorist attack it is crucial, as others have said, that we distinguish between Hamas and innocent Palestinian civilians, in line with international humanitarian law. The United Nations Population Fund says that there are 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza,

with 5,500 due to give birth this month. What efforts are being made to ensure that Gaza's hospitals are protected and able to operate for those pregnant women, newborns, children and all others who need urgent medical attention?

The Prime Minister: This is an incredibly difficult time, with an impact on many, and it is important that we recognise and remember that the people responsible for bringing it about are solely and unequivocally Hamas, with their appalling acts over the last week. As Israel takes steps, rightly, to defend itself, we will continue to call on it to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians. We are doing everything we can to bring humanitarian support into the region.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that we face a grave and dangerous moment in the middle east, which has been the result of myriad policy failures going back more than 25 years, and that a vacuum has been created where countries such as Iran, through its Hamas and Hezbollah proxies, are testing the will of Israel and the west as they seek to destabilise the region? I urge the Prime Minister to work with the US and other allies to ensure that they do not succeed, and that we show the same resolve on this era-defining moment as we did with our support for Ukraine.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he said. He is absolutely right: we must stand resolutely with Israel and also with our allies, such as the US, to demonstrate that Hamas's terrorism will not prevail. We will ensure not only that Israel can defend itself, but that we work with partners to bring peace and stability to the region that everyone living there deserves.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The barbarism unleashed last weekend is unparalleled in the history of the state of Israel. Israel unequivocally has the right to defend itself, and yet it remains the case that half the population of Gaza are children under the age of 18, of whom around 500 are believed to have died already. I welcome very much the additional aid provided, but with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency warning that its ability to provide relief is running out today, can the Prime Minister use every channel to drive home the message that humanitarian aid delayed risks being aid too late?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are working very hard with partners across the region to bring humanitarian aid to the people who need it as soon as practically possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I know that a lot of people are disappointed that they have not been able to ask their particular question, but the House is grateful to the Prime Minister for having been at the Dispatch Box for two hours. I must point out in advance to all those colleagues who will come and complain to me about not being able to speak that the House has been asking the Prime Minister to use his diplomatic skills to the best of his ability on behalf of our country, so I think we must release him from the Chamber to allow him to do so. Thank you, Prime Minister.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Points of order come after statements. Is this directly related to the statement?

Hannah Bardell *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Then I hope it really is a point of order.

Hannah Bardell: Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for granting this point of order. I appreciate that the Prime Minister was at the Dispatch Box for nearly two hours, but as a result of the importance and the magnitude of this issue and the complexity and nature of our questions, nearly 50 Members did not get a chance to speak. Will you, Madam Deputy Speaker, do everything that you can to ensure that time will be afforded to us during the rest of this week and going forward so that we can debate and discuss this very important issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady makes a perfectly reasonable point. The Leader of the House is in her place and will have heard what she has said.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues are making themselves available to speak to colleagues, because we are very aware that they will have constituency issues to discuss.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am very grateful to the Leader of the House for giving that immediate answer. I hope the hon. Lady and the rest of the House will appreciate that Ministers are doing their best to make themselves available, especially where there are particular issues relating to constituents.

I hope the House will settle down, as we move on to the next item of business. Will those who are leaving do so quietly and swiftly?

Prison Capacity

5.33 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): With permission, I shall make a statement on the criminal justice system in England and Wales.

The first duty of any Government is to keep their people safe, and that is why those who pose a danger to society must be locked up. The Government are categorical that the worst offenders should be locked away for as long as it takes to protect the public. We have increased the sentences for offences including knife crime, causing death by dangerous driving—now a maximum of life imprisonment—and causing or allowing the death of a child. We have ended automatic halfway release for serious sexual and violent offenders, so they will serve two thirds of their sentence behind bars, and, in the most dangerous cases, all of their sentence behind bars. We are changing the law to make whole life sentences the default for the most heinous type of murder, so that for society's most depraved killers, life means life and murderers end their days in prison.

Today, I can announce that we will be going further. We will legislate so that rapists, as well as those convicted of equivalent sexual offences, will serve the entirety of the custodial term handed down to them by the courts. A 15-year custodial term will mean 15 years behind bars.

There have been inaccurate reports in the media, claiming that judges have been told not to send rapists to prison. Let me be categorical: this is untrue. Sentencing is a matter for the judiciary acting impartially and in accordance with the law. It is a fact that under this Government the most serious and dangerous offenders are being locked away for longer. In the case of rapists, average sentences are nearly a third longer than in 2010. That is the right thing to do to keep the public safe.

To continue to put the worst offenders away for longer, we must use prisons better, and always so that there are sufficient spaces to lock up the most dangerous criminals. We must reform the justice system so that it keeps the worst of society behind bars, rehabilitates offenders who will be let out and presents the least serious, lowest risk offenders with a path away from a life of crime. That matters, because intelligent reform means less crime.

I have been candid from the moment I took on this role that our custodial estate is under pressure. Today, the prison population in England and Wales is greater than it has ever been—nearly double the level it was three decades ago. That is not principally because of the growth in the sentenced population: instead, it is the remand population, principally made up of unconvicted prisoners awaiting trial, which has surged in recent years, from 9,000 in 2019 to more than 15,000 in 2023. That is more than 6,000 more people in our prisons out of a total of some 88,000. That is because in the white heat of the pandemic we took the right and principled decision not to jettison hundreds of years of British history and abandon the jury trial system. We did that because the jury trial system is the bedrock of our freedoms. But covid restrictions inevitably meant that the flow of trials slowed and, in turn, the remand population grew. That growth was exacerbated by industrial action last year. In addition, the recall population is also significantly

[Alex Chalk]

higher than in 2018, partly because we are rightly ensuring that offenders who do not comply with their licence conditions are returned to prison.

The Government have taken unprecedented steps to meet demand. We are building 20,000 modern rehabilitative prison places—the largest prison-building programme since the Victorian era. By doubling up cells where it is safe to do so, speeding up the deportation of foreign national offenders and delaying non-essential maintenance projects to bring cells back into use, we have freed up an extra 2,600 places since September last year alone. On top of that, we have continued to roll out hundreds of rapid deployment cells at prison sites. Altogether, we have been bringing on capacity at a rate of more than 100 places a week—the fastest rate in living memory, and possibly in 100 years.

We are going further. Today I can announce up to £400 million for more prison places, enough for more than 800 new cells. When we legislate to keep rapists behind bars for the whole of their custodial term, I will ensure that commencement is dependent on there being sufficient prison capacity. There is already an obligation to lay before both Houses of Parliament a report as to how I have discharged my general duty in relation to the courts. To ensure public confidence, a new annual statement of prison capacity will be laid before both Houses. It will include a clear statement of current prison capacity, future demand, the range of system costs that will be incurred under different scenarios and our forward pipeline of prison build. That will bring greater transparency to the plans and will set out the progress that is being made. I have also already commissioned urgent work, to conclude before the end of the year, to identify new sites for us to purchase. That is backed by a down payment of up to £30 million in funding to acquire land in 2024 and launch the planning process.

We must do whatever it takes to ensure that there are always enough prison places to lock up the most dangerous offenders to keep the British people safe, to ensure that criminals can be brought to justice, and to maintain safety and decency in the prison estate. We have decided to use the power in section 248 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 to allow the Prison Service to move some less serious offenders out of prison on to licence up to 18 days before their automatic release date.

Let me be clear: this will not apply to anyone serving a life sentence, anyone serving an extended determinate sentence, anyone serving a sentence for an offence of particular concern, anyone convicted of a serious violence offence, anyone convicted of terrorism or anyone convicted of a sex offence, and this power will be used only for a limited period and only in targeted areas. Every offender will be placed under strict licence conditions that provide a step down from custody to living in the community. They may include the following: first, being made to wear an electronic tag when that is needed for the offender to be managed safely; secondly, a condition not to contact a named individual, directly or indirectly; thirdly, having to live at an address approved by the offender's probation officer; fourthly, attending appointments; and fifthly, a condition not to enter certain areas such as particular postcodes. I should also make it clear that breach of those conditions could lead to offenders' being recalled to custody for the entire second half of their sentences.

This will be overseen by the probation service—a probation service into which we have injected £155 million a year to recruit staff to bring down case loads and deliver better supervision of offenders in the community. In addition, HM Prison & Probation Service leadership will retain discretion to decide on further exemptions from release on advice of governors when concerns remain. Let me make it clear that this is a temporary operational measure to relieve immediate pressure contributed to by remand.

However, if we are to protect the public and reduce crime, we need to go further to use our prisons better. At the heart of the long-term plan for prison reform that I am announcing today is a simple mission: cut crime. To deliver that, we need to do three things. First, we need to ensure that the most dangerous offenders are locked up for longer, away from the public and unable to commit crime. Secondly, we need to ensure that prisons are geared to help offenders turn away from crime, to change their ways and to become contributing members of society. Thirdly, we need to ensure that more lower-level offenders get the tough community sentences that are shown by the evidence to cut reoffending and hence to cut crime.

Let me put that last point in another way: prisons should not ruin the redeemable. It is clear that all too often the circumstances that lead to an initial offence are exacerbated by a short stint in prison, with offenders losing their homes, breaking contact with key support networks and, crucially, meeting others inside prison who steer them in the wrong direction. When they are released just a short time later, they all too often reoffend, fuelled by addiction or mental health issues that cannot possibly be addressed effectively in such a short space of time. The fact is that more than 50% of people who leave prison after serving less than 12 months go on to commit further crimes. The figure is 58% for those who serve sentences of six months or less. However, the figure for those who are on suspended sentence orders with conditions is 22%.

Meanwhile, the cost of this is £47,000 per year per prisoner. The taxpayer should not be forking out for a system that risks further criminalising offenders and trapping them in a merry-go-round of short sentences, so the Government are determined to grasp the nettle and deliver a better approach. We will legislate for a presumption that custodial sentences of less than 12 months in prison will be suspended and offenders will be punished in the community instead, repaying their debt within communities, cleaning up our neighbourhoods and scrubbing graffiti off walls. We can do this more intelligently with modern solutions for a digital age.

I can announce today that we are doubling the number of GPS tags available to the courts, to ensure that offenders can be monitored, to track them to ensure that they are going to work, and also to ensure that their freedom is curtailed in the evenings and weekends, with robust curfews of up to 20 hours a day. We will make further use of new technologies such as alcohol monitoring tags. This will enable us to strengthen and expand successful step-down programmes such as home detention curfew, which we will keep under active review. If offenders breach the terms of their curfew or other requirement of their suspended custodial sentence, or commit another offence, they can be hauled back before the court and forced to serve that sentence in custody.

What we are not doing is getting rid of short sentences altogether. I know from my time as a prosecutor that that is sometimes the right and just option. Prolific offenders who are unable or unwilling to comply with community orders or other orders of the court must know that their actions have consequences, and they will continue to feel the full force of the justice system. Building on our antisocial behaviour action plan, the Home Secretary and I are looking at what more we can do to punish those so-called lower-level offenders who are a blight on our communities. For some offenders, the proper sanction is, I am afraid, the clang of the prison gate.

We will also remove foreign offenders who should not be in the United Kingdom taking up space in our prisons at vast expense to the taxpayer. There are over 10,000 foreign nationals in our prisons. It cannot be right that some of them are sat in prison when they could otherwise be removed from our country. That is why we will extend the early removal scheme so that we have the power to remove foreign criminals up to 18 months before they are due to be released—up from 12 months now—getting them out of the country early and no longer costing taxpayers a fortune.

To support that, more caseworkers will be deployed to speed up removals, and the Home Office will also look at measures to do more to remove foreign nationals accused of less serious crimes more quickly. We will continue to strike new prisoner transfer deals like the one agreed with Albania, ensuring that criminals from overseas serve their time at home rather than in Britain. We will bring forward legislation to enable prisoners to be held in prisons overseas—an approach taken by Belgium, Norway and Denmark in recent years.

More must be done to stop people spending long periods of time waiting in prison for their trial. As I have set out, there are now more than 15,000 defendants on remand in our prisons. Remand decisions are properly for independent judges, but we will consider whether to extend the discount to encourage people to plead guilty at the first opportunity, because when more offenders plead guilty, that saves time in the court and cuts the number of people in our prisons on remand, but most importantly it saves victims the ordeal of giving evidence in court. We will also be reviewing the use of recall for offenders on release who infringe the terms of their licence. It is right that ex-prisoners who commit new crimes or serious breaches while on licence should be returned to prison. We want to ensure that the system is working effectively to mitigate any risk posed by offenders while not having people in prison on recall longer than necessary.

We will take decisive action to address sentences of imprisonment for public protection. We put a stop to these discredited sentences a decade ago, but it is true that there remain about 3,000 IPP prisoners in custody despite their original tariff expiring years ago. IPPs are a stain on our justice system, so I am looking at options to curtail the licence period to restore greater proportionality to IPP sentences in line with recommendation 8 of the Justice Committee's report, and I will come back to the House on that in due course. This will not compromise public safety. Those found by the Parole Board to pose a risk to the public will not be released.

As I have set out, we are taking decisive action to make our prisons work better in the long term. We are building more prison places than at any time since

Disraeli was speaking from this Dispatch Box. We are rolling out hundreds of rapid deployment cells across the country to increase immediate capacity. We are going further and faster than ever before to remove foreign criminals from our prisons.

To govern is to choose. We choose to lock up the most dangerous criminals for longer to protect victims and their families. We choose to reform the justice system so that criminals who can otherwise be forced into taking the right path are not trapped in a cycle of criminality. That is the right long-term plan for our justice system, and I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.48 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Secretary of State was on his feet for about 15 minutes, his statement is about 2,500 words long, he did an op-ed at the weekend in *The Telegraph*, and there have been endless briefings to the media over the last few days. Yet in all that verbiage there has been not one word of apology to the British public for failing in the first duty of Government, which is to keep our citizens safe. As everybody knows, the first stage of rehabilitation is to acknowledge mistakes and make a sincere apology to those affected and let down by those actions, or, in the Secretary of State's case, inactions. His failure to do so today is utterly inexcusable. It is a damning indictment of this Government's collective failure.

Our prisons are completely full. We have been sounding the alarm for many years now, as overcrowding has skyrocketed. As of today, the public will undoubtedly be less safe. Although the Secretary of State has said that sentencing delays will apply only to those deemed "low risk", he knows that in 2021 more than 20,000 offences were committed by those on bail, including more than 200 sexual offences. So the public need to know: what steps will he be taking to mitigate the risk of increased offending that will arise as a result of the delayed sentencing? How many cases in total are we talking about? How many of those involve sexual and violent crimes? What is the plan to reach out to victims and assure them that the convicted offender in their case will be taken off the streets as quickly as possible?

The reason we are in this position is that the Government have consistently broken their promises to deal with the rising prison population. As far back as 2016, the Government pledged to build 10,000 new prison places by 2020—the Public Accounts Committee found that they had managed just 206. So the Government went ahead and pledged 18,000 prison places, but still with no plan. A year later, they said that they would make it 20,000 by the mid-2020s. According to the latest figures, there are no more than 8,200 places set to be built by the end of 2025, which represents a shortfall of 60%. The Government have known about this problem not only for the whole time this Secretary of State has been in Parliament, but ever since the Prime Minister was the Chancellor, and they have done nothing. It beggars belief that the funding has been allocated but the Government

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

still cannot get these prison places built—so much so that they are looking to rent space in prisons abroad, with no indication of how much that will cost. Given this woeful record, why should anyone believe that the Government will build those 20,000 prison places that we need? What update can the Secretary of State provide on the number of new prison places that are guaranteed to be built before the end of the year?

Will the Government consult on the changes to short sentences? Will any such consultation include victims? The Secretary of State knows that the use of community sentences has halved since 2011. How will the Government persuade the courts that these sentences are the solution? How can he reassure the public that this is not just a green light to offenders? He will know that this plan will take time to go through Parliament. What will his Government do in the immediate term to address the problem? So far, it sounds as though his plan is to move some prisoners abroad and to let others out early. Is that all he has got?

On the deportation of foreign national offenders, last year the Government managed to deport only 2,958 foreign national offenders, which is less than a third of the total number in our prisons and about half the annual number before the covid pandemic. Why should the public believe the Government when they claim that they can get a grip on the number of foreign national offenders in our prisons, given that they have failed to do so until now? What difference will bringing forward the deportation of foreign national offenders by six months make to the prison population—and by when? Let us be clear: the public need to know that today an offender—including, potentially, a sex offender—can go to court and be found guilty by a jury but instead of being locked up behind bars, where they belong, the inaction of this chaotic Conservative Government means that they can walk free. Can the Secretary of State tell the House today that not one individual convicted of a serious sexual offence is out on the streets as a result of a lack of prison places?

As the Secretary of State said, to govern is—
[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Shabana Mahmood: As the Secretary of State acknowledged, to govern is to choose. His Government have chosen to fail victims and to fail the public, and to offer too little, too late to turn our failing criminal justice system around.

Alex Chalk: What a very disappointing response. I was surprised to hear that newfound interest in locking up rapists. Lest we forget, this Government are prosecuting more alleged rapists, convicting a higher proportion and imposing longer sentences than Labour, and ensuring that a higher proportion of those sentences is being spent behind bars.

It is important to aim off a little bit when looking at what is said in the Chamber by Labour Members. The hon. Lady refers to foreign national offenders, but I remember very well that back in 2020 we wanted to

ensure that a plane full of rapists and murderers could leave the country, yet a letter came to the Prime Minister, saying:

“Dear Prime Minister, We, the undersigned,”—

have—

“grave concern over Home Office plans to deport 50 people”.

It went on to say:

“The flight and all future charter flights must be suspended”.

Shall we see who was on that flight, Madam Deputy Speaker? There was a man who had thrust a bottle into his victim’s face, leaving him scarred for life, in what was described as a “horrifying attack”—that is grievous bodily harm. Another person, who had been imprisoned for attacking a 17-year-old girl twice and abducting her, and who had sex with a 15-year-old, then lied about it and “vandalised” her life, according to her mother, was called “devious, callous and manipulative” by the judge. The hon. Lady signed a letter asking that he should not be deported. We will take no lessons from the Labour party in being tough on criminals. [*Interruption.*] She seems still to justify signing that letter. Does she not regret that decision? I think she might want to think about it again.

The Conservative party will get foreign national offenders out of this country. We have brought on the largest prison building programme since the Victorian era: 100 cells per week. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. When the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (*Shabana Mahmood*) was being interrupted, I stopped the interruption. I hope she will have the courtesy not to speak now from the Front Bench.

Alex Chalk: We will always take the steps that need to be taken to keep the British people safe.

In respect of community orders, the hon. Lady is right that it is important that they are robust and enforceable. That is why I was at pains to point out that we are doubling the number of tags—I suspect we will go much further and triple the number of tags. By the way, they are not the old radio frequency tags that were used when I was prosecuting. They are GPS tags that mean that judges and those appointed to the bench can ensure the monitoring of where that individual has gone, to make sure that they go to work and that their liberty is deprived at the weekend. That is the kind of robust penalty we support.

Our ability to ensure that people are under curfew for over 100 hours a week was in our legislation, which was opposed by—guess who?—the Labour party.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I commend the Lord Chancellor on his thoughtful, considered and serious statement that deserves a thoughtful and considered response, which it has not entirely had. Does he agree that it is right and proper that we are frank with the British public that prison is an extremely expensive way of dealing with people, and that it should be reserved for those who are a threat to us, not simply those with whom we are perhaps justifiably angry or irritated?

Does the Lord Chancellor agree that it is right to take on board some of the recommendations of the Justice Committee's report in relation to IPP prisoners—those sentenced to imprisonment for public protection? I welcome what has been said about remand, which we know is also important. As well as reducing the qualifying licence period, can he help us a little more on what else he will do to take on board the recommendations about IPP prisoners in the report? What is the timeframe for moving swiftly towards reducing the remand population?

Alex Chalk: I thank my hon. Friend for his typically thoughtful and considered response. He is absolutely right that we have to make choices about what we do in respect of the custodial estate. We choose to ensure that the most dangerous people are locked away for longer, which is right, so that the punishment fits the crime and so that we protect the British people. This is not simply a political statement but a statement of evidence, and the evidence, not just in England and Wales but in the Netherlands and elsewhere, shows that short sentences are disproportionately associated with recidivism. Of course we should learn the lessons from that.

My hon. Friend rightly raises the issue of IPPs, which are a stain on the justice system. That point is made even by the person who came up with the idea. We will take steps, and I thank the Justice Committee for taking on this difficult issue and for coming up with some very sensible proposals. I will be announcing more, but the central point about licence length is critical. It seems to me that this 10-year licence length means that it is very hard for people on IPP to think they will ever be free.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have a constituent who has been in prison for 18 years under IPP. He is due to be up for parole towards the end of the year. The Secretary of State says he will be bringing forward a review. How long will that take, and how will it impact on people awaiting the Parole Board?

Alex Chalk: First, I make it very clear to the hon. Lady and her constituent that we will not take steps that put the British people at risk. The Parole Board will have to make an assessment, in the normal way, on whether a person is safe to be released. If they are considered safe for release, the question is then about the duration of the licence period that remains. IPP effectively continues to hang over them. I am looking at that particular area at the moment, but I want to be clear that it is a sensitive area. We are trying to unwind a very ill-starred policy, but we have to do so in a way that ultimately keeps the British people safe.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend for his statement. In so many ways, it echoes and builds on the work we did together in the Department.

I emphasise the importance of building a technologically sound, innovative and direct alternative to short-term prison sentences, which I think this statement presages. We need to get on with that work, because short-term sentences have to be a last resort, as they clearly do not help to cut crime. What more can my right hon. and learned Friend do to redouble efforts to ensure that the prison building programme that started when I was in

office is delivered on time, and that we overcome some of the constant barriers of planning permission and other administrative obstacles?

Alex Chalk: I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend. I talked about tough decisions being made in the white heat of the pandemic, and he is the one who said that we will not get rid of the jury system on our watch. My goodness, he was right to say that. It was a tough call, but it was manifestly the right one.

Lest we forget, Five Wells and Fosse Way have opened and HMP Millsike is currently under construction, going alongside Garth, Gartree, Grendon/Spring Hill and other prisons. My right hon. and learned Friend is right that there has been an issue with planning. I have said that, with an additional £30 million, we will identify further sites in 2024 and get the planning permission well in advance, because we cannot have a situation in which these critical building programmes are held up by the planning process. We are changing to a new approach, and we are putting on the afterburners to make sure those prisons get built.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I declare an interest as an honorary life member of the Prison Officers Association.

In his statement, the Secretary of State celebrated the fact that the prison population has risen to 80,000. When I was elected in 1997, it was a scandal that we were at the 40,000 level. Part of the problem is the lack of crime prevention, but there is also a failure of rehabilitation. The statement mentioned probation, but there was no mention of prison staff. There is a desperate need for adequate prison staffing if we are to secure the rehabilitation of prisoners. What will be the staff-prisoner ratio in our prisons following these reforms?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of prison staff, as they are ultimately the most important factor, beyond the nature of the prison estate, in making the difference to whether prisoners are kept safe and rehabilitated. We are increasing the number of prison staff, and I think an additional 700 staff were recruited in the last period for which figures are available. The other important point is retention, and we are starting to see a positive trend in retention.

I also make the point that those prison officers who stuck by their duty during the pandemic and went into work when it was tough to do that—when their parents and friends would have been telling them not to do so—are the ones who ensured there was not a complete catastrophe in our prisons in terms of loss of life, and they should take enormous credit for that.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I completely agree with the Lord Chancellor's last point about prison staff during the covid pandemic, and I am very grateful to him for pointing out that the approach to FNOs must continue. He will know that between 2019 and 2022, some 12,000 FNOs were deported, despite, as he so eloquently pointed out, opposition from Labour Members. They were writing letters personally to the Prime Minister and myself. What assurances will the Lord Chancellor give the public going forward—this is about the direction of travel on this issue—that they are protected, and that offenders who are out and released back into the community,

[Priti Patel]

with GPS tags, do not pose a threat to the public? He will recall that in 2008, when the Labour party was in government, similar policies were pursued and there were major issues, with hundreds reoffending and prisoners on the run despite being recalled to prison.

Alex Chalk: I thank my right hon. Friend; no one did more in government to ensure that serious foreign national offenders were on planes getting out of the country. She did an exceptional job and I pay tribute to her for that.

On public protection, the whole point of the suspended sentence order is that the magistrate will say to the individual, “The crime that you’ve committed crosses the custody threshold. I am going to impose a suspended sentence order, potentially with a curfew and unpaid work”—or whatever the other conditions are. That order is then a sword of Damocles hanging over the person. If they do not comply, they are brought back before the court and they serve that sentence in custody. The choice for that offender is very clear: do what they should and abide by the order of the court, or they will hear the clang of the prison gates.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): As Home Secretary, Lord David Blunkett introduced indeterminate imprisonment for public protection sentences. Lord Blunkett has since said that he regrets injustices caused by the awarding of those IPP sentences. In February this year, 372 of the 2,456 women serving sentences in prison were serving indeterminate sentences. How many women are still serving IPP sentences who have already served their full tariff?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I remember when IPPs came in; they were created by the Criminal Justice Act 2003. I was a barrister at the time and I remember that under the legislation we were required effectively to apply for them and that judges were required to hand them down. There has been an understanding, in the intervening 20 years, that they have not operated as they should. They have created a sense of total despair, hopelessness and, most importantly of all, injustice.

How we deal with this issue is difficult in circumstances where the Parole Board has judged that people remain a danger to society. That is the issue. There is no easy solution where we say simply, “Let people out”, because we know in doing so that they could commit crimes and harm our fellow citizens. So we cannot do that, but what we will do is take every step, including providing additional psychological support so that individuals can prepare for parole hearings, and we will look at the issue of licences. We will not compromise on public safety, but we will do everything we can to scrub out the stain of those misguided sentences.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The success of our prisons is not about having the highest possible number of prisoners in them; it is surely about prison rehabilitating offenders so that there are fewer victims of crime in the future. I strongly welcome the measures that the Lord Chancellor has announced today, especially on not putting people in prison who do not need to be in prison. Does he agree that we can cut crime substantially

with much more effective use of technology, including the GPS tags that he mentioned, creating almost a virtual prison? That will be justice for the digital age under this party rather than for the Victorian era, which the Labour party seems to prefer.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend speaks clearly and persuasively, with the benefit of great experience as a magistrate. In my experience, magistrates courts overwhelmingly want to ensure, of course, that the punishment fits the crime, but they also want to ensure that the individual is taken away from the path of crime and ultimately rehabilitated. So of course my hon. Friend is right. Other countries have used technology very effectively. Where there are lessons to learn, we should learn them, but we will not compromise on ensuring that there is punishment. We can just deliver punishment with technology even more effectively.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee produced a report a while ago on the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual assault, and we found that those cases were disproportionately affected by the backlog in the courts. Of course, few cases—less than 2%—are actually getting to the courts, and even those are taking too long, so with these reports that judges are now going to delay sentencing, what does the Lord Chancellor have to say to the victims of rape and serious sexual assault who wait far too long for justice? It seems like it is going to be an even longer wait.

Alex Chalk: The right hon. Lady is right when she says it is important to try to reduce the period of time that people are waiting. I absolutely get that point, but in the interests of balance, it is equally important to note the following. More people are being prosecuted for rape than in 2010, and a higher proportion are being convicted; the sentences are a third longer, and defendants are spending a higher proportion of those sentences in custody; we have introduced reforms that mean that complainants can pre-record their evidence; we have rolled out over 800 independent sexual violence advisers to support people; we have created the offences of coercive and controlling behaviour and have stood up a 24/7 rape support helpline. All that we do and more.

I can tell hon. Members that compared with when I was prosecuting this stuff, the difference in the experience and the rights of victims of sexual violence is night and day. As I say, complainants now have the right to make pre-recorded evidence; they can have court familiarisation visits; and they have the right to an ISVA, to seek a redetermination in the event that the CPS decides to reduce a charge, and to make a victim personal statement. We do all this because we care passionately about wanting to support victims of sexual offences, and we will continue to do so.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly welcome the proposal to deport more foreign criminals, and I also support the idea of finding something better than prison for non-violent offenders. Will that include, wherever possible, their need to have a job legally and to pay compensation to those against whom they have committed fraud, theft and other financial crimes?

Alex Chalk: My right hon. Friend makes two excellent points. It is worth reflecting on the fact that since 2019, we have deported around 15,000 foreign national offenders. A huge amount of work has taken place, and that will continue, albeit at an even greater pace.

The second point he makes is fundamental. Judges already have the power to impose a compensation order in the event that someone is convicted of a crime, but their ability to do so is determined by the funds that are available to that individual. How much better it is if the individual can go out and do an honest day's work to generate more income, so that they can, in a small way, put right the crime they have committed and the damage they have done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement and his comments. I am mindful that this is about England and Wales, but I have been contacted over the past few years by a number of people who have been victims of perpetrators of some of the most bestial crimes in the country. The Government and the Minister have replied to some of the questions I have asked and some of the comments I have made to his Department, but can he tell me today whether those victims will be elevated to a more prominent position, and whether looking after them will be given greater priority? Their feelings—how those crimes have hurt them—must be a priority for Government.

Alex Chalk: As is so often the case, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have to ensure that victims are not spectators in the criminal justice process, but participants in it. That is why we have rolled out the victims code, which contains 12 core entitlements to ensure that victims can be kept updated about the progress of the case and informed about special measures and how they give their evidence, as well as the right to court familiarisation visits, the right to make a victim impact statement and a right of review, as I have indicated. We have also ensured that victims' funding has been quadrupled since 2010, we have doubled support for rape support centres, and so on. That is over and above creating the new offences to ensure that those victims can get justice. All this we do and more, and we do so because we want to put victims first.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Rape, and child rape in particular, is an abhorrent crime. Ensuring that those perpetrators serve their full sentence in prison will clearly act as a deterrent and reassure the public, but what steps is my right hon. and learned Friend taking to ensure we have the prison places to lock up dangerous rapists and child rapists in particular, so that victims know that those perpetrators are always behind bars?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are some of the most appalling crimes, which shatter not just the lives of the victims, but potentially those of so many others, including the victims' friends and families, and he is absolutely right that we need to make sure there is always sufficient custodial capacity for that to take place. That is why I am announcing today that we will roll out a programme to buy the very locations we need next year, with additional money, to ensure that, well in advance of the prison builds needing to come on

line, we have the planning permission in place so that there is the pipeline of places to ensure that justice can be done.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): To be fair to the Lord Chancellor, from the length of his answers there is no doubt he is against shorter sentences. [*Laughter.*]

My question is about overcrowded and understaffed prisons that make rehabilitation almost impossible. Many prisoners now leave jail more criminalised, more traumatised and, indeed, more dangerous than when they first arrived. While the measures outlined today may make a positive impact, the Government must go further. Will the Secretary of State commit to tackling the crisis in prison officer retention by starting with the Prison Officers Association's key demand to reduce the pension age, which it insists has a massive effect on morale and, therefore, on the retention of prison officers?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman. In fairness, that was quite a good joke; it was not bad—

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Too long! [*Laughter.*]

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman made some fair points, and I will get back to him.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Lord Chancellor is clearly well on top of this subject, so may I bowl him a couple of googlies? What safeguards will there be to prevent deported foreign criminals from coming back here if they are not imprisoned overseas? Will he be very careful before going down the road of plea bargaining, as in the States, whereby there is a perverse incentive for the innocent to plead guilty because of the huge disparity in the sentences they may receive?

Alex Chalk: To take the second point first, I am so pleased to hear my right hon. Friend say that. There are certain things that really are important in our jurisdiction: first, we do not do plea bargaining; secondly, we do not have political appointment of judges; and, thirdly, we have a jury system. These are incredibly important things. We do not talk about them enough in this Chamber, but they are immensely important to our basic freedom. I was delighted to hear that and, yes, he can be sure that we are not going down the road of plea bargaining.

On the point my right hon. Friend makes about ensuring people cannot come back, that is precisely the point. It is not just and it is not sensible to have people costing the taxpayer a huge amount of money in British prisons if, when they are out, they are never coming back anyway. That is central to our plan to ensure that, as we expand the ERS window, we put in place every necessary measure—in compliance or in consultation with our international counterparts—to ensure that once people are out, they are never coming back.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The second largest prison in Europe is HMP Berwyn in north Wales. As of today, I understand that it houses 1,989 prisoners. Any solution to the well-documented problems of violence at HMP Berwyn since it opened six years ago is continuously undermined by the failure to retain staff because working conditions are so extreme.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

Will the Secretary of State recognise that warehousing offenders in gargantuan prisons creates chronic problems and is not fit for purpose?

Alex Chalk: I am very glad the right hon. Member has mentioned Berwyn. I went to Berwyn, and she is right that we always want to recruit more prison staff, but let us pause for a second just to note how fantastic some of the work is in that prison. I was there in the jobcentre—in effect, there is a jobcentre within the prison—and people were having Zoom interviews with their potential employers on the outside. That is one of the reasons why reoffending has dropped while we have been in government from 32% to 24%, and it is one of the reasons why crime is down overall. She mentions the 1,900 or so people, but let me say—lest we forget—that the Labour party promised, before it left office, that there would be three Titan prisons with 2,500 people in them. Did they happen? Did they heck.

Hon. Members: Ooh!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I think that was quite mild. It is all right. It could have been worse.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): There was a great deal to be welcomed in my right hon. and learned Friend's statement, but can I unpack the capacity question? When he is successful in deporting more foreign national offenders, that will free up capacity. When he is successful in the home detention curfews and better use of technology, that will free up prison capacity, leaving the spike as the covid backlog is caught up with creating a temporary problem in capacity. Therefore, would it not be better to meet it with the temporary provision of cells in the existing prison estate, rather than going the whole hog and devastating communities such as mine in Grendon Underwood and Edgcott by building mega-prisons?

Alex Chalk: May I first put it on the record that no one could be a more doughty defender of the interests of the people of Buckingham than my hon. Friend, who raises with me time and again the concerns of his constituents about Grendon Springhill? I will continue to have those important conversations with him, knowing fine well that his constituents' interests are being vigorously advanced.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The ministerial code says that all major announcements of Government policy should be made to the House first, yet half of what has been announced today was precluded by an op-ed written by the Secretary of State and in briefings to national newspapers over the weekend. That is a breach of the ministerial code, and when I asked Sir Laurie Magnus, the independent adviser on ministerial interests, whether he would investigate such breaches, he said, "Yes, in theory." Would it not be a good idea, especially considering that the Secretary of State thinks that short and minor sanctions lead to recidivism, if there was a substantial sanction against Ministers who do that, and he reported himself to the independent adviser?

Alex Chalk: I am afraid that I do not accept that point.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it was to hear the Lord Chancellor's statement, which represents a big step forward for our criminal justice system? He and I have long shared the view that we do not lock up the violent for long enough and there are smarter ways of dealing with the non-violent. On that note, I applaud his expansion of the tagging programme. I have two questions. First, on GPS tags, does he intend to expand the acquisitive crime pilot? Currently, in 19 police force areas every burglar and robber released from prison is GPS tagged to reduce reoffending. Secondly, while we are not short of sobriety tags, which he will know I am extremely keen on, the problem is that judges are just not using them, so what steps will he take to expand judicial enthusiasm, given how much alcohol drives low-level crime?

Alex Chalk: My right hon. Friend did exceptionally important work in ensuring that the supply and roll-out of alcohol sobriety tags, and indeed other tags, proceeded at huge pace, and they make a significant difference. On his point about uptake, plainly sentences are a matter for the independent judiciary, but I do think that more can be done to ensure that judges and magistrates are aware of the sheer extent of the technology available, and the steps that can be taken to properly curtail people's freedom in appropriate cases by way of punishment, and to ensure that they have the tags to steer people away from addiction. Ultimately, that can be the best way to ensure that people are properly rehabilitated and become contributing members of society once again.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State reminds me of the unfortunate astronaut who by mistake is still circling the moon somewhere, out of touch, when he only expected to be up there for three months. Those of us who have been down on planet Earth for the last 13 years know about the resources devoted to the Ministry of Justice, which has faced the worst cuts of any Department. Is he aware that we have been promised a royal commission on justice three times in the Queen's Speech, which will now be the King's Speech? Today's statement was supposed to be an update on prison capacity. He has covered far more than that. Is he aware, for example, that joint enterprise is responsible for 1,000 young people who should not be in prison being in prison? Why can he not wake up and do something about them?

Alex Chalk: I know that the hon. Gentleman cares passionately about joint enterprise, but I must tell him this: joint enterprise is the legal doctrine that means that the getaway driver is culpable, or that the person who supplies the firearm in a murder is held properly accountable and found guilty. Those are important tools that the Court of Appeal considered carefully in the case of Jogee. Getting rid of joint enterprise would mean that a lot of people who have helped or encouraged the commission of offences get away—in some cases, with murder.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I declare an interest as the founder and chairman of a charity that works in prisons. I very much support today's announcement of an expansion of prison capacity and tagging, both of which are necessary and right. I understand that the Lord Chancellor was inspired by Texas prisons. I visited

some Texan jails and saw that they are doing two things right. The first is sentencing, with tough justice ensuring that people get the sentences that they deserve. The second thing that they are doing in Texas to reduce the jail population is getting rehabilitation right and, crucially, relying on civil society—outside organisations get access to prisoners before they are released and then support them afterwards. I think that the Government are getting it right on sentencing, but does the Lord Chancellor agree that we need to do more on rehabilitation, particularly by involving civil society?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is completely correct. We in this Chamber all know that the context for offending—not an excuse, but the context—can be deep-seated problems of addiction, homelessness, relationship breakdown and so on. One thing I am pleased about is that the Department of Health and Social Care is investing over half a billion pounds, with more than 1,600 additional staff, to ensure that drug treatment is available to those who need it. For our part, we in the Ministry of Justice have launched a pilot of three intensive supervision courts in the Teesside and Liverpool Crown courts to ensure that those whose offending behaviour is driven by substance misuse can get the treatment they need to get them off drugs and off the driver of their offences.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As my constituents have pointed out to me, there is a shoplifting epidemic under the Conservative Government. The police often do not deal with burglaries and other such crimes because of a lack of resources. Conviction rates for rape and sexual violence are at record lows. Now that our prisons are full, the Government propose to release prisoners early or try to ship them abroad. That is all because of a lack of foresight and action. Why are the Government so weak on law and order, and when were they first warned about a crisis and a lack of places in prisons?

Alex Chalk: There are more people in prison than ever before, which rather suggests the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman says. He also says that the conviction rate for rape is lower, but that is completely wrong—it is higher. Does he know who was Director of Public Prosecutions before? The Leader of the Opposition.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Despite resulting in lower reconviction rates, the use of community orders has halved in the last decade, so will today's announcement start to reverse that trend? In trying to do so, will my right hon. and learned Friend consider increasing the use of pre-sentence reports and speeding up the roll-out of community sentence orders where we are trying to get people treated?

Alex Chalk: That is an excellent question. In appropriate cases, pre-sentence reports are vital because the probation service can provide the sentencing judge or magistrate with all the surrounding information about the offender so that they can impose a sentence that meets the seriousness of the case while also being rehabilitative and appropriate. That requires trained probation officers who are experts in their area. That is why we have invested £155 million in addition, each and every year, to ensure that the probation service has the resource it

needs. I know from my time as a practitioner that the reports the probation service provides are essential to ensure that justice can be done.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): *The Times* reports that

“Lord Justice Edis, the senior presiding judge for England and Wales, has ordered that sentencing of convicted criminals who are currently on bail should be delayed”

from today. According to that report, the order did not specifically exclude rape convictions, which judges have expressed alarm about, given the already abysmal conviction rates of well below 2%. What message does the Secretary of State think such an order sends to victims of sexual violence who are deciding whether they have enough faith in our broken justice system to come forward? When do the Government expect sentencing to restart?

Alex Chalk: It is incredibly important that no one from this Chamber deliberately or inadvertently gives the impression that rapists are not going to be sentenced. They are going to be sentenced; the sentences imposed will be, on average, a third longer than those imposed in 2010; and they will serve a higher proportion of those sentences in custody. We are prosecuting more people for rape than in 2010 and, as I say, they are being punished more severely, so let the message go out that people who offend against women—and it is overwhelmingly against women—and behave in such a barbaric way can expect not just to hear the clang of the prison gate, but to be reflecting on their actions for a very long time.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give the House a guarantee that judges or magistrates will retain the discretion to impose short-term custodial sentences in the interests of public justice and public protection? In the circumstances, does he foresee a change to the sentencing guidelines for the raft of offences covered by the 12-month sentencing threshold? Does he foresee that all such offences will now be sentenced according to the one test he has outlined?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has been a practitioner in the courts, so he understands, as all practitioners do, that there are offenders who, I am afraid, show themselves unwilling to abide by the order of the court, or incapable of doing so, and even if the court is prepared to say, “There should be a suspended sentence in your case,” they will breach it. In those circumstances, magistrates and judges must have the power, in the final analysis, to send that person to immediate custody. We will always ensure that they have that power. That is important for the rule of law and to send the message that there will be consequences if a person flouts an order of the court.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I want to ask about licence conditions, and particularly those that prohibit the offender from contacting certain people or entering certain postcodes. It is obvious that such conditions are about protecting victims and their families. My concern is that the Lord Chancellor's statement did not make it absolutely clear that breaching such conditions will lead to a return to custody. It is important for victims to hear that those kinds of transgressions will result in an immediate return to custody.

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful and appropriate query on behalf of his constituents. In any case, before an individual falls to be released under the sentence that has been applied—in other words, when they get to the end of the custodial element of their sentence—probation officers will sort out, in advance, the package of licence conditions, which could include, as the hon. Gentleman indicated, instructions not to contact someone directly or indirectly, a residence condition, or a condition on contact with probation officers and so on. The point is that if they breach those conditions, they are liable to be recalled and—here is the important point—not just for the period of that release but for the entire balance of their sentence. In other words, if somebody was sentenced to 18 months and fell to be released at the nine-month mark, but a week later they breached the probation conditions, they would fall to serve the entire balance of the sentence of nine months. That is important. Metaphorically speaking, that sword of Damocles is hanging over that offender to ensure that they stay in line and do not commit further offences.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his statement. I believe in zero tolerance and long sentences for the most serious crimes, but I also believe in prevention rather than cure. With 96% of the prison population being men and many young boys destined to spend their lives in and out of prison, will the Lord Chancellor use his position in Cabinet to work with his colleagues on reducing the number of boys who are on that path? Will he also back my campaign for a Minister for men? We are letting boys and young men down and it simply is not fair on men or women, or on the taxpayer as a whole.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want to ensure that all prisoners, and certainly young men, are steered away from crime. We now have a much better understanding, as a nation, of some of the drivers of some offending. That is why, under our watch, when prisoners come into jail there will be a neurodiversity assessment to explore their background. We could potentially discover a brain injury—the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) has gone, but I know that he takes an interest in that subject. The whole approach we are now taking is to ensure that those who can be redeemed are redeemed, but that those who are frankly beyond redemption and are a threat to society are locked up, and locked up for longer. That is the right approach.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): In a parallel Government universe, the Secretary of State's proposals for directing short-term prisoners into community sentences might be an idea whose time had come, but it requires experienced probation staff in post, properly organised and challenging community work, and genuine rehabilitation initiatives. His Government's evisceration of the justice system means that none of that is available, and he is doing it now only because of their mismanagement of the about-to-burst prison estate. Has he not been set up to fail?

Alex Chalk: No, that is wrong. The first part—that this is an idea whose time has come—is correct. I spoke about this when I was a Back Bencher in a speech at the Conservative party conference, of all places. I have come

to this as a realisation for some time. What is encouraging is that the Government are putting enormous additional resource into the probation service, because I reckon that it is ultimately critical to the success of community orders; it does a phenomenal job. We are putting more resources in and recruiting more, and we will do everything we can to strengthen the system.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend knows that magistrates think carefully before they commit anybody to custody, because they know that once somebody is sent to prison for a short sentence, their life can spiral downwards very quickly: they can lose their home, their job and, often, their family. Does he agree that more robust community sentences are needed, particularly in relation to drug rehabilitation, which is the root cause of so much offending? Will he set out what steps he is taking to ensure that those on community sentences are suitably supervised?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. His observation that magistrates do all they can to avoid sending someone to custody and do so only when absolutely necessary was well made. The reason why this reform will be so important is that under a suspended sentence order, the magistrates are saying in effect to that individual, "You must engage in a sensible and productive way with drug rehabilitation. If you don't, you will go to prison." That provides the most powerful incentive for that individual to break the cycle of offending while not locking them up, which, as my hon. Friend indicated, would mean they could lose their universal credit, not get the mental health treatment they require and break the family relationships that can be so important to keeping people away from crime.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Four years ago, the Secretary of State's Department announced limits on short-term sentencing, which were then scrapped, and now they are back. That is four years wasted; years when Ministers sat on their hands, ignoring a crisis of their own making. Meanwhile, prison officers have had to deal with the consequences of health and safety concerns, overcrowding and violence, all undercut by low pay and poor terms and conditions. Will he apologise to prison officers—especially those in the City of Durham—and will he lower the retirement age?

Alex Chalk: Prison officers in the City of Durham and elsewhere do an exceptionally important job. That is why I was pleased to accept the recommendation of the independent pay review body to ensure that the pay uplift was fair and decent, and recognised the stunningly important work that they do. That is why we have rolled out £100 million in prison security to ensure that prison officers have body-worn video cameras and other security measures to keep them safe. We will always do everything we can—whether with recruitment, pay or helping to drive retention—to keep prison officers safe and our prisons well resourced with prison officers.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware that I have been notified that HMP Wealstun in my constituency will get new cells. Will he write to me on when those will be completed by and what conversations he has had with the governor on being able to staff them to capacity? Many of the prison officers are constituents of mine.

Alex Chalk: I thank my right hon. Friend for the care and attention he takes in respect of this matter. I will be delighted to write to him in the terms he suggests.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this year, I secured a Westminster Hall debate on the criminalisation of ethnic minority and migrant women who are themselves victims of violence. Sadly, 57% of women in prison or under community supervision are victims of domestic violence—a shocking statistic. Will the Lord Chancellor commit to amending the Victims and Prisoners Bill to ensure statutory defences for those victims of domestic violence accused of offending, to prevent more unjust convictions?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for the care and attention she gives to this topic. It is worth reflecting that around 5% of the overall prison population are women, so it is overwhelmingly men who are in custody. On the point she raises, she will be aware that there are already defences available—duress, self-defence and so on—that can be invoked by individuals facing charges. We think that strikes the right balance, but I am of course happy to have a conversation with her about any representation she might wish to make.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): A rapist should be prosecuted, they should be sentenced and they should serve that sentence, and I thank the Lord Chancellor for making that very clear today. In Chelmsford we have a small number of people who have been charged with antisocial behaviour, a low-level crime, and are waiting to go to the magistrates court, but they are causing havoc on our high streets as they reoffend. Can he assure us that those persistent offenders will still be judged? I know that, as an Essex MP, Madam Deputy Speaker, who was here earlier, will have wanted to know about the situation in our local prison at Chelmsford: there were 708 prisoners there last night, so only 15 empty spaces, but there are 27 cells that could be repaired. Could the Lord Chancellor possibly look into repairing those cells?

Alex Chalk: On that last point, we have put a great deal of funding into the maintenance of Chelmsford prison, but also HMP Liverpool and Birmingham in particular. On the first point my right hon. Friend raises, about recidivist offenders, it is precisely because we are concerned about people committing so-called low-level offending that we want to ensure that magistrates retain the power to send people to prison. If people show defiance and that they are incapable or unwilling to abide by the terms of the order of the court, there is a simple answer: they will go to prison and they will learn to reflect on their actions in custody.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I welcome some of what the Justice Secretary said in his statement, especially on the implementation of the recommendations of the Justice Committee on IPP sentences. They were always a terrible idea, in my view, and they have been used badly. However, it should not be a surprise to anybody that, after 13 years of deliberate and savage underfunding, the criminal justice system is on its knees and our prisons are full to bursting. If it is right that the senior presiding judge, Lord Justice Edis, is saying to sentencing judges, “Adjourn sentence,” is that his fault, or is it the Justice Secretary’s fault?

Alex Chalk: The first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, on IPPs, was absolutely right, and I am delighted to hear that he agrees. However, he is making a bad political point on the second matter, and it is not borne out by the arithmetic. In 2010 the total number of cases was around 48,000—he is shaking his head; we can argue about opinion, but this is fact. The position prior to the pandemic was around 40,000. The position we have at present is a function of that pandemic, and we are frank about that. That is why we are taking steps not just to increase the number of judges—we have recruited an additional 1,000—but putting up to £141 million into legal aid, something he should support. We will do everything we can to expand capacity in the system to ensure that we can deliver justice for all.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend’s statement and his focus on protecting the public. He mentioned that we are changing the law to make whole life sentences the default for the most heinous types of murder. He will be aware that one of the cases that led to that change in the law was the release by the parole board of the “monster of Worcester”, David McGreavy, a multiple child murderer. Unfortunately, last week, Worcester Crown court saw the sentencing of another monster of Worcester, Anthony Roberts, for a savage sexual assault on a 71-year-old woman. He had previously been sentenced to life for attempted murder of a 15-year-old girl. Will my right hon. and learned Friend meet me to hear the concerns of my constituents about this appalling case and about the case to be made for attempted murder, aggravated by sexual assault, to be treated alongside those heinous murders?

Alex Chalk: Of course I will—what an appalling case. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. On the changes to whole life orders that we have introduced following the dreadful Sarah Everard case, where there was sexual violence followed by murder, it is in such cases that we insist, as a matter of fairness and basic natural justice, that someone who behaves in that way should expect to end their days in custody. That is what the British people think, and that is what we think too.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): My constituents are increasingly victims of the scourge of dangerous and antisocial driving. They have contacted me demanding tougher penalties for those who cause death by dangerous driving. I welcome the Lord Chancellor’s statement that sentences have been increased for offences including death by dangerous driving to a maximum of life imprisonment. Will he confirm that prison capacity is not an obstacle to ensuring that dangerous drivers serve the prison time they deserve?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. Dangerous driving shatters lives and families, which is why we thought it was right, in recognition of the sheer harm that it causes, that the maximum sentence should go from 14 years to life. I make the point, gently, that we would have welcomed support from the Opposition, which unfortunately we did not get. Notwithstanding the point that he raised, it is important for independent judges to decide on the facts of the case. We welcome the fact that the Sentencing Council is in place to impose guidelines to ensure that judges have everything they need to ensure consistency but also condign punishment.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's statement today, and I congratulate him on clearly being on top of a difficult brief, and on confirming today that those serious and violent criminals are being locked up for longer. Could he expand on the reoffending rates of those on short sentences versus community sentences? Does he believe that the general public—and victims, potentially—might support them, because those convicted are seen as doing good when they complete their community service in public?

Alex Chalk: I thank my right hon. Friend for getting absolutely to the heart of it. Those who are sentenced to short custodial sentences—under 12 months—statistically go on to reoffend 55% of the time. Yet for those who have suspended sentence orders with conditions—such as unpaid work or to address mental health issues or whatever—22% commit further offences. There is a massive reduction. We want to ensure that once people have served their sentences and atoned for the crime they have committed, they can go on to become law-abiding, contributing members of society.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Last man standing, Mr Deputy Speaker. No early release for me. The Secretary of State's statement would be all the more impressive had it not come after 13 years of continuous Conservative Governments. They promised to create 20,000 extra places by the mid-2020s, but we have seen a net increase of 300. We have lost some places to dilapidation, and those that have replaced them amount to a net increase of only 300. Only a few weeks ago, we were told that the Government were implacably opposed to early release. I take it that he has dropped his idea of buying places in foreign prisons. The truth is that the management of the system has been completely chaotic for 13 years. When will we see the increase in prison places that the Government have been talking about?

Alex Chalk: The first thing to say is that our prison programme is the largest since the Victorian era—20,000 places. If I may say so, that stands in stark contrast to Labour. Jack Straw stood at this Dispatch Box and said, "We will build three titan prisons, each one of them 2,500". Did it happen? No, it did not. This is the party that has put the money behind it. In fact, it was this Prime Minister, as Chancellor, who did that. We are rolling them out. By the way, I will make no apology for taking offline old and inadequate accommodation and replacing it with modern, secure, decent prisons. That is something the hon. Gentleman should welcome.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that people who have been through the care system are overrepresented in our prisons, as are people with neurodiverse conditions, as he has mentioned, and many existing victims of crime and abuse. It is a mark of a civilised society that when those people first touch the criminal justice system, we take the opportunity to support them to make them functioning members of society, not simply lock them up and throw away the key. We have heard all that across the Chamber, but that message does not survive the retail nature of our politics. Will he assure me that the Government will continue to walk the walk and talk the talk on those messages?

Alex Chalk: More than many people in this place, my hon. Friend combines compassion with clarity of thought. She absolutely demonstrated that. It is incumbent on all of us to advocate for basic fairness and decency and what works, and I can think of no more powerful advocate than my hon. Friend.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's statement that foreign criminals—who, by the way, cost the taxpayer an absolute fortune—will be taken out of their comfy cell, put on a plane and sent back to where they came from. What assurances can he give me that those planes will actually take off the tarmac and not be blocked by lefty lawyers, human rights campaigners and silly letters signed by that lot over there?

Alex Chalk: As always, my hon. Friend makes a robust point. It is not right that the British people, having suffered the crime in the first place, should then have to pay for the privilege of locking people up for longer at a cost of £47,000 a year. We will send them back. The only people who will try to block it—who will try to block rapists, murderers and grievous bodily harmers—will be the Labour party. And we know that because they have tried to do so already.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Last but not least, I call James Sunderland.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): May I thank the Lord Chancellor for his pragmatic statement? I also thank the prisons Minister for his engagement over the weekend. I really welcome progress with IPP sentencing, on which I have a clear constituency interest, but what I really want to ask about is custodial sentences of less than 12 months being suspended. Is there a presumption that those needing to pay a debt to the community will do so in the very communities in which they offend?

Alex Chalk: What an excellent point to end on. It is critical that where a community is offended against, the offenders make that community whole—in other words, that they do the work, whether it is scrubbing graffiti, clearing wasteland or planting trees, in the community to try to atone for their guilt and to repair some of the damage they have done. I am delighted that, increasingly, police and crime commissioners are working together with local probation services to identify the stuff that needs doing in their community so that when defendants go straight, they also look after the community that they have wronged so badly in the first place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Lord Chancellor for his statement and for answering questions for just a minute short of one hour and 20 minutes.

Before we move on to the next statement on transport, may I make an announcement? Wendy Morton is pulling the debate on knife crime this evening. We have another two statements to go, which could easily take us to 8.30 or 9 o'clock. I think she has sensibly made the decision that we should have that debate at another time, and I hope that that can be facilitated as soon as possible.

Zero-emission Vehicles, Drivers and HS2

6.52 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper):

With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on how this Government are improving the journeys that matter most to the British public.

Our path to net zero remains ambitious, but we are making that path more proportionate. We are backing Britain's drivers and slamming the brakes on anti-car policies. Thanks to record Government investment, everyday journeys for more people in more places will improve more quickly.

I wish to update the House on three long-term decisions we have made to secure a brighter future, starting with zero-emission vehicles. No one should doubt or play down Britain's progress on decarbonisation. "World leading" is not an exaggeration. We have cut emissions faster than any G7 country, pledged a decarbonised transport sector by 2050—the first major economy to do so—and today we have laid another world-leading piece of legislation: the zero-emission vehicle mandate. Manufacturers will now meet minimum targets of clean car production, starting with 22% next year and reaching 80% by 2030. It stands to be one of the largest carbon-saving policies across Government, and manufacturers are on board. They will deliver a mandate that they helped shape, a product of partnership between this Government and industry that has been not months but years in the making. These targets are now embedded in their forecasts, and that certainty has inspired investment, protected existing jobs and paved the way for new jobs, too. Look at the past few months: BMW, Stellantis and Tata are expanding their electric vehicle operations right across the UK, from Oxford to Merseyside.

However, targets can be missed if Governments fail to take people with them, and we will not make that mistake. So, people will be able to buy new petrol and diesel cars until 2035, aligning the UK with the likes of Canada, Australia and Germany. It is fairer on British consumers, it allows us to grow the used EV market—lowering costs and increasing choice—and it ensures we raise confidence in our charging infrastructure. In fact, public charge points are already up by 43% since last year and set to grow even further thanks to investment from both the Government and private sector.

For many, that is the future, but today, in some parts of the country, drivers are being punished and cars vilified. The Mayor of London's expansion of the ultra low emission zone is forcing drivers to sell up or pay hefty daily fines. Overzealous enforcement practices—from yellow box junctions to blanket 20 mph zones—are turning drivers into cash cows for councils. Measures to overly restrict where and when people travel are already being planned in places such as Oxfordshire. My message to councils is simple: this anti-motorist campaign has run out of road. This Government recognise that cars are not a luxury; they are a lifeline. They are how most people in rural constituencies such as mine access work, education and essential services. That is why, after listening to the concerns of motorists, I have announced a new long-term plan for drivers, with 30 measures that will protect their rights to travel how they want, where they want and when they want.

We will use AI technology to keep traffic flowing. We will build a national parking platform to make it easier to find and pay for a space. We will inject some common sense into enforcement: where 20 mph zones are necessary exceptions with local support, not a blanket norm; where rules are enforced to keep our roads safe, not to line council coffers; and where low traffic neighbourhoods rely on public support, not on outdated covid guidance. How many times drivers get from A to B will be their choice, not decided by councils. None of that undermines our investments in public transport, nor in active travel. We are pro public transport, but we will not be anti-car. A sustainable transport network needs both, so people can choose to travel in the way that best suits them.

Let me now turn to our decision on HS2. With decades to wait before it arrived and benefits dwindling, it risked crowding out investment in other transport areas and no longer reflected post-pandemic changes in travel. Despite that, some argue that we should have carried on regardless—that a single rail line between a handful of cities and London is more important than millions of everyday journeys around the country. I disagree. The facts have changed, so we are changing our approach. With work well under way, we will finish HS2 between London Euston and the west midlands. Just last week, I spoke to the Euston Partnership Board on the huge regeneration opportunity that can be unlocked with private investment. However, by stopping HS2 in Birmingham, we can reinvest every penny of the £36 billion saved in transport across the country, in the roads, the local bus services and the regional train links—all those essential daily connections that people rely on.

No region will lose out, receiving either the same, or more, Government investment than under HS2. Almost £20 billion will go to the north, with Bradford, ignored under previous proposals, now getting a new station and faster rail connections to Manchester. Northern Powerhouse Rail is now extended to include Hull and Sheffield. A separate £12 billion fund will better connect Liverpool and Manchester, and I have already spoken to the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region to kickstart work on that.

West Yorkshire, thanks to £2.5 billion of funding, will finally get its mass transit system built in full. Over 20 road schemes will be delivered, and crucially, we will more than double the transport budgets of northern Mayors, benefiting our largest cities and smallest towns.

We are also investing in the midlands, with almost £10 billion ensuring the midlands rail hub is completed in full, increased mayoral budgets, including £1.5 billion for the new east midlands city region, and councils—from Stoke on Trent to Lincolnshire—seeing long-term transport funding settlements for the first time.

Finally, the remainder of this transformational investment will be spread across the UK, including: extending the hugely popular £2 bus fare cap, which people will see the benefit of just next month; delivering the Ely junction project and north Wales mainline electrification, benefiting both passengers and freight; and dealing with the menace of potholes, with £8.3 billion in new funding to resurface roads up and down the country. All told, Network North is a new vision for transport—one that creates more winners in more places, one that prioritises people's everyday journeys, and one that drives the growth and jobs that this country needs.

[Mr Mark Harper]

I will finish with this: we will never shirk the long-term decisions to secure this country's future and we will always be guided by the needs of the British people. When the majority want a pragmatic route to net zero, we will back them. When drivers feel unfairly targeted, we will back them. When the public want us to focus on the journeys that matter most to them, we will back them. This Government are delivering on the people's priorities. I commend this statement to the House.

7.1 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Let me start by saying how shocking it is that our first opportunity to scrutinise the cancellation of Europe's largest infrastructure project comes two weeks after the announcement was made. It shows sheer contempt for this House and the people affected by this decision.

It is good to see the Transport Secretary in his place for a change, but for once I am not holding him responsible. I know that he was not in the room when these decisions were made and he has my sympathy for having to try to make this absurd decision look sensible. There is only one man who should take responsibility for the sheer chaos, incompetence and desperation that we have seen over the past two weeks: the Prime Minister. Only he could announce the cancellation of HS2 to Manchester in Manchester. Only he would have the brass neck to make that decision without consulting our metro Mayors or any of the communities and businesses that depend on the project. Only he would announce a plan for drivers, as car insurance and petrol prices soar, that makes no mention of the cost of living, and when, just six months earlier, he personally had kicked every future road project into the next decade. Only he would insult the north with a back of the fag packet plan that he has announced in its place.

The consequences of this shambles are no joke; they are profound. There will be owners of small and medium-sized enterprises that have bet the house on HS2. People will lose their jobs this side of the general election as a result of this decision—homes, farms and businesses all sold, the countryside carved up, and Euston a hole in the ground, and for what? He has wasted £45 billion on a line between Old Oak Common and Birmingham that no one asked for and that has no business case. Only in Conservative-run Britain could a high-speed train hit the slow-coach lane the second it hits the north of England.

We need some answers. First, was there a meeting with Simon Case before the Tory conference in which a decision on HS2 was taken? If not, why was a video recorded of the Prime Minister in No.10? Is he suggesting that he followed in Boris Johnson's footsteps and recorded two versions just in case? And what of the economic impact? How many businesses does the Secretary of State expect to go under as a result of this decision? What is the estimate of the compensation that will have to be paid? How much more will phase 1 now cost through re-scoping? How much do the Government expect to lose in the coming fire sale of the land, and what safeguards are in place to ensure that there is not a hint of corruption in those sales? Given that the west

coast main line is at breaking point, does he accept that this plan will result in severe overcrowding and set Northern Powerhouse Rail back by a decade?

This level of chaos and economic damage would make even the Prime Minister's most recent predecessor blush, and I am not alone in that opinion. Two former Tory Chancellors have warned that this is "an act of huge economic self-harm".

The Tory Mayor of the west midlands has described it as "cancelling the future", and David Cameron has said that it shows that

"we can no longer think or act for the long-term as a country".

Not content with simply cancelling the programme, the Prime Minister is now salting the earth by selling off the land—and what have we got in its place? This so-called Network North. That announcement can be broken down into three categories: projects that have already been built, projects that have already been announced, and projects that do not exist. Let us go through some of them, shall we? There is the extension of Manchester's tram link to the airport, a project that opened nine years ago; there is the

"brand new rail station for Bradford",

a project that has been scrapped and reinstated by three Tory Prime Ministers in a row; and there is the upgrade of the A259 to Southampton, a route that does not exist. How can the Transport Secretary stand at that Dispatch Box and pretend that there is any credible plan for delivery, when last week even the Prime Minister admitted that these plans were only "illustrative"? For once I agree with him: they are illustrative—illustrative of the sheer incompetence of this Government, illustrative of the contempt with which they treat the north, and illustrative of why you can never trust the Tories.

The Prime Minister promised us a "revolution" in our transport infrastructure, but instead we got a wish list. He has robbed Peter, and he will not even be paying Paul. Communities are sick and tired of the broken promises from this broken Government. Does this fiasco not prove once and for all—after 13 failed years, three discredited rail plans, tens of billions of pounds of public money wasted, and thousands of homes and lives upended—that they have no record to stand on, no mandate to deliver, and no credible plan for the future? Is it not time they finally accepted that they are a Government at the end of the line?

Mr Harper: Oh dear. I do not know whether the hon. Lady noticed, but this is the first day that the House has been back after the conference break, and I am here at the Dispatch Box making a statement at the first—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) will allow me to answer the questions that her hon. Friend has just asked without shouting from the Opposition Front Bench, I shall be delighted to do so. This is our first day back, and I have made a statement at the first opportunity I have had.

The hon. Lady made a point about the cost of living. I drew attention to the fact that the £2 bus fare cap was being extended; that will kick in as early as next month, and it is an important cost of living measure for the many millions of people who use buses. Buses are the most popular form of public transport, which is why the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), is such a massive champion of them.

The hon. Lady referred to HS2. We are still delivering phase 1 from Euston to the west midlands, which is very significant transport investment and delivery, in terms of the supply chain and all the companies that depend on it. Moreover, it delivers a massive increase in capacity to the west coast main line, taking the number of seats a day from 134,000 to 250,000. As for the details in the “Network North” document, let me point out that a third of the savings we are making that are being reinvested—£12 billion—are increases in funding for various Mayors across the country. The ultimate decisions about what is to be invested are for those Mayors, and I have had productive conversations with a number of them. They will be working with us on the details of these plans, so that they are right for the areas that they represent. As for the hon. Lady’s point about decision making, I have said this publicly before: I took the formal decision on the day before the Prime Minister’s speech. There was a meeting of the Cabinet on the morning of his speech, which approved that decision, and the Prime Minister announced it shortly afterwards.

I noticed that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) rowed in very quickly, and has not disavowed this decision. He, of course, has long campaigned against HS2, and I suspect that the fact he rowed in so quickly behind it reflects that. I note that, on this decision, where the Prime Minister leads, the Leader of the Opposition follows.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement. My Committee colleagues and I will want to scrutinise a number of the measures in depth when he appears before us in a few weeks—it will be a bumper session. Today, however, let me focus on one issue regarding HS2. One advantage of the project was that it would release capacity on the west coast main line, not just between London and Birmingham, but right up the line. As it is stopping at Handsacre junction, there will be a severe capacity constraint on that part of the line; there will not be space for extra inter-regional services and freight services. The high-speed trains will be in a very congested part of the network, unless further upgrade work is done. I urge him to look at that capacity constraint; if HS2 is not happening on that part of the project, what additional measures might be put in place?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and, as always, I look forward to appearing before the Transport Committee to answer his questions and those of his colleagues, from both sides of the House. On his specific question, the first thing we have committed to doing is invest in remodelling Handsacre junction, so that those high-speed trains that go to Birmingham then get on to the west coast main line on the fast lines. The most congested part of the west coast main line is its southern part, which of course is having a significant capacity upgrade. However, I note carefully what he said and will bear that in mind. He should also note that we are investing in the upgraded connections east-west in the north of England, including from Liverpool to Manchester. One conversation I have already had was about the importance of making sure we are able to take freight traffic, including from the Port of Liverpool, and those are conversations we will take forward.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Dear me! I almost feel sorry for the Secretary of State. All the promises about greener, faster and more sustainable transport and connectivity are gone, unless you live in Birmingham, where people will have the most gold-plated express shuttle service in the history of the world. There are no real benefits to modal shift or net-zero targets here, but what about levelling up? The cancellation of the Golborne link last year highlighted that this Government never really cared about the project serving Scotland, but the Manchester leg following the Leeds route into the bin proves that they did not care about the north of England either. As always with Westminster, for London and the south-east money is no object, but when a large infrastructure project outside the M25 runs into trouble, the plug is pulled. Gareth Williams of the Scottish Council for Development and Industry said:

“The lead recommendation in the UK Government’s own *Union Connectivity Review* was to reduce journey times and increase rail capacity between Scotland, London, the Midlands and the North West of England.”

He also said:

“This is a very short-sighted decision that...actually risks making Scotland’s connectivity with London worse.”

There was also no need to push back the date on electric vehicles. The Government could have made the switch easier and faster had they, at any time whatsoever, listened to us on issues such as the charging network, VAT equalisation, removing incentives to switch too early or their zero-emission bus schemes being entirely unfit for purpose. So will the Secretary of State guarantee that Scotland will receive the consequential expected through HS2, now redirected to these other schemes? How much money was wasted looking at a Golborne link alternative? How much consultation took place with the Scottish Government regarding the A75 announcement, given that it has absolutely nothing to do with this Government whatever? Will the Department now look at different rolling stock options, including new high-speed tilting options, to increase potential speeds on the west coast main line?

The Secretary of State recently tweeted:

“In Japan, I saw the benefits high speed rail can bring—to connect communities & grow the economy...we remain fully committed to building HS2..Building it shows we believe in Britain”.

I can only conclude therefore that he no longer believes in Britain—will he confirm that? I like to end in consensus, so I hope he will answer that question in the affirmative.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman demonstrates in the close of his question the Scottish National party’s obsession with crowbarring independence into every question about everything, thus he continued in a way not to disappoint. The SNP never ceases to talk about independence at every available opportunity, even when it has nothing to do with the question.

The hon. Gentleman’s first point, about different regions in the country, might have some merit if we had just cancelled phase 2 of HS2 and not reinvested every single penny in alternative transport projects across the country. As I said, some of those will take place relatively soon: the money for local authorities for bus funding and for improving the quality of local roads, which is a top priority for most people, will be available next spring.

[Mr Harper]

The other investment will be available in the same timeframe as the money would have been delivered for phase 2 of HS2, which would not have delivered high-speed trains to Manchester until 2041.

Secondly, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the zero-emission vehicle mandate that we tabled, which is the single largest decarbonisation measure that the Government will take. I notice the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) barely mentioned it, if at all, but it is a very significant measure in delivering our net zero obligations. It is incredibly important and it would be good to have Opposition support for it. We have the support of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, which agree with the plan we have tabled in Parliament today.

On the point the hon. Gentleman made about our planned local transport spending, Barnett consequentials will flow in the normal way. The roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), has spoken to his opposite number in the Scottish Government about the A75.

As I said, this plan delivers every single penny that would have been spent on HS2 on alternative transport projects that, I think, are closer to what people want to see. When the facts changed, the cost of the project had risen and the benefits had reduced. That is why we have taken this decision, which will be welcomed by people across the country.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As a Yorkshire Member of Parliament, I have always championed HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and the trans-Pennine rail upgrade. Two out of three is not brilliant, but I will settle for that. It is very disappointing that the Leader of the Opposition always campaigned against HS2 as well, but we are where we are. With Network North, can the Secretary of State confirm that projects that improve local connectivity, such as the Huddersfield-Sheffield-Penistone line, which goes through my constituency and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), are exactly the projects that can now be delivered, with this cash being invested locally and regionally?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes two good points, one of which is that the Leader of the Opposition has always campaigned against HS2. [Interruption.] If we look at the parliamentary record, he absolutely has. Secondly, my hon. Friend is right that what we have been able to do is free up money to pay for other road and rail projects and, for example, to fund buses. I know that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), is going to meet my hon. Friend and the colleagues he mentioned to talk about exactly the sorts of schemes we are going to deliver.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is it not the case that rather than levelling up the north, this is slowing down the north? I will give an illustration. Not very long ago, a station in the town of Northwich, which I represent, collapsed. It is now finally being rebuilt, via insurance, and what is being rebuilt is the ticket office—a ticket office that this Government are

consulting on closing down. That speaks volumes about how, when the Government cut their cloth, it is always the north that pays the price.

Mr Harper: I do not think the hon. Gentleman listened to what I said or read what we said in the document. We are going to reinvest every single penny that we are saving from cancelling phase 2 of HS2 in the parts of the country where the money was going to be spent. Just under £20 billion will be spent in the north of England, just under £10 billion will be spent in the midlands and £6.5 billion, which we are saving from the new way that we will deliver Euston station, will be spent in the rest of the country. That is reinvesting in transport projects that I think are closer to what people want to see, which is why they have welcomed the decision we have made.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): After I have spent years arguing that HS2 was wasteful and too destructive and that we could not afford it, the Government have finally agreed with me and scrapped the line north of Birmingham. However, with the Government having previously cancelled the eastern leg and now having chopped its leg off, that leaves a legless stump through my constituency from London to Birmingham, which continues to bring daily misery to my constituents and is costing an amount of money that we cannot afford. I ask the Secretary of State—going for third time lucky—whether he will scrap the entirety of HS2, return the land that can be returned, do something better with the community's consent with the land that cannot be returned, and then spend that money on the west coast main line and the Chiltern line instead.

Mr Harper: Given my hon. Friend's constituency interest, I completely understand why he takes the view that he does. He is a doughty champion for his constituents, and never loses an opportunity—in this place or, in fact, every time I see him—to make exactly those points.

However, given the progress we have made, the decision we have taken is to complete phase 1 from Euston to Birmingham, delivering that significant capacity upgrade. [Interruption.] I say to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, who just cannot help shouting from a sedentary position, that I had a very productive meeting with the Euston Partnership last week to discuss these details. The London Borough of Camden and the Mayor of London are very enthusiastic, and are working with us in partnership on those proposals. The new development corporation at Euston is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform that area. They welcome these proposals, and I look forward to working with them constructively on them.

Coming back to my hon. Friend's point, we are going to complete phase 1 between Euston and Birmingham, which delivers the significant capacity upgrade that the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), referred to. Notwithstanding the inconvenience being suffered by the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), if there are any issues we can deal with—other than cancelling phase 1—I am always happy to meet him.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State did not make any specific reference to his comments at Conservative party conference about the proposals for

15-minute communities that are out there. He has, however, said that the number of times drivers can get from A to B will be their choice, not decided by councils. Does he believe this nonsense? Can he tell the House about any local authority that has ever considered such a restriction on local people? This is just complete nonsense.

Mr Harper: I actually can. If the hon. Gentleman goes to the website of Oxfordshire County Council, he will see a very specific proposal for, I think, five roads. That council is proposing to have filters on those roads and to issue permits, enabling local residents to only drive down them a specific number of times a year. That is a Labour-Lib Dem-Green council, or at least it was when the proposal was made. If a resident exceeds that number of permitted journeys, a picture will be taken of their licence plate and they will be issued with a fine. We in the Conservative party do not support those sorts of restrictions being put on motorists by local authorities—clearly the hon. Gentleman does, but we do not, and we will not stand for it.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's statement. Phase 2b to Leeds was cancelled earlier in the year, so does my right hon. Friend know when the safeguarded land through my constituency will be released back? That has had a big impact on constituents who have seen their lives blighted and have been unable to move forward. Any news my right hon. Friend has would be gratefully received; he may want to write to me later so that I can feed it back to my constituents.

Mr Harper: To help my right hon. Friend, phase 2a safeguarding will be formally lifted within weeks. Phase 2b safeguarding, which covers the area in which his constituents live, will be amended by next summer to allow for any safeguarding we need for the Northern Powerhouse Rail projects. In the meantime, we will start taking steps to lift the blighting effect of HS2 in areas where safeguarding is going to be lifted. We will obviously set out the details of that in the usual way. There is a proper legal process to be followed, and we will continue working with local authorities in my right hon. Friend's area and colleagues in the House to keep them fully informed.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What consideration has the Secretary of State given to allowing Parliament to scrutinise the proposed £36 billion of expenditure, in relation to both Network North and Northern Powerhouse Rail? In the consideration of the schemes, now that HS2 has been cancelled, will any of the money that has been saved be available to address some basic transport failings in constituencies such as mine? We have a Northern Rail service on the Durham coast line that is frankly not fit for purpose. There is a lack of capacity. We have two carriages once an hour, with no notice of cancelled services, which undermines education and employment, leaving people stranded on the platform. These failings represent not only a transport crisis, but an economic crisis, which, frankly, makes a mockery of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Mr Harper: First of all, scrutiny of my Department's spending will be carried out by the Transport Committee. The Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, is no longer in his place, but I am sure that the

Committee, of which the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) is an esteemed member, will carry out that scrutiny process.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in the north-east, there is a tripling of the money that will be under the control of the new North East Combined Authority. A significant amount of extra money in many parts of the country will be controlled by locally elected Mayors and local authorities, thus ensuring that transport decisions are taken closer to home. I hope that he and Opposition Members welcome that as much as I do.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that in 2025, it is the 200th anniversary of the world's first passenger railway in Britain. Does he share my dismay and, frankly, shame that in this country, 200 years on, we are not able to connect our great cities when other major countries around the world can do so? Would the right thing not be to address the cost of the schemes and why they are so much more expensive in this country, rather than scaling back our ambitions?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend raises two separate points. One is about the reasons why there have been cost increases. Some of this was in place before the project was in construction—from planning and issues like that, which are worth looking at in the long term, although that will not help in this case. We have also seen significant cost increases, not least due to construction inflation over the past few years. However, this is not just about cost increases; it is also about the benefit reduction. One of the key parts of the business case for HS2 was that it was for business and business traffic. We have seen business rail use and commuter rail use halve post-pandemic because of the changed way in which people choose to travel. That has been an essential part of the decision, and that is why we have decided to change the way we spend the money—not to not spend it, but to spend it on transport investments closer to the way people live their lives. We think that is the right decision, notwithstanding the fact that I recognise that my right hon. Friend is disappointed by it.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Government claimed that the decision to scrap most of HS2 was made due to rising costs, yet who was Chief Secretary to the Treasury and then Chancellor when the costs were spiralling out of control? The current Prime Minister. Not content with that failure, we now know that he also wasted a shocking £2.2 billion on the leg of HS2 that has just been cancelled. Secretary of State, does this entire fiasco not illustrate how little regard the Government have for taxpayers' money?

Mr Harper: No, not at all. Having no regard for taxpayers' money would be deciding that a project was going to cost too much and deliver too little in benefits, and then continuing to spend taxpayers' money regardless. This will not be welcomed by everybody and it was not the consensus view, but we have decided to cancel the second phase. By the way, this was about not just increased costs, but the combination of increased costs and reduced benefits, as I said in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark). It was about the two things together, and we have decided to reinvest the money in alternative transport projects, which, by the way, have a higher return on

[Mr Harper]

investment and will therefore deliver a greater return to taxpayers. That shows exactly the opposite of what the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said—that we value taxpayers' money and want to deliver the best return for taxpayers' money, which is why we have made this change in how we are investing their hard-earned money.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Many councils apply for grants in order to make changes to their local roads. When considering these applications, will Ministers ensure that they do not end up paying for schemes that cut local capacity on crucial roads and make drivers' lives a misery?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point about what we should prioritise when funding roads. He should know that one of the important changes I have made is to make sure that our active travel team is focused on delivering cycling and walking schemes that increase choice, rather than focusing on driving people out of their cars. I hope he will welcome that important change.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Secretary of State says that his party is not anti-motorist, but it is clearly anti-public transport. We Liberal Democrats are not anti-motorist either, but we are unequivocally pro-public transport. Rail produces 76% less carbon dioxide emissions than the equivalent road journey, and each freight train removes up to 76 lorries from our roads. The decision to scrap the northern leg of HS2 will lead to up to half a million more lorry journeys up and down the country, resulting in a lot more congestion in our towns and cities. Is the Secretary of State not concerned that freight that would have gone on to the railway will now be forced on to the roads, increasing our carbon emissions and congestion?

Mr Harper: I do not agree with the hon. Lady's characterisation of our view on public transport. First, we have already put in a significant amount of extra money this year and, from the savings, still more is going into our bus system. Our £2 bus fare cap is making it much easier and cheaper for people to use public transport. Twice as many journeys are made by bus than by rail. She should also know that HS2 spending was crowding out other important investments. One of the things we are now able to fund is the £600 million project at Ely junction that will increase capacity for both passengers and freight to the important port of Felixstowe.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has just mentioned Ely junction, and he will know that the great eastern main line taskforce has assiduously campaigned for that investment for over a decade. I am grateful for this announcement, and we look forward to seeing the proposal go forward. Alongside rail, which is huge in the east of England, can my right hon. Friend bring his long-term plan for motorists to Essex by bringing forward the dualling of the A120? That scheme has been delayed for another two years because of construction inflation, which I completely understand. I implore him to look at the business case and see what the scheme would mean for the economic wellbeing of mid-Essex.

Mr Harper: The Ely junction scheme, which I know my right hon. Friend and others welcome, is a well worked through scheme that was on Network Rail's list of important priorities, but we simply did not have the money to fund it. We now do, as a result of this project. People cannot want to continue building the second phase of HS2 and simultaneously want to do all these other things. A choice had to be made, and we made that choice, and I think it is the right choice for the country. I know how important my right hon. Friend thinks her road scheme is. I obviously cannot deal with it now but, as ever, I would be happy to meet her to discuss how important it is for her constituents.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I saw the Secretary of State's Network North map on Twitter, featuring those legendary northern towns of Tavistock, Dawlish and Plymouth. That might have been mildly amusing had my constituency not been cut in half, with the whole of the Wirral disappearing into the Irish sea. Have we been taken off the map because we have no funding for any capital transport projects? Will Cheshire West and Chester Council now get a refund for the hundreds of thousands of pounds that it has already spent on preparatory work for HS2 coming to Cheshire? That money now appears to have been wasted because of the bungled handling of this contract.

Mr Harper: Just to be clear, of the money that we are saving as a result of cancelling the second phase of HS2, just under £20 billion is being spent in the north and just under £10 billion is being spent in the midlands. The money being spent in the rest of the country is the money saved from the way we are now going to deliver Euston station—with a much more ambitious development, building thousands more houses and having a much more positive impact on the local economy. It is sensible to call it Network North, because that is where two thirds of the money is going, but the £6.5 billion that is being spent in the rest of the country, outside the north and the midlands, will be very welcome. As I have said, every penny is being reinvested in those parts of the country that HS2 was going to benefit. In the north of England, for example, we are looking at investing £12 billion in the line between Liverpool and Manchester, and at having productive talks with the Mayors in that part of the world to deliver transport projects that are their priorities for the people they represent.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): The allocation of funding to the north-east has the potential to have a major positive local impact. I particularly welcome the announcement on Ferryhill station and look forward to discussing the timing with the Secretary of State. However, the substantial funding towards investments such as the Leamside line was within 24 hours spun by the local opposition as a reversal of intent. Will he make absolutely clear what is being delivered to the north-east and how it affects the Leamside project?

Mr Harper: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. The reopening of the Leamside line is a Transport North East-led project. It is developing a business case to connect Washington with the Tyne and Wear metro, and we are supporting it as it develops the outline business case. Because we have cancelled the second phase of HS2, £685 million extra is being allocated

to the north-east, meaning that the new north-east Mayor will have £1.8 billion to spend on their transport funding over the five years from 2027. One such scheme could be the reopening of the Leamside line. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) says, “Could be”. We believe in devolution. We are giving £1.8 billion to the north-east Mayor and it will be for the Mayor to decide the priorities. I know, having talked to one of the candidates for that mayoral office, that this is a priority for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) has been championing this project enormously, and we can now fund such projects because of the cancellation of the second phase of HS2. I am grateful to my hon. Friend and will continue to work with him as he champions that case.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On Wednesday, Hull and Humber chamber of commerce, Humber local authority leaders and MPs are going to meet the rail Minister to discuss the need for transport investment around the Humber. The Prime Minister announced at the Conservative party conference that rail electrification for Hull would go ahead, and the Secretary of State has also mentioned that in his remarks today. Of course, this has been blocked twice by Conservative Governments. In the light of that and the broken promises over HS2, trust is very limited in the north as to whether this Government will deliver on what they say. To help with that, will the Secretary of State tell me the start date for the rail electrification project to Hull?

Mr Harper: I am not going to pluck dates out of the air. It is worth saying that phase 2 of HS2 was not going to deliver trains to Manchester until 2041. This funding is over a significant period of time. Clearly, we have to have the normal processes in place where we work through business cases and do all of that. I am not going to pluck dates out of the air. Since we made the announcement, I have met both National Highways and Network Rail. They are now working through the detail of how these proposals fit in with their planning processes. We will announce the details in due course, but the right hon. Lady would not expect me to pluck dates out of the air. We will announce them in the normal way. I know that my hon. Friend the rail Minister is meeting her local authority to talk through the details of these important schemes.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I very much support this decision on HS2, given that the cost was totally out of control, the benefits were much diminished from what was originally promised, and many of the stations in Staffordshire and up and down the north will actually receive a better service via the Handsacre link than ever could have been delivered by phase 2. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire very much want to see investment going into local schemes such as reopening Meir station, reopening the Stoke to Leek line, investing in the A5 and the A50, and investing in junction 15 of the M6?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has demonstrated through his question and that list of valued local schemes why investing the money in those schemes will deliver more benefits to more people more

quickly than delivering the rest of HS2. That is why he and many other people have warmly welcomed this decision.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Despite chopping HS2 off at the knees coming at a considerable cost—about £40 billion, from what I understand—and the statement indicating that the Government will reinvest the money from HS2’s northern leg, which is another £36 billion, the only Welsh announcement I can see in the statement is about the north Wales main line, which the Government estimate to have a cost of about £1 billion. That, by my maths, leaves a shortfall of about £3 billion. Will the British Government ensure in discussions with the Welsh Government that Wales gets its allocated shortfall of £3 billion so that it can invest in Welsh transport priorities?

Mr Harper: The Government retain responsibility for delivering heavy rail. We are making an investment of £1 billion into electrifying the north Wales main line, which I would have thought the hon. Member would welcome. As over the coming years we develop the funding for local transport spending, Wales will get Barnett consequential in the usual way.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): There is a deep democratic point in all of this. The Secretary of State was elected at the last general election with the expectation given by the then leader of the Conservative party that HS2 would be built. Partly because of the Government’s financial incompetence, they are now cancelling it. A Prime Minister—not the Secretary of State—whose own party did not support him, and who has certainly never put himself before the electorate as Prime Minister, is cancelling it. The current Secretary of State is following a scorched earth policy whereby it will be impossible for either the elected Mayors who are looking for alternative funding for carrying on the second phase or an incoming Labour Government, to build out the full scheme, with all the benefits it would have. That is fundamentally anti-democratic. Will the Secretary of State not consider, on a democratic basis, protecting the line of HS2?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman raised two points. On the first, I make no apology for basing a decision on the facts. The facts have changed—both the costs have increased and the benefits have reduced—and pouring taxpayers’ money into a scheme where that had happened would not make a lot of sense. On his second point, I am now thoroughly confused: I thought the Labour Party had now accepted that HS2 was not going to happen and that it preferred all the alternative things we wanted to spend the money on. It cannot have it both ways. If he and his colleagues want to complete the second phase of HS2, they must go and tell everybody else that they do not want to spend the money on all those other things that we are going to spend it on. We have to make choices in politics. We have made our choice. I am happy with our choice and will defend it. They cannot have it both ways.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Apologies—I inadvertently called two speakers from the Opposition side, so I will next take two from the Government side. While I am on my feet, I remind

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

Members that we have another big statement and an important debate to come, so I urge brevity in questions and answers.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): When the Secretary of State is looking at Network North, which I do welcome—I thank him very much for the A582 benefit in the Ribble Valley constituency of Mr Deputy Speaker; he will be delighted with that name-check—may I encourage him to think about the structure for funding other opportunities? There is a gap in the market between very large rail schemes and those extremely small rail schemes that are too small for local councils to deliver, such as at Midge Hall in my constituency, where the trains stop at a platform and we have the nonsense of customers not being able to get on or off. Does he agree that we could look at such improvement schemes in Network North?

Mr Harper: The rail Minister has listened to my hon. Friend very carefully, and I will ensure that he meets her to discuss that specific proposal.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The cancellation of HS2 is a triple win for Newcastle-under-Lyme. First, we will get faster trains to London. Secondly, we will get improvements to junction 50 and the things that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) talked about. Thirdly and most importantly, HS2 will not cut a swathe through the south of Newcastle-under-Lyme. On that point, the people who will be most pleased are my councillors Gary and Simon White, who have been representing the people of Betley and Madeley on this since long before I was an MP. I have a number of questions from them that I will send to the Secretary of State, but most of all they are focused on the need to ensure that the situation faced by landowners who have had their land subject to compulsory purchase can be put right as quickly as possible, whether they want to purchase the land or not. What reassurance can he give that we will look after landowners whose land has been subject to compulsory purchase?

Mr Harper: As I just said, we are now following a proper legal process. We will set out the details of that, and then landowners who have been impacted will know what they can do for us to try to put things right. I welcome the work that his two councillors have done in ably representing their constituents, as my hon. Friend represents his.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The more the Government pursue their net zero obsession, the less Conservative they look. The Minister, without any embarrassment, has today announced—in fact, he has boasted of—a new law, the zero emission vehicle mandate, which will instruct manufacturers on what they are allowed to produce year on year. Then he tells us that consumers will be allowed to purchase whatever cars they want until 2035. That sounds more like a Stalinist economic plan than a free-market Conservative policy. Can he tell us what will happen if rational consumers decide that they do not want to buy more expensive cars—cars that take half an hour to refuel, are likely to

burst into flames, or are more expensive to insure? What will he do then? Will he have to introduce legislation to instruct dealers on what cars they sell and how to sell them?

Mr Harper: First, if the right hon. Gentleman assumes that climate change is a problem, then we need to deal with it. Transport is the biggest single emitter of carbon. That is why we have published these ambitious proposals, which by the way are supported by the automotive industry. Several of those in the industry are planning on going faster than we are legislating for. On the specific point for Northern Ireland, the plans that we have set out are agreed by the Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments. When, as I hope, we get a Northern Ireland Government and Assembly back up and running, they will have to decide whether they wish to join in with those proposals. I very much hope that they do.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and the additional £900 million for South Yorkshire, which will make a huge difference to the region. However, with the recent closure of Doncaster Sheffield airport, does he agree that the best thing that our combined authority Mayor can do is use all his devolved powers to work with all stakeholders to secure the opening of our airport, and will the Secretary of State use all his influence to press the South Yorkshire Mayor to do the right thing with the additional money and use it to help secure our airport's future?

Mr Harper: I know that my hon. Friend and others in that area of the country have campaigned in favour of the airport. Of course, the thing about devolution is that Mayors are able to decide to use their resources, which they now have more of, on what they think are their local priorities, representing the people they are elected to serve. It is a decision for the Mayor, and of course my hon. Friend and others will campaign for that decision to be taken.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) said that South Yorkshire will get £900 million as a consequence of the decision made by the Secretary of State and the Government to cancel HS2. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is the case that in South Yorkshire we can expect £900 million for our region that we would not otherwise have received? If that is the case, over what timeframe will we receive it?

Mr Harper: It is extra money going to the region, capital funding over the next phase of that capital budget. It is over the second phase of the city region sustainable transport settlements scheme. I have already had a discussion with the South Yorkshire Mayor to talk it through, and his officials and mine are working through the details so that he can look at the relevant schemes that he wishes to invest in over that period.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Norfolk's infrastructure needs have often been overlooked, but not any more: just in the last week, the Department of Transport has announced £231 million supporting the Norwich Western Link road in my constituency, for which I am very grateful, in addition to the £600 million supporting the Ely junction upgrade. The Secretary of

State has mentioned the increase in freight transport that that allows, but am I right in thinking that it also unlocks the possibility of increased passenger trains between Norwich and Cambridge, along the Norwich tech corridor?

Mr Harper: I am pleased that we were able to make the decision on the road that my hon. Friend and other colleagues have been campaigning strongly for, and to communicate that to his county council so that the scheme can continue apace. I am grateful for his welcome for the upgrade for Ely junction and, as I said in my earlier remarks, that unlocks both freight capacity and potentially further passenger services that can be delivered. Network Rail will set out further details on that in due course, once it has set out the timetable, now that I have been able to confirm that the plan is funded.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Earlier this year I asked the rail Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), what was in place to ensure effective monitoring and oversight of HS2. He assured me that comprehensive monitoring arrangements were in place. Now even the Prime Minister has raised concerns about mismanagement of HS2. What assurances can the Secretary of State give to my constituents in the Chilterns that HS2 Limited and its contractors will be better held to account?

Mr Harper: On that specific point, one of the things we have done, because we are going to continue delivering phase 1 of HS2 from London Euston to Birmingham, is to make sure that we focus on both cost and delivery on the current timetable. There are now extra members appointed to the HS2 board; I have met the board to talk through its plan and to hold it to account on both the delivery schedule and the cost budget that it has to hit, and I will continue to do so. If the hon. Lady has any further issues, I know that my hon. Friend the rail Minister will be delighted to meet her to talk through them.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I can tell the Secretary of State that residents and businesses in Aberconwy and across north Wales are delighted to hear that there will be £1 billion put towards the electrification of the north Wales main line. The last major infrastructure project we had along the north Wales coast was in 1987 for the Conwy tunnel. Like that tunnel, this project will be transformative for our local economies, for lives and for our connections with the north-west of England and down to London. Will my right hon. Friend confirm from the Dispatch Box, for residents and businesses in north Wales, that £1 billion will be attributed to the electrification of the north Wales main line, and will he meet me and my colleagues to confirm that those plans are progressing?

Mr Harper: I would be pleased to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues, and I can confirm the money that we have put aside. I have already discussed the plans with Network Rail, which is starting work on detailing those plans. I am happy to meet him to talk them through in more detail.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I have campaigned for more than 18 years for the reopening of the Leamside line, which would

enable the metro to come to Washington in my constituency—14 years longer than the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), who is a newcomer to that campaign. So hon. Members can imagine my joy when I saw it in print, the day after the Prime Minister's speech—only for it to disappear 24 hours later. Far from it being the Opposition who went out spinning, it was Ministers on the Prime Minister's own Front Bench who were on the airwaves spinning that nothing had changed after it disappeared. If it was just illustrative, why did it need to be deleted from the Network North document with other such illustrations?

Mr Harper: It was not deleted from the Network North document. The Network North document that was published on the website has not changed, so—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) keeps going on about illustrative stuff. As I have said, £12 billion of the £36 billion was allocated to combined authority Mayors, so what it gets spent on is ultimately their decision. I know that that is a priority for the north-east, so it is one of the things on which we are working with them on a business case.

I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) are both campaigning—it is always good when these things are done on a cross-party basis. I know that this is a priority for a region. The money is now there to pay for it, which was not the case before we took the decision to cancel the second phase of HS2. These things are only now able to happen because we took that decision. If the Opposition decide that they want to campaign to build the second phase of HS2, things such as the Leamside line will not happen.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): If the seaside resorts, industrial towns and rural villages of Lincolnshire are to expand their economies, it is essential that the road network be improved. The A15, A16 and A46 are just three examples. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that some of the redirected £36 billion will head towards Lincolnshire, and will he arrange for me and neighbouring colleagues to meet the Minister with responsibility for roads to discuss future plans?

Mr Harper: I would be very pleased for the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues. Yes, there is money going to all local authorities to address the quality of their local roads. A number of road schemes, including the major road network and large local majors programmes, were funded in partnership between the Department and local authorities, but we are now able to pay all the costs to bring them to fruition more quickly. On specific local schemes, I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and local colleagues to talk them through that in more detail.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Building HS2 was a long-term decision for the future—investment for decades to come—not just to improve transport but to drive the economy of the north, which is why my south Manchester constituents once again feel let down by this Government. We now have the worst possible

[Jeff Smith]

outcomes: £45 billion spent on half a job, without those long-term benefits for the north. That is not a long-term decision but a short-term, short-sighted failure.

Mr Harper: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. First, the high-speed trains were not going to get to Manchester until 2041 anyway. Secondly, as the facts have changed, it has become clear that we will receive better returns on taxpayers' hard-earned money by cancelling the second phase of HS2 and reinvesting every penny in alternative rail projects in the north, the midlands and elsewhere. We have set out the detail of that plan. I know that not everybody will agree with it—that is okay—but those who do not like what we have proposed instead have to be honest with people and say that campaigning to build the second phase of HS2 will mean that those other things cannot be done. The choice had to be made. We have made the right choice, which is to invest that money in things that will give a better return, sooner and for more people in more parts of the country. That is the right choice for the country, and a long-term decision for a better future.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I am a member of the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill Select Committee. We have been sitting for nine months and have listened carefully to a lot of petitioners. My view is that HS2 has had a massive impact on many of those people's lives. How can the Secretary of State ensure that the people who have already lost businesses and properties to make way for a railway line that will not be built have the option to get them back for a fair price?

Mr Harper: One thing that we will do, as we work through the consequences of the decision, is set out the details exactly. I will not do so now because there are important legal consequences for such things, but we will set out the details exactly for people whose properties were subject to compulsory purchase orders—my hon. Friend will know, there are rules detailing what happens when such properties are no longer needed for the purpose for which they were purchased—to protect the constituents who were affected. We will set out details of how that will work in due course, and will keep her informed.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I was very pleased when the Prime Minister announced the electrification of the north Wales line, having been a long-term advocate of that sort of project. In fact, as long ago as 2003, I met the chair and chief executive of the then Strategic Rail Authority to press for it—he said no. Twenty years later, I remember the SRA's motto, which was "Britain's railway, properly delivered". I was concerned that the Prime Minister noted a figure of £1 billion for the north Wales project; many commentators think that that is quite insufficient. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the project will be properly delivered by being properly and fully funded?

Mr Harper: I am grateful for what I think was a welcome for the north Wales mainline electrification. I met Network Rail following the announcement we made, and it will now do the detailed work on delivering that scheme. It will announce the details, the timeframe and so forth in the usual way, and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's support for each stage of the project.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I very much welcome the commitment to Ely North junction and also to Haughley junction. They will deliver major benefits for my constituents, including an hourly Peterborough to Ipswich service and better services to London. It will also benefit the midlands and the north by better connecting the busiest sea container port in Europe to the rail network. Haughley junction is a much cheaper and simpler project than Ely North junction. Is there scope to expedite and accelerate the delivery of that specific project, which will start delivering benefits on the ground for my constituents soon?

Mr Harper: I am grateful for the campaigning work my hon. Friend has done on pushing for that scheme. It was very clear from the work that he and other colleagues have done that it was a very important priority. I can confirm that the Ely area capacity enhancement project includes Haughley junction, and we have started the work with Network Rail. It is seized of trying to do it as quickly as we can, but we obviously have to make sure it is done properly. I will keep him posted in the usual way.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): No matter how much the Secretary of State tries to back-pedal, the fact is that the proposal to reopen the Leamside line was scrapped just 24 hours after it was announced, and businesses and communities in the north-east rightly feel betrayed. Who was it who decided that they would water down the proposal? Who decided that the Leamside line was far too north to be worthy of Government investment? Was it the Prime Minister, the Treasury or the Minister who sold out the north-east?

Mr Harper: I am not quite sure why the hon. Lady does not think that an extra £685 million for transport in the north-east, adding up to £1.8 billion of investment, and the fact that we have started work with officials in that area on that project should not be welcomed. I think it should be welcomed, and I am sure that she and other colleagues who support it will continue working with us on making sure that it gets delivered.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): The Secretary of State will be aware that Blackpool Council is considering spending millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on 90 zero-emission buses from China, instead of purchasing British ones. It is beyond farcical that taxpayer cash intended to support British jobs and local supply chains may be used to import poorer quality vehicles and ultimately end up in the hands of the Chinese Government. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging Blackpool Council to support British jobs and investment, and to think again?

Mr Harper: It is ultimately for local authorities to make decisions. They are accountable, and it is for them to make decisions about how they choose to spend the taxpayers' money for which they are responsible. I have heard very clearly what my hon. Friend has said about where that money should be spent, and his local authority will have done so. More importantly, however, so will have his voters, and they will be able to make a decision about the council's future in due course.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): A number of years ago, the Conservative Government expressly instructed Members, local councils and other stakeholders

not to focus on the electrification of the north Wales line. As a result, virtually the entire rail development case for Cheshire, north-east Wales and the Wirral was built on the premise of HS2. Have I heard the Secretary of State correctly that we are going to waste all the time, effort and money spent over the years, and go right back to the drawing board? To paraphrase the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), what exactly is the plan?

Mr Harper: I am not entirely certain exactly what the hon. Lady's question was, but we have set out the plan very carefully. We are going to deliver the first phase of HS2 from Euston to Birmingham, we are going to cancel the second phase and we are going to reinvest every single penny—the £36 billion we have saved—in the north, the midlands and the rest of the country. That is a very clear plan, and I think it is one that will be welcomed by the public.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as per the Prime Minister's recent announcement, the Ivanhoe line will be fully reopened, thereby linking Burton upon Trent to Leicester? Is the Secretary of State aware that even this week compulsory purchase orders are being issued and processed in respect of property and land on the now-cancelled HS2 route north of Birmingham?

Mr Harper: On the second point, which is very important for the hon. Gentleman's constituents, all outstanding claims for land that has already been acquired for phase 2 of HS2 will still be paid. Applications that are in progress will be handled on a case-by-case basis after consultation with the claimants, because people may well have made plans based on the land being purchased and it is important that we follow through on that, so there will be proper consultation with claimants before we make decisions to try to do the right thing by the people affected. The Ivanhoe line is going to be delivered.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I welcome sincerely the news of the Secretary of State's support for Cullompton railway station. It is not new, given that my predecessor as MP for Tiverton and Honiton, Neil Parish, secured restoring your railway funding for Cullompton station two years ago. At that time, Neil said that

“construction could take place as early as 2024”;

will the Secretary of State tell my constituents whether Cullompton station is still on track to open in this Parliament?

Mr Harper: It is very important, when projects are promised, that we have the funds to pay for them, and it is by cancelling the second phase of HS2 that we are able to fund that important project, which I am glad the hon. Gentleman welcomes. I do not think that the rail Minister and I, in the time we have been in post, have had any communication from the hon. Gentleman campaigning for the station, whereas my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) has campaigned for it assiduously, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow).

Net Zero by 2050

8.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Prime Minister's announcement on net zero.

Britain has led the world on tackling climate change. We have cut our carbon emissions in half over the past 30 years. We have boosted our share of renewables from just 7% in 2010 to almost half today. We have delivered the second highest amount of recorded low-carbon investment cumulatively across Europe over the past five years. Of all the major economies, we have set the toughest targets, and we have exceeded every carbon budget target so far.

As we look forward to becoming a net zero economy by 2050, we must ensure that our ambitions are practical and achievable—achievable by industry, which is investing billions to decarbonise; achievable technologically, as much of the green tech we will need to hit our 2050 target needs to be scaled up; and achievable for consumers, in particular for the millions of households that are currently struggling to make ends meet.

We will not reach net zero over the next three decades unless our plans for the future are pragmatic and viable. Only 7% of people in the UK currently think that net zero is going to be good for them and their family's finances in the near term. In Europe, we are seeing people push back at clumsy policy that is negatively affecting our lives. It is clear that if we do not bring people with us, we risk sacrificing the whole climate change agenda. That is why the Prime Minister set out his plans last month for a fairer approach to ease the burdens on hard-working people and keep people feeling optimistic about net zero.

The Prime Minister's approach includes giving people the flexibility to choose a new petrol or diesel car until 2035; removing the requirement that would have seen property owners forced to spend up to £10,000 or more on energy upgrades; easing the transition to clean heating; and raising grants under the boiler upgrade scheme by 50%, to £7,500—that scheme is now one of the most generous of its kind in Europe. The changes will allow us to meet our international net zero targets while avoiding disproportionate costs at a time when global inflation pressures are challenging the finances of many households.

We are responsible for less than 1% of annual greenhouse gas emissions. While our emissions are down 48%, America's remain unchanged and China's are up by 300%. It cannot be right that our citizens face punitive costs here when emissions are rising abroad. As the Prime Minister said, the fear is that if we continue to impose extra costs on people, we risk losing their consent for net zero. I want people to feel optimistic about net zero and connect that with jobs, investment and a sense of pride in playing our part in a global challenge. By taking a more measured approach, we will achieve our ambitious targets with the public's consent.

Meanwhile, we are spending tens of billions to transform our energy security, and to boost renewables and clean nuclear power. We are investing £20 billion to get our carbon capture and storage industry up and running, with jobs supported in places such as Humberside, Scotland and the north-east and north-west of England.

[*Claire Coutinho*]

We will take carbon dioxide from polluting industries and store it under the North sea. The UK can lead the world in the provision of carbon transport and storage services, with an estimated 78 billion tonnes of theoretical carbon storage capacity in the UK continental shelf—one of the largest potential carbon storage capacities in Europe.

We also have the largest operational offshore wind farm in the world, and the second largest, the third largest, the fourth largest and now the fifth largest, too—all delivered under a Conservative Government. We will have enough wind to power the equivalent of every home in Britain by 2030. We will generate enough solar energy to power the equivalent of over 25 million electric vehicle miles every hour by 2035. We are world leading in our fusion technology and space-based solar projects.

Britain's nuclear revival is well under way. Hinkley Point C in Somerset will provide enough secure, low-carbon electricity to power around 6 million homes. Sizewell C in Suffolk features the most powerful electricity generators in the world, to power another 6 million homes. We have launched Great British Nuclear to deliver our programme and we have accelerated the development of small modular reactors. Bringing all our work together is the Energy Bill—the vehicle for delivering the energy strategy to turbocharge British technology. It will liberate £100 billion-worth of private investment, scaling up green jobs and growth, and make Britain the best place in the world to invest in clean energy.

The most important announcement made during my tenure has been about the grid. We must make sure that the grid infrastructure is in place to bring new clean, secure and low-cost power to homes and businesses. Four times as much new transmission network will be needed in the next seven years as was built since 1990, so we are bringing forward comprehensive new reforms to help green energy expand faster. We will speed up planning for the most nationally significant projects and accelerate grid connections so that those who are ready can connect first.

Later this autumn we will set out our response to the work of electricity networks commissioner Nick Winser, demonstrating how we are going further and faster on grid, informed by his recommendations on reducing the time taken to develop this critical infrastructure for lower bills, energy security, decarbonisation and economic growth. We will also set out our plans to reform the connections process so that new electricity generators and electricity users can be connected faster, bringing more low-cost, low-carbon energy into the system and connecting up new economic investment quicker. We will set out the UK's first ever spatial plan for energy infrastructure, to give industry certainty and every community a say.

We have so much to be proud of in what we have achieved so far, particularly the international leadership that we have shown in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Climate Change Committee has assessed that there is no material difference in our progress to cut emissions by 2030 since its last report in June, yet the changes we have made will make a real difference to the finances of many households up and down the country. The Prime Minister's intervention means that we are now on a more secure path, because it can command public support,

taking the people of Britain with us and delivering net zero in a practical, proportionate and pragmatic way. I commend this statement to the House.

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

8.13 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advanced sight of her statement. My only disappointment was that she did not read out the multiple paragraphs defending the Prime Minister's claim about seven bins, which was in the copy sent to me. Obviously, she was too embarrassed to defend it, because it was made-up nonsense.

We profoundly disagree with the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister when they suggest that the answer to the cost of living crisis in our country is dither and delay on building a clean energy future for Britain. It will not work and their approach will make it worse. If you want the evidence, Madam Deputy Speaker, just look at their previous failures. The ban on onshore wind did not cut bills; it raised them. The slashing of home energy efficiency—cutting the “green crap”, as they called it—did not cut bills; it raised them. The fiasco of the offshore wind auction last month did not cut bills; it will raise them. It is not going too fast on climate that has caused the cost of living crisis; it is the Conservatives' failures that have left us exposed to the worst energy bills crisis in generations. Rather than learning the lessons, they are doubling down.

The definitive analysis of the recent announcements came last Thursday from the Government's own watchdog, the Climate Change Committee. It said this:

“The cancellation of some Net Zero measures is likely to increase both energy bills and motoring costs for households”.

Why did it say that? Let me explain. The Government now say that landlords will not have to insulate homes, but as the CCC points out, these regulations

“would have reduced renters' energy bills significantly.”

Moreover, the cost savings would have outweighed any changes in rent. Therefore, they are not lowering costs; they are raising them.

On electric vehicles, the CCC says that “any undermining of their roll-out will ultimately increase costs.”

That is because the lifetime costs of EVs are already cheaper than those of petrol and diesel vehicles. By 2030, the up-front costs of EVs are forecast to be at parity with petrol or diesel cars. Again, the Government are not lowering costs for families; they are raising them.

When the Secretary of State dumps other targets, I have to ask: who set these targets and then failed to take the action to meet them? The Government did. Laughably, they say that this is about long-term decisions. The biggest long-term cost that the British people face is failure to act at the scale required to tackle the climate crisis. The Secretary of State says again that the Government are on track to meet their 2030 target, but their own watchdog said in June that they were “significantly off track”. It says—this is from last Thursday—that the Government have not offered evidence to back their assurance

“that the UK's targets will still be met.”

There is no evidence that they are on track to meet their targets.

Perhaps worst of all, imagine being a business trying to make decisions and invest in our country when they literally do not know from one day to the next what the Government policy is. Since the Prime Minister's announcements, businesses from around the world have said that, by backing off climate action, the Prime Minister is turning his back on the greatest economic opportunity of the 21st century. Meanwhile, the UK heads into yet another winter where people cannot afford their energy bills. There are still no proper plans for a roll-out of energy efficiency, no plans to properly lift the onshore wind ban, and no proper plan to get the offshore wind market back on track.

Finally, let me say to the Secretary of State that the consensus on net zero has been hard-won over two decades. We have a duty to debate it on the basis of facts, not falsehoods. I have to say to her that it is deeply regrettable that she used her first major public appearance—two weeks ago at her conference—literally to make up complete nonsense about meat taxes, which I notice she did not defend today, and for which frankly she was exposed on national television. I say to her that it demeans her, it demeans her office and it demeans public debate. The Government said that they were going to move on from the premiership of Boris Johnson, but people will be deeply disturbed to find that that appears to mean dumping commitments to net zero and keeping his peculiar relationship to the truth.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his response to my statement. He raises a number of questions that I wish to address. He mentions the prospect of the seven bins policy. He has forgotten that he voted for it. The Conservatives, by contrast, came to the good sense to course correct. He has taken leave of his senses and forgotten what he has voted for in the past.

On the question of dietary changes, the right hon. Gentleman might like to speak to his shadow climate change Minister and shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who both have pushed to treat meat like tobacco in the past. The substantial point that I would make is that we need to be practical about our net zero policy and to make sure that we are having honest debates. We on the Conservative Benches stand by our record. We are proud to be the party that has decarbonised faster than any G7 country, and it is regrettable that the Opposition cannot acknowledge that achievement. We are proud that we have secured almost £200 billion of investment in low-carbon energy projects since 2010 and that we have helped to secure this country's energy independence by backing North sea oil and gas, protecting 200,000 jobs.

Can the right hon. Gentleman be proud of his record? He said that we should sacrifice our growth to cut emissions and that we should borrow £28 billion in his blind ambition for 2030. He supported coal, before he changed his mind and is now against it. He also said that growing our renewables sector to 40% was pie in the sky, but in the first quarter of 2023, 48% of our power came from renewable energy. He spent years at Gordon Brown's side and as Energy Secretary but did nothing to boost British nuclear in his time in government, whereas we are forging a new path, with every operational nuclear power station in this country having started life under a Conservative Government. Members do not need to take my word for it that our energy security is

safer with us, because just this weekend the owners of Grangemouth made it clear that the threat Labour's plans pose to the future of the refinery, potentially putting thousands of jobs at risk, would be a danger for energy security. Furthermore, we cannot allow oil and gas workers to become the coalminers of our generation. It has been said that Labour

“does not properly understand energy”,

with it being “self-defeating” and “naive”. Those are not my words but those of the general secretary of the Unite union and the head of the GMB.

Furthermore, the right hon. Gentleman talks about uncertainty. If he would like to give the business and industry certainty, he and the shadow Chancellor need to sit down and agree how much money they will actually spend—is it £28 billion or £8 billion? Is it no new money, or is it what we heard over the weekend, which is as much as £100 billion of new borrowing for GB Energy? Conservatives will prioritise energy security. We are set on delivering the most ambitious net zero targets of any major economy, and we will do this all without forcing families to choose between protecting their family finances and protecting the planet.

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

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I warmly welcome what my right hon. Friend has just said about the focus on the grid and accelerating grid access. I hope she will be able to pick up on the report that my Committee is undertaking on that subject and that we can contribute to her deliberations. As she will be aware, I wrote to the Prime Minister on behalf of the Committee in the week following his speech, offering him an opportunity to put some flesh on the bones of what his more pragmatic approach to achieving net zero ambitions actually means. Will she confirm when my Committee can expect to receive a reply to that letter? Will it include an analysis of the impact of the trajectory of delivering net zero on the five-yearly carbon budgets and, in particular, how the announcement we have just had confirmed by the Transport Secretary, who is sitting next to her, on maintaining the zero-emission vehicle mandate will impact on that trajectory?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend and commend his long-standing work on environmentalism; I have been privileged to work with him on this before. I will be responding to him and I look forward to coming to speak to his Committee in due course. We set out unprecedented levels of detail in the analysis of how we are going to meet the targets earlier this year. I also accept the Climate Change Committee's analysis, which is that the changes we have made are not materially different in terms of achieving our targets—we are absolutely committed to making sure that we do so. As he rightly points out, the biggest announcement we have made on achieving those targets is the one relating to the grid, which will allow for much greater and quicker electrification of society when it comes to the impacts of other proposals.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): There seems to be no level to which this Prime Minister will not stoop in his pursuit of a culture war. Apart from the reactionary brigade on his own Benches and the flat earthers, he has angered many across the UK, from environmental groups to Tory donors and even Boris Johnson. These legal targets and deadlines have been in place for some time and, accordingly, businesses active in all these sectors will have had investment and disinvestment plans in place for years. Reducing the UK's energy use by 15% by 2030 was a tough target, but we need tough targets if we are to rise to the situation the planet faces.

What does the Prime Minister do when faced with difficulty? He scraps the energy efficiency taskforce after just six months—it is utterly embarrassing. If this Government were so worried about the affordability of climate measures, why were they offering less support than the Scottish Government for heat pump installation, and why do they keep cancelling successive home insulation schemes? Of course, all this follows the Tories permitting a new coal mine, along with the Cambo and Rosebank oilfields. Is the Secretary of State at all surprised that two thirds of UK voters say that the Tories cannot be trusted on climate change?

Scotland's ambitions in this area are far greater and faster. Scotland's Net Zero Secretary, Màiri McAllan, said that the Scottish Government had been

“blindsided by these announcements, with zero consultation in advance”

and that it was an

“unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations”.

The Prime Minister's reckless decision, combined with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, makes it extremely difficult for Scotland to hit our targets. Last week, Scotland transferred—it would be an export, post-independence—more than 400 GWh of renewable electricity to England. Many other wind power schemes are in development, including the world's biggest at Berwick Bank, which will ensure that Scotland is one of the world's biggest exporters of clean green energy. We also have two hydro schemes ready to go, if the Government were to put the contractual agreements in place.

Scots often ask about the costs and benefits of this unequal Union of ours. Many will now wonder if watering down our climate ambitions or the obligations we committed to at COP26 is too high a price to pay.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Let me be clear: there has been no watering down of our targets. We have the most ambitious decarbonising targets of any major economy, and we have not changed those at all. We are resolutely committed to them. By 2030, we will have cut emissions by 68%; the US is planning to cut its emissions by 40% and the EU its emissions by 55%. The people of Scotland will be very proud that we are the most ambitious major economy in the world, and we will work towards that together.

We have worked with the devolved Administrations since the announcement, and I am due to speak to my counterpart in due course—I have been in correspondence with him. One of the biggest things that we will do that will be helpful for the Scottish people particularly, and that will bring benefits to the renewable energy sector,

is to improve the grid. Having spoken to more than 100 investors, I know it is their biggest ask, and it will be very positive, not just for Scotland but for the whole of the UK.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Even before Dogger Bank comes on stream, the UK is leading the world in offshore wind generation. I hope that in due course we will also lead the world in nuclear generation. If we are to charge up all those electric cars and power all those air source heat pumps, we will need an awful lot of electricity at peak times. We will also be producing a lot of electricity at off-peak times. Does the Secretary of State agree that hydrogen will have an important part to play in powering heavy vehicles and heating homes? If we are to do that, we need to make sure that our gas grid does not become a stranded asset, because we might need to press it into service.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend and he makes an excellent and correct point. While making sure that we grow our intermittent energy sources such as solar and wind, we must also have a stable baseload underneath that. He is right that hydrogen will play an interesting role, and I am speaking to the sector about how we can move forward. It is an exciting policy area and I will explore it in many ways. We also have a trial on heating homes. I pick him up on one point: we will be using gas for a long time. Even the independent Climate Change Committee acknowledges that we will still be using gas in 2050.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: We have another debate to follow. I will try to get everybody in, but I will prioritise those Members who have not already asked questions in previous statements or who did not get in. Brevity would be much appreciated in both questions and answers.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I value the cross-party consensus that this country has enjoyed for the past 20 years, which is responsible for some of the strenuous targets that the Secretary of State has outlined. However, I was disappointed by the Prime Minister's statement and, indeed, the tone of the Secretary of State's remarks today. In the spirit of cross-party consensus, will she set out a hierarchy for the utilisation of the 10 MW of low-carbon hydrogen that the Government have now committed to, so that the limited supply of hydrogen power is delivered first to high-energy users such as those in the steel, ceramics, glass and cement sectors who need the extra heat that electricity cannot provide?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that hydrogen possesses enormous potential when it comes to our industrial sectors. I will be meeting many people from the sector tomorrow and will be looking at that point very carefully, and I would be happy to speak further with him about it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): When the new Select Committee on Energy Security and Net Zero first met, the first thing we did was to have huge roundtable days with over 50 different stakeholders from the sector. Time and again, those stakeholders talked about the tardiness of getting planning approval and access to the grid, so I absolutely welcome action that will deliver cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy. I also get the point about needing carrots, not sticks, for electric vehicles. In my constituency, those with driveways pay only 5% tax on their electricity, but those who do not have a driveway have to pay 20% tax. That is true all across the country, so will the Secretary of State join me in pushing the Chancellor for those carrots to be fair carrots?

Claire Coutinho: My right hon. Friend is a huge champion of all environmental issues, and I look forward to speaking to her Committee in due course. It is really important that we have a just and fair transition—that is exactly what the proposals we have set out aim to do. She will know that tax matters are for the Chancellor but, again, I would be happy to speak to her further about those issues.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Honestly, this statement takes Orwellian doublespeak to new levels. It must have set some record for the largest number of misleading statements in the smallest amount of space. I do not know how the Secretary of State has the gall to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that this is about easing the burden on hard-working people, when she knows that all the evidence shows that what has been announced will increase costs for ordinary people.

For example, we have heard from the Climate Change Committee that the changes when it comes to landlords and efficiency standards in homes will cost renters an extra £300 a year. The Office for Budget Responsibility is clear that, as a result of the changes that are going to be made, our dependence on gas will cost us more. If the Government really cared about hard-working families, they would not be handing Equinor £3 billion to develop the climate-wrecking Rosebank oilfield; they would be admitting that what the Secretary of State is doing is ripping up the climate consensus for short-term electoral calculation and populist right-wing propaganda.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, but if she had any constituents living in properties off the gas grid, it would be clear to her how worried people were about those policies. We have given them this reprieve because we understand that putting in some of those technologies, such as heat pumps, would have cost them thousands of pounds—making sure that they had the right insulation in place, for example.

Turning to Equinor, far from us paying that company money, that is something that will pay tax into the Exchequer, unlocking green investment and allowing people in the wider sector to continue in 200,000 jobs across the economy. Those are jobs, people and communities that we will need in the transition to renewable energy, because they are the same people with the same skills that will be used. It would be right for the hon. Lady to talk to the people of those communities about this issue.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that, in order for this to work, green products need to be affordable and attractive. What study has her Department made of the attractions of synthetic and sustainable fuels as another option, compared with batteries? They may be easier for many of these users.

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question—we have spoken about this issue before. We will be consulting on synthetic fuels, in particular for aviation, and we are looking at alternative fuels more widely, for example for rural homes. I would be happy to keep up the conversation with him about our progress.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): In the words of my constituent Adam:

“In Vauxhall these climate policies would help local parents like us to pay our energy bills this winter and keep our children safe and warm. Without these policies children in London face a bleak future as the climate crisis does irreparable damage to the world around them.”

Like many other Vauxhall residents, Adam is deeply concerned about the impact of the Government’s delays and about the world we are leaving for our children. Does the Secretary of State not understand that these delays run contrary to the aim of making the lives of the next generation better than the lives that we all enjoy today?

Claire Coutinho: We do understand the importance of energy efficiency. In fact, during our tenure we have raised the proportion of energy-efficient homes from 14%, when we came to office, to 50%. We are also spending £6 billion in this Parliament and a further £6 billion up to 2028, in addition to the £5 billion that will be delivered through the energy company obligation and the great British insulation scheme. This is something that we are taking seriously, and the hon. Lady can give her constituent that assurance.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Given that our total emissions are less than the increment in Chinese emissions every year, my right hon. Friend is right to be pragmatic about this. At present there are planning applications for solar farms ringing Gainsborough totalling 15,000 acres—enough to feed the city of Hull every year—all based on a fiddled application for a national infrastructure project. There is currently a planning presumption against building solar farms on land graded 1, 2 or 3a, but not 3b. But for a farmer there is no difference between 3a and 3b land. Can we change that planning presumption and build solar farms on top of factories and on grey land, rather than taking good farming land?

Claire Coutinho: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend about the need to build solar farms in more appropriate places, which is why I announced, in the last couple of weeks, that it would be easier to build them on industrial rooftops, car parks and warehouses in the way that he has described.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): The Secretary of State has suggested that many people have not bought into the concept of net zero. Instead of seeing

[*Claire Hanna*]

that as an opportunity for leadership, the Government play into misinformation about made-up taxes and the seven deadly sins. She will be aware that Northern Ireland is already a laggard on climate issues because the Assembly was collapsed just after it had finally passed binding targets, and before it had taken any meaningful action on issues such as retrofitting, planning for renewables and transforming agrifood. Is she also aware that Northern Ireland relies largely on the all-island single energy market for our energy needs, and is she confident that her Government are keeping up with their responsibility to ensure that we match the standards of that market?

Claire Coutinho: We care about climate change, which is why we have the most ambitious targets of any major economy. That is what we have delivered on to date, and that is what we will be delivering on when we get to 2030 as well. As for the single electricity market, I am familiar with that, and we talk to our Northern Ireland counterparts regularly to make sure that it is working in a way that benefits the Northern Irish people.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The Secretary of State is right: we must take people with us on this journey to net zero. When it comes to incentivising people in the take-up of electric vehicles, what more can the Government do to broaden—or turbocharge—the provision of public EV charging points by companies and councils?

Claire Coutinho: The most important thing that we can do to turbocharge that is get the grid working and look at both transition and distribution, which is exactly what we are planning to do in our responses to the Winsor report. I would say to anyone who wants to buy an electric vehicle that if that works for them they will be able to do it, and nothing in our plans will change that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The cheapest energy is the energy that we do not use. It is unforgivable that the Government have cancelled the obligation for landlords to upgrade homes to an EPC grade C rating by 2028 at the latest. A comprehensive home insulation scheme would reduce bills and carbon emissions this winter. I am going to make a proposal that might sound quite attractive to Conservative ears, because it is about incentivising and tax breaks. Will the Secretary of State consider allowing landlords to offset spending on insulation against their income tax bills? That would benefit tenants by enabling them to live in warm and comfortable homes.

Claire Coutinho: I set out earlier the amount that we are spending on insulation: £6 billion in this Parliament, with a further £6 billion to 2028 and an additional £5 billion through the energy company obligation and the great British insulation scheme. The real-world reason for why we did not pursue that policy is that it could have cost property owners up to £15,000, and we did not want to put further pressure on rents at a time when families are really struggling. With regard to the hon. Lady's policy on income tax relief, I suggest that is not necessarily the best response, because a lot of landlords are pensioners and will not necessarily pay income tax. However, we will continue to look at everything we can do to ensure that insulation is properly delivered.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The announcement changed two key dates that were the subject of a lot of work by the previous Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Does the Secretary of State agree that in terms of the preparedness of the industry affected and the awareness of consumers, there is a contrast between the automotive sector and domestic heating, with far more progress having been made on the former, so there was a stronger case to put back the dates on home heating than on the automotive sector? Does she also agree that if we are to have power available where it is needed for electric vehicles and to heat our homes, we need to speed up the reinforcement of the electricity grid?

Claire Coutinho: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's points about the grid. Every single person in the sector I have spoken to has said that the announcements we have made about the grid are the most important made to date. In terms of electric vehicles, if the prices get to a point where families want to adopt them, they will do so. Nothing in our policy stops them. On domestic heating, it is right that we have taken some space for households that would not be suitable for such technology. He is right to welcome the uplift on the boiler upgrade grant. I have spoken to providers such as Octopus, which has said that it has seen a fivefold increase in inquiries since we announced the policy.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It was clear from talking to industrialists about net zero and carbon capture last week that they were exasperated with the Government's start-stop approach to business, the snail's pace of decisions and, of course, the lack of clarity. The Chemical Industries Association has reported declining production and said that domestic demand remains low. It needs CCUS, its fellow industrialists need CCUS and net zero needs CCUS. When will we get some final decisions, or are those initiatives also under threat?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to articulate the potential of carbon capture and storage. Earlier in the year, we set out the £20 billion package—a large package by international standards. We have set out some progress, and we are working at pace to ensure that we can set out more later in the year. He talks about lack of clarity; if he is worried about that, I gently say that he might want to look at his own party's position.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), synthetic fuels—by that, I mean genuinely synthetic fuels made from green hydrogen and atmospheric carbon capture, rather than biofuels or fuels from waste—are net zero, because the amount of carbon at the tailpipe is the same volume recaptured to make the next lot of fuel, yet the myopic zero-emission vehicle mandate prevents the UK from benefiting from synthetic fuels for our road vehicles. Will my right hon. Friend show the same welcome pragmatism she has shown to the rest of the agenda and revisit the zero-emission vehicle mandate?

Claire Coutinho: We have set out our position on the zero-emission mandate. However, we are also looking at synthetic fuels. As I said, we are consulting on them for

aviation, and we can look at them more broadly. However, we have set out the position on the ZEV mandate, which has been widely welcomed.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Given that the rowing back on the commitments towards net zero came on the first day of the parliamentary recess, it looked an awful lot like there was an attempt to avoid democratic scrutiny. The Secretary of State has said that she wants to take people with her. May I put to her a group of people she could take with her by reversing some of these daft decisions: private renters. When I meet families who are renting from private landlords, particularly in the Marsh area of Lancaster, I hear that their energy bills are far higher because of their doors and windows and how their roofs are leaky and not insulated. That rowing back on the standard in the private rented sector is costing families more. Will she please look again at that?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady, but that takes some gall when the Labour party left the proportion of energy-efficient homes in this country at 14% and we have taken it to 50%. I have set out the multiple billions that we will be spending on insulation, which is important to us. But, at the same time, asking families up and down the country to spend £10,000 on updating homes would have been passed on in rents and may have led to more shortages in the private rented sector. That is something we absolutely must not see at a time when families are struggling.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I too welcome my right hon. Friend's comments on grid connections; that is something I am concerned about and have raised a number of times. Can she reassure businesses that may be making investment decisions right now that, when she brings forward her plans, those timescales will dramatically reduce? I am not talking about reducing from the 10 years we have seen reported to eight, six, four or even two years—I am talking about a really serious reduction in practical timeframes.

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for all the industries in her area. Our ambition is to tackle the challenge with the grid. We will be setting out for the first time a geo-spatial plan, looking at planning and looking at all the different connection points to make sure we have an overall strategy for the country, which will immeasurably speed up the connection process.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): September's offshore wind auction failed to attract any successful bids, a result that dealt a severe blow to hopes for a floating offshore wind industry based off the south-west coast of Wales. What reassurances can the Secretary of State offer that lessons will be learnt from that auction process and that action will be taken to ensure that investment in this new exciting industry is secured in future?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about offshore wind as an exciting industry, which has done incredibly well under our contracts for difference programme. We are looking at floating offshore wind, and he will know the support we have put in place, but I have been speaking to investors and stakeholders and will be making sure that we look at some of the challenges the sector faces.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What role does she see for the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods in helping the United Kingdom to meet its net zero targets?

Claire Coutinho: The point of our proposals is to make sure that people have choice, that we can bring people with us and that people can live their lives in the way they want to. We can enable them through decarbonising the power grid and giving them alternative options, so we can make sure that we can get to our net zero targets in a way that is practical and achievable for families.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): At the Democratic Unionist party conference on Saturday past, the Ulster Farmers Union, of which I declare I am a member, had a leaflet on achieving net zero. Can the Secretary of State outline how we will meet our international obligations in terms of net zero with this rollback and how firms and farmers that have already invested in green policies and procedures will be able to compete with those who can go full steam ahead with older practices and no incentives whatsoever to change?

Claire Coutinho: We are not rolling back from our targets at all; I agree with the Climate Change Committee's assessment that there is no material difference between the projections in June and the recent assessments it made post the announcements. I welcome a lot of the work that many of our farmers are doing to pursue environmental goals. I have talked to many in my constituency who are doing quite phenomenal things at a local level. They will be supported by our agriculture policy, the landmark Agriculture Act 2020 and the Environment Act 2021 that we have brought forward in recent years.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Last winter the taxpayer covered around half the cost of British people heating their homes. That amounted to exactly £39.3 billion of taxpayers' money spent between last October and this March. At the end of last year, 33% of properties with a loft did not have loft insulation. How concerned is the Secretary of State about the cost to future taxpayers of rowing back this Government's previous insulation plans?

Claire Coutinho: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we spent £40 billion last year helping people with their energy bills, paying on average half of people's energy bills to support them through that difficult time. On insulation, I would say that when we came into power, 14% of homes were energy efficient, and now that figure is 50%. We are spending £6 billion in this Parliament, a further £6 billion to 2028 and £5 billion through the energy company obligation and the Great British Insulation Scheme to make sure that our homes are energy efficient.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Government's belated recognition that net zero policies are costing individuals in their pockets, costing jobs and of course producing huge profits for the eco industry. But is the Secretary of State not concerned that, by maintaining the legal target for 2050, she hands a weapon to those who want to use the judicial review

[Sammy Wilson]

mechanism either to delay or to stop important decisions on airport expansion, new roads and oil and gas licences—delaying even some of the policies that she says today she wants to delay to save people money?

Claire Coutinho: We are confident that we can meet those targets, and we see opportunities in the transition ahead of us—we see jobs, investment and opportunities to export British products around the world. That is what I will focus on in this job to ensure that we make the most of the energy transition and that it benefits all parts of our country. We also want to do that in a sensible way that protects families and household incomes.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): The Secretary of State is explaining that she is only slowing the Government's headlong dash to net zero because of waning public support. When did the Secretary of State think that she was ever going to maintain public support for policies that will make our constituents poorer, colder and less free, while at the same time allowing communist China to increase its emissions by more than our total emissions in every year of this decade?

Claire Coutinho: As I said, the climate transition presents huge opportunities for this country and the people of this country when it comes to jobs, investment and improving our energy security. That will be the focus of my work in this role. However, we will do that in a way that protects finances and families from clunky and clumsy unimplementable policies.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement.

Backbench Business

Early Years Childcare

[Relevant document: *Fifth Report of the Education Committee, Support for childcare and the early years, HC 969.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the mover of the motion, I should say that we will have a maiden speech, and we have a very short time for this debate. I warn those who are participating that there could be a maximum time limit of five minutes, but it might be a bit less. We will see how it goes—I just wanted to warn Members, because, obviously, there will not be a time limit on the maiden speech.

8.51 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for childcare and the early years.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate early in this parliamentary sitting period and for allowing the Education Committee to continue its work on this vital area of policy. I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), recognising the pressure on parliamentary time today, for having withdrawn her equally important debate. I hope that she secures another one on that subject.

When I ran to be Chairman of the Education Committee, I proposed an inquiry into early education and childcare, and I was very glad to get the support of a substantial majority across the whole House, as well as from individual members of the Committee in pursuing that. As the parent of a five-year-old and two-year-old, I should perhaps declare a special personal interest in this area, but there is probably no single subject more vital to the future success of our children than their earliest experiences of education, and the stimulation, engagement and support they can receive through high-quality early years education and childcare.

As many others have argued, there is enormous economic benefit from investment in this space. However, the last time I troubled the Backbench Business Committee for time to debate it was in advance of the last Budget, when I was very glad that the Treasury accepted the case for major new financial commitments in this area. I said then that investment in childcare and early education would benefit multiple groups: parents who wish to work; schools to have properly socialised children ready to learn; children who benefit from better stimulation; and those with special educational needs with earlier identification. It is a win to the power of four.

Our inquiry was launched before the very significant expansion in the Government's childcare offer and their plans for substantially increasing investment in the funded hours. It is important to note, however, that our oral evidence was taken both before and after the detail of the announcements became known. We heard both the relief of the sector at the scale of the commitment being made and also many of its ongoing concerns about the complexity of the many schemes of funding, the overall

level of funding going into childcare, particularly for three and four-year-olds, and the many serious and ongoing pressures facing providers.

I am enormously grateful to the many expert witnesses, parents, providers, academics, campaigners, childminders and nursery practitioners who gave evidence to us. Indeed, it is worth noting that this inquiry received more written submissions than any other in the life of my Committee and, in so far as my Clerks recall, any other inquiry in the history of the Education Committee. I put on record my thanks to the Clerks of the Committee and their apprentice, who had to handle an unprecedented quantity of material with calm determination and expertise.

Due to the very important list of other debates that have taken place today, I will not have time to re-present every one of the 21 recommendations that we made in the report on the back of the more than 10,000 pieces of evidence. However, I want to remind the Minister of the pressing nature of the challenge, reflected in the enormous public response to our call for evidence, and I will focus on three key recommendations.

The affordability of childcare is a key concern for parents, and before the Budget it was becoming clear that the sector was facing a crisis of both affordability and availability. I have no doubt that the additional hundreds of millions in funding this year and next will make some difference, and that the roll-out of funded hours for the under-threes over the next few years will make a big difference for working parents, but I urge the Government to consider very carefully recommendations 6, 8 and 11, as well as overarching recommendations 1 and 2 on the need to work across Government to ensure adequate funding. The additional billions that the Government have committed over the long term will succeed only if the sector is properly supported in the short and medium term and if we continue to have strong and thriving early years education across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

I know the Department for Education is not able to make decisions on taxation, but I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider very carefully the case for our recommendation on exempting childcare providers from business rates and the payment of VAT on building costs. Not only are these taxes a false economy for the Treasury, as the DFE's evidence admits these costs have to be taken into account in a setting's funding rates, but they are a barrier to much-needed expansion to meet the Government's own ambitions. Worse, many childcare businesses pointed out to the Committee that the size of their premises is a matter not of choice but of meeting regulatory standards required by Government and Ofsted guidelines. They therefore find themselves having to pay more in business rates not as a result of a commercial decision to expand but as a result of wishing to meet the space standards set by public bodies.

I raised nurseries' pressing concerns about their rapidly increasing business rates bills in a previous debate but, as our unanimous recommendations suggest, fixing this problem and creating a level playing field among providers on rates and VAT should not be used as a cost-saving measure; it should be used to ensure that more resources are available for paying, upskilling and retaining expert staff. In support of this recommendation, written evidence from the National Education Union said:

"Business rates for nursery schools can be over £100,000 in some areas, so the absence of a rebate is a significant pressure on already overstretched budgets."

Written evidence from the National Day Nurseries Association said:

"Business rate property revaluation from April 2023 has seen providers report bill increases of 40-50%."

In a survey of NDNA members, 782 nurseries across England were asked what they would do if they no longer had to pay business rates: 61% said they would increase staff salaries; 49% said they would reduce losses in their business; and 40% said they would mitigate fee increases to parents. If affordability and quality are as important to the Government as availability, I believe that they should take account of this evidence. I know my hon. Friend the Minister is passionate about social mobility and the benefits of early years education, and I urge him to ensure this continues to be pressed with the Treasury.

We have heard strong arguments from the Treasury about the benefit to parents of being able to work, where there is affordable childcare provision. This has been a key rationale for the expansion of so-called free hours, which we have recommended should be called "funded hours," down the age groups. It was a key rationale behind the very welcome changes to childcare costs within universal credit. However, in that context, I urge the Minister to press his Treasury colleagues on recommendation 11 for a fundamental review of the tax-free childcare system to improve both understanding and uptake.

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs tax-free childcare report and survey of 2021 found that 43% of people found the name confusing or unclear. Of these, 58% said it prevented them from looking into tax-free childcare and 54% said it prevented them from signing up to the scheme. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that

"in the four years after introducing tax-free childcare, the government spent £2.3 billion less on the scheme than it had planned."

In the written evidence we received from parents, they said:

"The tax free childcare system is confusing and onerous to use, and complicated to calculate."

Childminders told us:

"Not enough parents know about Tax-Free-Childcare, especially not the self-employed. Many parents also find it...difficult to set up the payments."

My biggest disappointment with the announcements made at the Budget is that the tax-free childcare system was not touched, yet we know that the theoretical benefits of this policy are not reaching a very substantial proportion of the parents it was designed to help.

Worse, in answer to my written parliamentary questions, we have seen that even those who have gone to the trouble of registering or re-registering for support through the current cumbersome system, only around half actually claim anything from it, which does not suggest a system that is living up to its promise.

The Select Committee made a number of other suggestions for supporting affordability for parents, not least our call in recommendation 13 for better support for stay-at-home parents.

The last area I want to press particularly hard with my colleague on the Front Bench is the logic of our recommendation on offering funded support to parents

[Mr Robin Walker]

in training or study. The logic is that elsewhere across education policy the Government are going out of their way to encourage people to upskill, supporting lifelong learning and investing in the long-term productivity of our country by ensuring people are better skilled. It is, therefore, counterproductive to disincentivise parents from pursuing higher qualifications by making 30 hours of childcare available only to working families on a particular income, and explicitly not to those in study. The recent report by the all-party parliamentary group for students on the cost of living and its impact on students highlighted the severe challenges facing parents in study. Addressing that, as part of our recommendation 18, would make a massive difference to that group of parents.

Supporting the workforce, expanding family hubs, not just in some areas but across the whole country, expanding the early years pupil premium and investing in early intervention and training to identify and meet special educational needs are among the other key recommendations of our report. I could speak passionately in favour of every single one of our key recommendations and, when the Select Committee meets tomorrow, I look forward to the detailed consideration of the Government's response, but I know many other Members want to speak in the debate.

I end by commending the whole report of my Committee to my hon. Friend the Minister. Having served in the Government, I appreciate that he may not be able to accept every one of our recommendations straight away, but I hope he will recognise the weight of evidence that sits behind them, the incredible importance of getting policy in this area right and the immense value of continuing to invest in our children.

Our Prime Minister has described education as “the closest thing we have to a silver bullet”

for improving productivity. I welcome his commitment to making education the main funding priority in every spending review—early years education needs to be at the forefront of that. Having worked with my hon. Friend the Minister over a number of years, I know how passionate he is about evidence-based policy to improve life chances for children, closing the attainment gap and tackling disadvantage. There can be no greater impact on each of those than investing effectively in early years.

I am hugely grateful to colleagues from across the House who have supported the debate and I am delighted that we have a maiden speech to look forward to from one of the House's newest Members. I commend this report and debate to my hon. Friend the Minister.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that this is a maiden speech and there will be no interruptions.

9.1 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this important debate on support for childcare and the early years.

In my constituency of Selby and Ainsty enormous challenges exist for children who have additional needs and who sit at that critical juncture between the early

years and key stage 1. One reason for that is the failure to build a special educational needs and disabilities school for the Selby area of my constituency, despite Department for Education funding having been allocated since 2019. That forces parents to make an impossible choice: they can place their children in mainstream schools that do not suit their needs, educate them at home with little support or have them travel for hours a day to attend schools in Harrogate or Scarborough. This outrageous situation cannot continue and, as Selby and Ainsty's Member of Parliament, I will fight tirelessly for spades in the ground to provide the SEND school those children so desperately need.

If you will permit me, Mr Speaker, I would like in my maiden speech to tell hon. Members about my beautiful constituency of Selby and Ainsty, but before I do so I too condemn the barbaric attack by Hamas terrorists on Israel last week and send my profound condolences and personal solidarity to all innocent civilians caught in the terrible violence that has engulfed Israel and Palestine.

I would also like to take a moment to welcome another new Member to their place: my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks). He is a person of integrity and intelligence, who I greatly look forward to working alongside, as we learn to navigate this formidable place together and show our constituents the difference that a hard-working Labour MP can make.

People in my constituency of Selby and Ainsty represent the best of Yorkshire. They are community-orientated, but personally resilient; hopeful and proud, but grounded and pragmatic; willing to give people a fair hearing, but never afraid to speak truth to power. It is that independent-minded outlook that I believe explains the most exciting political moments in our area's past, because I am not the first by-election candidate to cause a national upset in our part of the world.

Back in 1905, Selby residents, much like their modern compatriots, had suffered through over 10 years of Conservative Government. Britain languished under the rule of an unelected Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, too weak to govern and too lacking in authority to lead a broken Tory party, divided, unsurprisingly, by Britain's trading relationship with the outside world. The residents of Selby looked at this Tory melodrama and said enough, using a by-election to send a Liberal, Joseph Andrews, to represent them. I am proud, Mr Speaker, that some 118 years later, local people in Selby have not lost the defiant spirit of their forebears, this time voting Labour for a brighter future for their community.

In modern times, the Selby constituency has mirrored the national picture, remaining Labour from 1997 to 2010 before being Tory-held from 2010 to now. I would like to take a moment to talk about my predecessors. My immediate predecessor is Nigel Adams, who had the privilege of representing the seat where he was raised and educated. Mr Adams deserves credit for his support for local charities such as Selby Hands of Hope, and his work to secure funding for Tadcaster's flood-alleviation scheme. In his maiden speech, he said that there was

“no greater honour, privilege or responsibility”—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 395.]

than representing Selby and Ainsty. I echo those sentiments and thank him for his contribution.

I now turn to Mr John Grogan, who began the tradition of Labour MPs representing the Selby area. John and I both fought our first elections in Selby as younger men, myself at 25 and John at 26, though I am pleased to say that I had a little more luck on my first attempt. I can only hope that the similarities continue, as John's achievements for our area were phenomenal. He secured the Selby bypass, oversaw the creation of modern flood defences, and achieved funding for Selby War Memorial Hospital, a pillar of our community upon which so many continue to rely. John was an empathetic and tenacious constituency MP, and will be so again when he returns to this place at the next election.

Selby and Ainsty is a vast rural constituency, with no one single centre of gravity. Instead, ancient patterns of agriculture, river trade and commerce have created a complex tapestry of villages and towns, each with its own unique attributes. Selby itself has always been on the national map, passing the centuries under the shadow of our magnificent 11th-century abbey as a prosperous market town. It played its part in the industrial revolution with a thriving shipbuilding industry, and in recent times boasted the largest coalfield in Europe, powering Britain for decades through the hard graft of ex-mineworkers and their families, whose interests I look forward to defending and advancing. It is also clear that our town has a bright future ahead as a regional tourism centre, an emerging hub for doing business, and in its continuing role as Great Britain's energy epicentre.

To the west of Selby lies Sherburn in Elmet, a town fired by community spirit and people determined, in the best Yorkshire sense of the phrase, just to get on with it. The place is powered by fantastic community groups such as We Are Sherburn, the Old Girls' School, Elmet Lions and the annual Scrapper's Cup, stewarded by fantastic local leaders. To the north lies Tadcaster and its surrounding villages. Tad is a brewing town with formidable heritage, and those Members who enjoy a Madri, a John Smith's, a Foster's or even a Newkie Brown are likely to be sampling the produce from that beautiful part of north Yorkshire.

However, like so many other northern villages and towns, the success of communities in my constituency has been in spite of a Government who have consistently failed to get the basics right. In our part of north Yorkshire, it is hard to stay healthy when a GP appointment or a timely ambulance is a thing of the past, and when dental provision is so poor that one resident told me that she had had to pull out one of her own daughter's teeth. It is hard for people to keep their head above water when average mortgage payments in our area have increased by thousands of pounds a year, and when those trying to build a life on newbuild estates are fleeced by the very companies that are meant to provide them with a decent place to live. It is hard to get on as a region when broken bus networks isolate the elderly, stop people getting to work, stifle small businesses and cut us off from the outside world.

I have no doubt about our future success, but local people know that we deserve better than what we are forced to settle for now. That hope for a fairer future is what I will fight for every single day that I am in this place, and I am grateful that constituents have provided me with this opportunity to serve, because for me, the

need to right those systemic wrongs is not just about productivity, health outcomes, or pounds and pence. It is about values—Labour values—and the conviction that residents in Selby and Ainsty have a right as British citizens not just to survive but to realise their full potential, and to live decent, happy and fulfilled lives that allow them and their families to flourish.

I hold those convictions not only as a Labour Member of Parliament, but as somebody who is deeply patriotic, who believes that Britain should lead the world and set an example for what it means for the Government to serve their citizens. That belief in progressive patriotism is defined by my experience as a young person. I am the first Member of Parliament to have been born after the last Labour Government took power in 1997. I know that some Members may want to close their ears at that fact, but it means that I have grown up in a world destabilised by the technological revolution, climate crisis and war, and I will live through a century of unparalleled global upheaval.

In the face of those challenges, myself and other young people believe that Britain has a duty to become a leader again. When globalisation has failed to solve challenges such as the climate crisis, British business and British workers must lead the world in securing green prosperity and winning the race to net zero. When the age of peace on the European mainland is over, and America's ability to provide stability is in question, the UK must lead in NATO, support our European partners, and enhance our armed services' ability to defend our interests. When democratic ideals are threatened, either by autocratic regimes or the destructive power of terrorist organisations such as Hamas, the UK must defend our allies overseas, uphold international law and human rights, and strengthen our democracy at home, protecting civil liberties, enhancing trade union rights, and pursuing meaningful devolution of powers across our United Kingdom.

As young people, this is the future we choose. We are clear-eyed about the challenges that lie ahead but determined to play our part in realising our country's promise. As I said on the night of my election, I hope to be a representative of that power of young people to make a difference. But we will not do it alone. I was sent to this place by a constituency whose population is older than the national average but who put their faith in me to defend their interests. That is because, in spite of the divisive politics that seeks to pit one generation against the other, in Selby and Ainsty we share our ambitions for our community and our country, and are committed to realising them together.

It will be the privilege of my life to play my part in this work, working in our Parliament, which I revere so deeply, to give back to my community and country, which I love so very dearly. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: I am now putting a four-minute limit on speeches.

9.11 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) to his place. I am sure that he is going to be an absolute asset to his area. Not many people may know that, although I am a Member of Parliament in Cornwall, I was born and raised in North Yorkshire.

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

I therefore wonder why none of the children in his constituency wants to go to school in Scarborough, because I thought it was a fabulous place to go to school. I understand his campaign, however, and I admire his confidence and desire to stop older people and younger people being pitted against each other. He made me feel incredibly old, because I left Scarborough to move south before he was even born, and I had thought that I would live my whole life there. I genuinely welcome him to his place.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this debate, and I also thank the whole of the Education Committee. This is a truly important debate and I agree with most of his recommendations today. This Government have made strides in improving the quality of childcare. As a parent with a young child at home—she is nine now—it was not that long ago that I also took an interest in these matters. It is important for all working parents and all parents who need to go into training to improve their lives that we take this sector very seriously and see what we can do to make things better.

During the spring Budget statement, I was incredibly proud to sit on these green Benches as part of a Government who were supporting childcare and early years, putting them at the heart of their long-term economic strategy. It is something that I have long campaigned for. With the Chancellor pledging to double the Government's support from £4 billion to £8 billion by 2027-28, there is no doubt that we are serious about getting to grips with this issue. I feel that I can hold my head up high at my daughter's school gates, in the knowledge that working parents in Truro and Falmouth will save, on average, up to £6,500 a year on their childcare bills. This really matters to all the people in my constituency.

It is never going to be straightforward to expand on that scale in what is a predominantly private sector-led service. That is why I also appreciate the pragmatic steps that the Government are taking to ensure the deliverability of promises and to try to take the sector with them. The necessary changes being made to the staff-to-child ratios, which can be controversial, are actually bringing them in line with those in Scotland and other countries. I believe that gives childcare providers the freedom necessary to deliver 30 hours of free childcare in the short term, while knowing that perhaps we need a longer-term solution. That is combined with the Government's work to encourage people back into the childcare sector. I am excited by that expansion, which will have a positive effect on the people of Truro and Falmouth.

I am going to skip quite a lot of my speech, because we are running out of time. I want to add to what the Chair of the Select Committee has said. Perhaps this issue will be for another day, but I have campaigned on it before. I have further ambitions for the sector. Eventually I would like early years educators to be given the same pay, status and training as primary school teachers. It is my belief that the work done with under-fives is every bit as important as—if not more important than—what primary school teachers do. There would be a cost and an upheaval to the sector to bring that into reality, but it is important. It would help to solve some of the issues with the growing SEND sector. When things are a little more calm, I would like real thought to be put into

bringing early years educators in line with primary school teachers, particularly in training but also in their all-important career status.

9.15 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I warmly welcome this debate. There may well be a few speakers from Northern Ireland today, which illustrates the fact that there is a real crisis in Northern Ireland, where we are being left behind. The Government talk a lot about so-called super-parity measures in Northern Ireland, but this is an example of a super-disparity that urgently needs to be addressed. We do not have a devolved Assembly functioning in Northern Ireland. That is an ongoing crisis, but this is a crisis for households and families, and it needs to be addressed urgently by someone with Government authority of some kind.

Parents are really struggling with childcare costs—in many cases, they are greater than their mortgage costs, which we know are challenging. That puts into context the sheer scale of the problem that families face. Childcare is vital infrastructure, both social and economic. It is a form of early intervention, early education, an anti-poverty measure and a means to improve economic activity, long-term productivity and gender equality. The Government have rightly addressed those things, but we need an affordable and high-quality childcare policy.

We have concerns about the 30 free hours scheme that is in place in England. We do not feel that it is appropriate—it is certainly not the measure we want in Northern Ireland. Last week, my party published a paper on childcare and what we could do differently in our region. We have listened to expert evidence—some of which is reflected in the Select Committee's report and recommendations—that the free hours approach fails children in low-income households; distorts the market for childcare, creating issues in the sustainability of supply; and centres on parental employment rather than on the child. We need to do things differently around universal benefits, which will help to stabilise and enhance the sector and provision.

The sustainability of the sector is an important factor. We should not be in denial about the fact that a lot of labour from other parts of the world, including the European Union, was vital in sustaining the childcare sector. That is also a pressure point under the new dispensation. This is a key investment that we want to make in our future, and one that the Government have to make—preferably through a restored Assembly. In the absence of that, I call on the UK Government to intervene, because the parents and children of Northern Ireland cannot wait any longer for a properly resourced childcare scheme.

9.18 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) on securing this important debate. At the outset, I should declare that two of my three children are below school age. We are very lucky that we have found an exceptional childminder and a superb pre-school that my two sons enjoy every day of the school week. However, from talking to many mums and dads around my constituency, I know it is not always easy to find the right childminder, nursery, pre-school or whichever setting they want and

is right for their child. When they do find it, it is even more difficult to pay for it and to meet the high costs of childcare.

I warmly congratulate the Government on the massive increase in spending on subsidised childcare that will apply from 2025 to children as young as nine months old, and when the Chancellor announced it, I welcomed it. However, whenever there is a great announcement such as that, there needs to be significant scrutiny of the detail. We need to iron out any of the gremlins that might be in there. In the limited time we have, I want principally to outline two points through the lens of a wonderful childcare setting in my constituency, Big Top Nursery in the village of Waddesdon, which I visited earlier this year.

The first point relates to the funding rates that we have as of this academic year. I would really appreciate it if the Minister could meet me at some point to go through the detail further. However, I inform the House that, on the current rate the Government will pay, compared with what it costs Big Top Nursery to provide childcare, it is currently losing £1.40 an hour on a three-year-old, which equates to £14 a day. For a child who goes to Big Top for 22 hours a week, which is a standard placement for that setting, the nursery is making a loss of £30.80 per week, which across those 22 hours-a-week children adds up to a loss of £1,500 every single year. That amount of money is not sustainable if that private nursery is going to remain in business and provide the excellent childcare that it does in the long term. Either we need to find a way to ensure that nurseries can charge a top-up, with the “free hours”, as they are badged, actually rebadged as subsidised childcare—not creating the expectation that everything is free, welcome though the funding is—or there needs to be another model that recognises that such a gap exists across thousands of settings across the country.

The other point I wish to mention very briefly is the way Ofsted treats pre-school and childcare settings. Big Top Nursery was subject to a report from Ofsted that it deems deeply unfair. Questions to staff were so unclear that staff had to ask the meaning of them, and the inspector then gave them a report that was not fitting for the setting, which had parents up in arms. My challenge to the Minister is to find a way to fix that when every single parent wants the setting to remain open and to be where their children go. As yet, there is no mechanism for parents to feed into such a process.

9.22 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) on a full political speech delivered with real energy, style and passion, though I could have done without the age joke.

I sat on the last Childcare Bill Committee seven years ago, and I warned then that the plans would not fly because of lack of investment. We have just heard an example of that from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith). The Minister all those years ago said that the market would create itself. It did not, and costs remain high while the number of places available is restricted. The spring Budget was an opportunity to get that right, and I welcomed the announcement of a

funding package as well as the extension of the subsidised 30 hours entitlement—it was a step towards helping parents and providers with affordability and sustainability concerns—but this investment was too long overdue, and more will be needed to address the structural problems in the early childhood education and care system if the funding increases are to be implemented effectively.

Years and years of underfunding early years entitlements has left providers unable to invest in development and straining to survive. Children and families in my constituency and across the country deserve equal opportunities to thrive and fulfil their potential. The new clauses I moved all those years ago in that Bill Committee are still relevant today, but they are not on the statute book. One would have mandated the Government to ensure that all three and four-year-olds had access to high-quality, flexible and accessible early education and childcare provision, delivered by well-qualified, confident and experienced practitioners and led by an early years graduate. Sadly, that did not happen.

Childcare settings in disadvantaged areas are the least likely to be of high quality, which is why I argued during that Bill Committee for the Government to have the power and the responsibility to ensure that all our children are cared for and taught by highly qualified professionals. Instead, we have a situation in which nurseries are unable to pay the wages needed to attract early years teachers because of the chronic underfunding of the free education entitlement by the Government. At the same time, universities are withdrawing their early years teacher training courses because they cannot attract applicants.

It is widely recognised that effective early intervention and support is vital to improve the outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Such children have the same aspirations for the future as other children, but they face more barriers. Across education, health and care, we need to know that these children’s needs are being met and not missed. Despite their failures and initiatives, the Government still lack the ambition necessary to focus on those children whose life chances are being blighted from their earliest years, in order to close the attainment gap.

Last week, I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) set out Labour’s plan for the ambitious reform of childcare. With a taskforce chaired by Sir David Bell, Labour’s early years plan will ensure that we have a childcare sector that works for families, children and the economy, and that high standards are not just for those families who can afford them. The chief executive of the London Early Years Foundation responded to the policy, saying:

“As children from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to find access to quality nursery education—thereby increasing the attainment gap even further—we welcome Labour’s new ambitious review to fix what is currently a broken childcare system.”

The Tory Government have broken the childcare system, from axing huge numbers of Sure Start centres to misunderstanding how they would deliver the promised provision seven years ago. There was no plan then and there is none now. It is time for them to move on.

9.26 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I join in the praise of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) and his Committee's comprehensive report. We have 30 to 40 years' worth of evidence about the benefits of early intervention and improving the first 1,001 days of a child's life. The report adds to that evidence base.

All too often, we have a debate focused on getting mums and dads back into work, when actually the early years should always be about families. We should never forget that for some children, good early years care—being able to go to a nursery—is a lifeline. It is a chance to escape a violent home, to learn, to have some routine and to eat regularly. I had quite a chaotic home life myself and know all too well how that can affect people. The report's focus on the quality of early years and childhood care is imperative, as is the focus on making sure that parents have parental choice, which is something we should all strive to achieve.

On parents, let us be honest: we love our kids but they are hard graft. This morning, I said to my daughter that she needed to drink her water like mummy, and she looked me square in the eyes and said, "But I don't want to be like you." Then my baby threw her Weetabix at me and snotted down my top—and that is before I came to this mad place to deal with thousands of emails.

Parents are quite literally on the edge because having little children is hard work, but add in mortgage-level childcare costs, the daily juggle, things going wrong—my mother-in-law has broken both her ankles—and finding childcare and it all adds up to quite a lot of pressure. The transition to parenthood is excruciatingly tough on relationships. We should not forget that it is one of the few life stages in which relationships are likely to break down, causing family breakdown.

I did a comprehensive report with Onward, which gave evidence to the Select Committee, and in our recommendations we focused on families and talked about reducing complexity, as there are currently eight childcare schemes; front-loading child benefits; sharing parental leave; subsidising support in training; and really focusing on the whole family existence and what we know about the weird and wonderful lives of families.

One of my girlfriends who is currently in the trenches with a new baby sent me an article about the South Korean Government, who are basically subsidising mortgage rates—people get lower mortgage rates if they have children—because they are trying to deal with their low birth rate. Governments all around the world are trying to think creatively.

For the first time we have a Government in which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have put the early years at the heart of a growth agenda. I take issue with the remarks of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). The Labour party does not have a plan; it talks about having a review and about talking a bit more. I put it to Opposition Members that they have in the Committee's work a review and all the details.

We give the workforce the most precious things in our lives, yet they feel undervalued and underpaid. There is a litany of recommendations in the report. I look forward to the Minister's comments on the recruitment campaign. We must stop calling the hours "free"; they need to be

funded or subsidised. The early years premium, for example, is £376 per annum, and £1,400 for primary schools. We need to see tax changes on business rates and VAT. I could go on and on, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will not.

9.30 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) on an excellent maiden speech. It reminded me that my maiden speech as a Member of the Legislative Assembly some years ago was on childcare. I hope that he is slightly more successful than me in achieving his political aims.

Members across the Chamber have made excellent points about the chronic failure to think big on the issue of childcare, and about the series of minor interventions to tinker with a sector that is struggling under the weight of complex funding streams. Such interventions have increased demand on the sector, as various promises of free hours are made without any meaningful work on the supply side and so do not add up to any sort of solution. As we have heard, the UK has the highest childcare costs in the OECD. Northern Ireland is falling even further behind because, as my colleague the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) said, successive Executives have failed to take sufficient interest in the issue.

The crisis is not new. As I said, I addressed it as an MLA back in 2016, and I subsequently established an all-party group, which has driven quite substantial policy change and ideas. However, when government is down more than it is up, implementing those things is difficult. There has been quite a bit of progress in people's understanding of the issue, and I credit Northern Ireland groups such as Employers For Childcare and Melted Parents NI, as well as the Federation of Small Businesses, with correctly framing the issue as one of gender equality in the workplace, of outcomes for children and, fundamentally, of economics. The issue is crucial in tackling Northern Ireland's chronically low productivity and high levels of economic inactivity.

In January, my Social Democratic and Labour Party colleagues in the Assembly set out a plan for a two-stage rescue plan to address the acute cost of living pressures that families face, including gargantuan—and growing—childcare bills, which, as Members have said, dwarf housing and other costs; and to address the recruitment and retention crisis that the sector faces. We also had a longer-term strategy that would borrow from successful—and usually social democratic—economies around the world. We noted at that time the inverted pyramid of funding that means that 10 times more is spent on post-primary education than on early years education, despite all that we know about the impact of a child's first 1,000 days.

Nobody is pretending that this is a simple issue, but the necessary fixes for childcare start from the principle that it is a common good. Yes, having children may be meaningful in our lives—I think back to being asked by an indignant morning radio presenter whether this was not just chronic self-interest on my part because I had big childcare bills—but fixing childcare starts with an acceptance that, as well as being a meaningful experience,

parenting is necessary for the replenishment of the human race and the workforce of the future, so providing for childcare is a matter for us all. It starts from the knowledge that more equal societies do better. That means affording everyone an equal opportunity to thrive in the workplace, and understanding that giving children a better and more equal start in life is good for the public purse and for society throughout their lifetime.

9.34 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for opening the debate. I also add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather), who gave an absolutely tremendous speech, full of patriotism and love of community, which is just what we need to hear from the Labour party. He is already an asset to this place, so I welcome him and look forward to the contribution that he will make.

It is a very good thing that the Government are committing such a significant amount of money to the early years. Normally, I do not want to boast about Government spending as if it is a sort of proxy for good work on its own. In this case, however, doubling the contribution that is being made, from £4 billion to £8 billion, is a tremendous demonstration of the Government's belief in early years and family policy, so I welcome it.

I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) about the importance of the birth rate and fertility, which is a great challenge facing countries around the world, and something that our country will have to grapple with. With that in mind, it is very important that we do put money into families. My anxiety, though, is about the method of implementation and the effect on pre-schools. We are talking about institutions that deliver perhaps 30 hours of education and childcare per week. Increasing the funded hours effectively makes the state the sole buyer of those places at pre-schools. Effectively, we are nationalising these schools and making them clients of the Government. That might be okay. There is nothing wrong with that in principle, except for the fact that the Government are traditionally not very good at setting prices. If, as we see in Wiltshire, the price that is set is way below the actual amount of money that it costs to run the pre-school, then we have a problem. We are distorting the market to the point of destruction. I am very concerned about the effect of that on pre-schools.

Nurseries are able to do better. They run throughout the year and are able to cross-subsidise and to charge for private places. I am afraid the effect might well be that we are driving parents into nursery provision, which is often of a lower quality and out of the pre-school sector. I received a letter from Little Dragons pre-school in Devizes, which I went to see the other day. It said that the current direction of Government policy is towards the state-funded, impersonal supervision of children by profit-motivated businesses from the age of two. I am not saying that is the case for all nurseries, but it is a concern.

I just want to make a simple suggestion—probably an oversimplistic one—to the Minister. We massively over-complicate the provision of childcare and the way that funding works, to the great distress of families and, of course, these providers. We are now putting £8 billion a

year into early years. That is £6,500 per family. Why do we not just give that money, by some means or another, directly to families to use as they see fit? In the very early years, up to the age of two, I think that could be in the form of cash—a direct entitlement to parents to spend as they see fit, whether in a formal or informal setting. For three and four-year-olds, there could be a voucher system, redeemable at any registered institution, and it should be allowed to be topped up.

It is wrong that there should be a complete monopoly of state funding in these institutions. Why can a charity like Little Dragons not charge a bit extra if it needs to? Of course, it will also provide a free place to a child of a family who could not afford any additional fee. These schools should be allowed to work that out themselves with their community. Of course there is also quite a significant universal credit childcare entitlement that should enable people to support that cost.

I think we can be more imaginative, more flexible and more respectful of the choices that parents themselves want to make, both for the sake of their own family finances and the way they want to live their lives, but also in order to sustain a healthy and vibrant early years sector.

9.37 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for securing this important debate, and I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) to his place. I commend him for his outstanding maiden speech—he has made his constituents very proud tonight.

Throughout this cost of living crisis, countless nurseries in my constituency of Coventry North West have struggled to keep up with ever-rising prices. At Georgie Porgie's pre-school, Katie, the director, fought to keep her nursery open after her utility bills tripled. She was lucky and was able to save her business, but countless other nurseries across the country have been forced to close. We need only look in the faces of the nursery workers who have lost their jobs, and their security, to see that our current system is failing. The inadequate levels of state funding offered per child leaves nurseries to struggle with insufficient funds and inadequate support.

The system fails not only our nurseries, but the parents and carers who use them. Closing nurseries means less space for their children, packed waiting lists and longer morning commutes. But a financially struggling nursery almost always means a rise in fees. It is not surprising that Britain now has the third most expensive childcare system in the world, with more than one in five households spending more than half their income on it. For women who wish to return to work soon after the birth of a child, those costs crush their aspirations. Three in four mothers say that childcare fees are so significant financially that their best option is to stop working altogether. I know from speaking to many families on the doorstep that this is an issue that many of them raise with me. Our system hinders the opportunities and, ultimately, the freedom of women who wish to return to work, and we cannot continue to allow that to happen.

I strongly support my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) in her plan for an extensive review of the system. I believe that any reform we implement must move us closer to

[*Taiwo Owatemi*]

the examples of countries such as Finland or Estonia, where there is a better-funded, expanded system of care. As the shadow Secretary of State has suggested, that should involve empowering local councils to deliver their own childcare, filling the gaps in provision. But it should also include more substantial grants offered to nurseries, which could stabilise the industry, while also potentially adopting a Finnish-style tiered system, where each family's fees are far more closely linked to their income.

While I welcome the Government's plan to expand childcare provision to children as young as nine months old, those changes are simply not enough to tackle the challenges in our system. If we seriously wish to give our businesses and parents a system that works, we have to go for far more substantial reforms. Sticking-plaster solutions just will not work. I urge this House not to turn a blind eye to our childcare system, but to press ahead with the meaningful, long-term changes that this country desperately needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will call Jim Shannon, but I do need him to sit down at 9.44 pm so that I can bring in the Front-Bench speakers.

9.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) on his excellent speech.

Two women in my life have made a big difference. The first is Sandra, my wife, who I have been married to for 36 years. She brought up our three sons; she looked after them, she reared them and she is the person who can take the credit. Not only that, but she is now a grandmother and looks after our six grandchildren, with a stint at 5 o'clock in the morning and numerous stints in the afternoon. I mention that because that is the difficulty with childcare and early years: without my wife's assistance, my boys and their wives could not afford to go to work. What was easily afforded 10 years ago is not afforded the same way today, particularly when parents are working beyond 65 years of age.

I think it is important, in my contribution to this debate, to say that we cannot talk about support for early years and children without highlighting the Government's determination not to raise child benefit thresholds since 2013. From 2013 to now, the average increase in the UK consumer prices index has been 25.9%. How can any mother and father afford childcare and early years care? They quite simply cannot. If the boss gives them an extra £2,000 on their wages, that does not help, because it puts them over the threshold and they do not get the benefit. I want to put that case on the record.

With that 25% increase in CPI, a family who paid £98.15 per week for 25 hours of childcare in 2013 would now pay £285.31 per week. That is massive. For any mum and dad with a family to rear, there is no way they can do that—and if they earn more than £50,000, they do not get a tax credit to help them. These are people in ordinary jobs, trying their best to make their mortgage payments, heat their homes and educate their children,

and they are not getting one penny from the Government in child benefit. That is why an uplift of that threshold is so important.

I will quickly give the House the example of the second woman I want to mention—not the second woman in my life—my parliamentary aide, who writes all my speeches. She leaves work, collects her children from the childminders, helps them with their homework, prepares their meals, gets their lunches ready and makes sure they are healthy, as they are not allowed any unhealthy food until Friday, which means peeling carrots, making fruit salads and cubing cheese. She does the housework, including the washing, and puts her children to bed, making sure to spend at least 20 minutes reading with them. The point I am making is that the pressure on her day is phenomenal.

I finish with this point: we must do something now before a generation of families are submerged in debt and stress and cannot recover. They need help with childcare, help with finances and help to manage expectations. A message must be sent to working families, as well as to single-parent families: "We see you, and we will support you." That is what this debate is about.

9.44 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), on securing this important debate today and on the Committee's excellent report on support for childcare in the early years. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, and I particularly congratulate my new hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) on a truly outstanding maiden speech. He has shown what a brilliant champion he will be for his constituents on the local, national and international issues that shape their lives. We are so glad to have him with us in this place.

I do not have time to mention specifically all the other contributions, but we have heard from hon. Members across the House about the eye-watering childcare costs that families face. We have heard about the deficit in Government funding for the so-called free hours. We have heard about the recruitment and retention problems faced by early years providers and about a sector that is under unbearable pressure.

Children's earliest years are crucial to their development and life chances. Many of the factors that contribute to the education attainment gap are already present by the time children start school. Early years education and childcare should be focused on ensuring that families have the early support they need to give their child the best start in life and education, while also delivering affordable childcare to enable parents to work.

The current hours-based model for childcare funding is fundamentally not working for providers or for families. For families, it is inaccessible and complex and does not reflect the reality of their lives and working patterns, nor does it deliver affordability. At the same time, 4,800 providers were forced to close their doors last year due to rising costs. The current model is not working for them either.

Parents have seen rising costs year on year, and growing childcare deserts where they cannot access the childcare they need. There are now two children for

every Ofsted registered childcare place in England, creating a barrier to parents, particularly women, taking on employment. We are seeing women leaving the workforce for the first time in decades, priced out by the costs of childcare. It is parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities who find it hardest of all to find childcare places.

The Government have delivered a triple whammy—the most expensive childcare in Europe, an unviable financial model for providers and significant childcare deserts. It is a colossal failure for both families and the skilled professionals who work in early years. The policies that the Government have introduced in response to the crisis, after 13 years of failure and only because of intense pressure after the Chancellor spoke a year ago about the need to expand the labour market but mentioned the role of childcare only once, will not fix the problems. Additional funding is welcome, but pumping it into a system that is already broken will not deliver the change families need.

Childcare providers are clear that, as things stand, they cannot deliver the expanded entitlement. A survey of 800 providers by the Early Years Alliance found that only 20% of providers who currently offer places to two-year-olds plan to deliver additional places under the expanded entitlement. Another 33% said that they were unsure whether they would deliver places under the new scheme. That is because the Government have no plan for expanding the workforce to deliver an expanded entitlement in a sector already struggling to recruit and retain staff, no plan for premises for which there are rightly strict requirements in the early years sector, and no vision for quality in the early years.

Childcare must be about more than just minding children while their parents work. It should be able to provide every child with high-quality early years education. A Labour Government will be driven by our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage, including by boosting child development with 500,000 more children hitting the early learning goals by 2030. Labour is determined that childcare should offer more flexibility, better availability and high standards for children and families. We will draw on the best practice internationally to drive an ambitious and coherent programme of reform, with higher standards for early education, better availability, stronger regulation of the financial sustainability of providers and a clear strategy for the childcare workforce. We have commissioned former Ofsted chief inspector Sir David Bell to undertake a full review of the early years sector and help to develop the detail of our early years plan.

A Labour Government will work with the early years sector to build capacity, including by removing the legislative barriers to local authorities opening new provision. We will also work with the sector to ensure that there is a plan for the early years workforce that offers more opportunities through high quality training and recognition for the skilled work of early years practitioners. We will also recognise that childcare does not end when children start school. We will deliver funded breakfast clubs in every primary school to help parents work, provide opportunities for children to play, learn and socialise at the start of the school day and ensure that every child is able to access a healthy, nutritious breakfast and start the school day ready to learn.

The Government's record is the most expensive childcare in Europe, childcare providers closing their doors and childcare deserts across the country. They have always regarded children as an afterthought, and in doing so they have failed children and their families. After 13 years, their sticking-plaster solutions will not fix things now. A Labour Government will deliver a childcare system that works for children and their families from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school. We put children at the heart of our programme of government from 1997 to 2010, and we will do so again.

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): May I first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Education Committee? He has helped with the development of our policy in this area, and his Committee produced a good report that we have responded to. I am also grateful to him for relinquishing his time so that I have longer to respond to some of the points made in the debate.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) on giving his maiden speech, which I thought he delivered with aplomb. He gave us a lovely portrait of his constituency, which I visited—on the losing side—a number of times earlier in the year. I have no doubt that he will be a strong advocate for his constituents.

May I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of our early years and childcare workforce? Through challenges from the pandemic to the rising costs of living, they have worked tirelessly to provide care that allows children to flourish. Extensive evidence makes it clear—a number of hon. Members touched on this—that high quality early years education has a positive effect on the cognitive, behavioural and social development of children in both the short and long term. Building a strong foundation for every child is at the heart of the Government's agenda, and it is critical to enabling children to succeed both at school and later in life. That is true for all children, but as hon. Members will know I have a particular interest in disadvantaged children, having run charities for them before I became an MP, and it is especially important to try to ensure that they get the right support in their earliest years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) touched on in her excellent speech.

High quality childcare is also fundamental to building a strong economy, allowing parents to enter employment, take on more hours or choose from a wider range of jobs. That is particularly important for mothers, whose employment rates and pay have been and continue to be disproportionately impacted by having children.

The Government have a strong track record of supporting parents with the cost of childcare, supporting disadvantaged children and ensuring that childcare is of high quality. In September 2010, we extended the three and four-year-old entitlement that parents typically take as 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year. In 2013, we introduced 15 free hours a week for disadvantaged two-year-olds. In 2017, the three and four-year-old entitlement was doubled to 30 hours a week. Now, recognising that childcare is one of the biggest costs facing working families today, the Government are making the largest single investment in childcare ever.

[David Johnston]

This investment—an additional £4.1 billion—will double the amount being spent by the Government on childcare so that by September 2025 all eligible working parents will be able to claim 30 hours of free childcare—I will come back to the word “free” in a minute—from when their child is nine months old until they start school. As hon. Members know, that will be rolled out in stages. From April, eligible parents of two-year-olds will be able to access 15 free hours. From September, eligible parents of children aged nine months and upwards will be able to do likewise. The full 30-hour entitlement will come in from September 2025.

Alex Cunningham: We are all going to welcome additional funding within childcare and the expansion of services, but surely we need a very clear workforce plan if we are actually going to deliver all this.

David Johnston: I am grateful to the hon. Member, because I am about to come on to workforce. However, just before I do so, alongside this we want to increase the supply of wrap-around care to enable families to work more, or flexible, hours. We are investing £289 million in start-up funding to provide local authorities with funding to set up wrap-around provision from 8 am to 6 pm in their areas. More broadly, local authorities are critical to delivering this expansion of childcare, and we are working closely with them to understand the challenges they face and ensure they have sufficient places to meet parental demand. We will shortly be appointing a contractor to support them in that work.

There have been some key themes in this debate, beginning with funding rates. By 2027-28, we expect to be spending more than £8 billion every year on childcare. We have already increased the funding paid to nurseries for the existing entitlement by £204 million this year, rising to £288 million next year. That means that the national average rate for three and four-year-olds has gone up to £5.62 an hour, and for two-year-olds it has gone up to £7.95 an hour from £6—an increase of a third. Those rates are informed by a survey of more than 10,000 providers that we carry out in order to understand the funding pressures they face. That said, I am very happy to meet both my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), who raised issues in his constituency—there has been a 10.1% increase for providers there—and my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), where there has been a 6.8% increase. I am happy to continue that discussion.

On quality and flexibility questions, it is worth first noting that we have some of the highest-quality childcare in the world, with 96% of early years settings rated good or outstanding. However, we are working with the sector to increase flexibility and remove unnecessary burdens. In September, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) touched on, we changed the ratios for two-year-olds. We are pushing landlords to be more flexible and to allow childminders to operate on their premises, and we will

shortly announce our response to the recent consultation with the sector about the early years foundation stage, where we are hoping to make a series of changes to help practitioners more easily do their jobs while maintaining higher standards.

Delivering expansion is going to require a significant boost to the workforce, so it is key that we are able to encourage more people into this sector—to raise its status, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth touched on. In the new year, we will launch a big recruitment campaign to encourage people to consider working in a nursery school or as a childminder. We are expanding the early years professional development programme: nearly 25,000 people are already undertaking apprenticeships in this sector, but we are looking at accelerated apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships and will also be running early years skills bootcamps from next year to try to get more people into the sector. A start-up grant scheme for childminders, which will provide £600 for those registering with Ofsted and £1,200 for those registering with a childminder agency, will also be starting shortly.

Very briefly, I will touch on some other points made by the Chair of the Select Committee. Our funding rates do take business rate costs into account, and in the autumn statement the Government announced a freeze to the business rates multiplier, a tax cut worth £9.3 billion over five years. Small business rate relief exists, as does relief for charities, but I am happy to look at the extreme cases that my hon. Friend set out. He is right to flag the issue of tax-free childcare, which can save parents up to £2,000 per year on the cost of childcare, or up to £4,000 for children with disabilities. We are trying to drive up the take-up of that through our Childcare Choices website. As for people in education and training, a big part of this offer is to try to encourage people into work: students are eligible for the universal 15 hours for three and four-year-olds and for the 30 free hours if they meet the income criteria, and there is also the childcare grant and the parents’ learning allowance. However, I have heard the point that my hon. Friend has made.

I think I have covered most of the points that people have made. A number of Members from Northern Ireland have spoken: obviously, this issue is devolved in Northern Ireland, but I will just say that next week, I am chairing a meeting of the British-Irish Council on the topic of childcare. I am sure we are going to discuss childcare in both Northern Ireland and the Republic.

I think I have covered most of Labour’s commentary. I would be a lot more amenable to criticism from the Labour party if it had any policy whatsoever in this area. As it does not and all it has done is commission a taskforce to tell it what to think, I will close the debate there.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for childcare and the early years.

Protection of Dark Skies

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

10 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I rise to speak as the Member of Parliament for North Norfolk, a constituency blessed with huge skies and one of the few places in England where one can see, on occasion, the northern lights. Such is the significance of my constituency that we have two internationally recognised dark sky discovery sites: Kelling Heath holiday park and Wiveton downs. The North Norfolk coast is classified as having one of the darkest skies in the UK, with some areas as dark as those in the forest of Galloway or Exmoor national park, which are two internationally recognised dark skies that we all know well.

We celebrate our dark skies in Norfolk, and I wish to take a moment to highlight the fantastic work of the Norfolk Coast Partnership. Its dark skies festival opens up the secrets of our night-time wildlife and raises awareness of the impacts of light pollution. I should also pay tribute to the former co-chair of the all-party group on dark skies, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who is a passionate campaigner. I also want to welcome David Smith and Shreoshi Das from Buglife, who are in the Gallery; I am proudly wearing the emblem pin badge this evening and they have helped me prepare for this debate. They have travelled a huge way, from Somerset and Scotland, to be here to champion the importance of invertebrates, nature and our dark skies.

I rise to speak also as the glow-worm species champion—that is one of the lesser-known facts. Despite its name—here is a slight lesson—it is actually a beetle belonging to the firefly family. Not just the glow-worm, but many creatures, along with our dark skies, are under threat from light pollution, which has so far received very little action to curb its ever-increasing expansion into our nocturnal world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this subject forward. He has talked about light intrusion. I am blessed to live in a coastal area and also on a family farm, so I know perhaps more than most what true darkness is like. However, I, like many MPs, have recently had to instal security lighting, which certainly had an impact on the animals and birds, putting them on alert and disturbing their sleep. Does he agree that although we need protection from the darkness to address security concerns, there is still a need to protect our ecosystems and that this must be more widely known and circulated? Tonight, he is ensuring just that.

Duncan Baker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for intervening on me; it would not be an Adjournment debate without that intervention. Of course, he is absolutely right in what he says, and this debate is all about highlighting some of the impact on and damage to our nocturnal creatures, be they mammals or insects. Later in the debate, Members will hear about some practical steps we want to take to try to achieve an improvement, through something so simple; light pollution can literally be healed with the turning off of a light, and there are not many pollutions for which we can do that.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): A large number of Northern Ireland Members are present tonight; I ask Members please not to let anyone make a joke about us being unenlightened!

For many years there was a stunning murmur of starlings in south Belfast. It was quite something to be seen from Albert Bridge, which I used to cross every evening as I walked home to Woodstock Road. They used to come from across the city and beyond, but after some planning changes we noticed that they had all but disappeared, apparently because of a change in lighting. Along with others, I have worked with the authorities, and we were able to make a few relatively minor changes involving blinkers on some lights and filters on street lights. Since then, we have seen the return of some of the starlings. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that understanding the issue and, perhaps, minor planning changes will constitute a big part of protecting nature?

Duncan Baker: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Later in my speech, I will come to some of the practical measures that are being taken by planning authorities. Many are leading the way in being able to put together sensitive ways of dealing with light pollution, and in 15 or 20 minutes Members will be able to hear about some of those things that are being done by authorities around the country.

Darkness is not only essential to the health and wellbeing of people; it is equally important to wildlife. A huge variety of animals need darkness for feeding, for migration, or even simply to rest. I shall say more about that shortly. As humans, we need sleep to recharge and maintain good physical and mental health, and so do animals. We are probably all aware of the effects of a bad night's sleep on the rest of our day, and after several days without sleep the symptoms worsen. The same effects are seen in our wildlife, and they are exacerbated by the increase in light pollution.

Earlier this year, a group of international scientists estimated that light pollution is increasing globally by approximately 10% every year, and has been doing so for at least the past 12 years. That is an incredible rise in a pollutant that has gone pretty much unchecked, despite concerns being raised since the 1970s by astronomers whose ability to glimpse the outer reaches of our solar system has become obscured. More recently, environmentalists trying to protect nocturnal species such as invertebrates and bats have been pointing to light as a major issue in the pressures on ecology.

Light pollution, as defined by the convention on the conservation of migratory species of wild animals, refers to artificial light that alters the natural patterns of light and dark in ecosystems. Artificial light is of course very useful, allowing us to recreate some semblance of daylight during the hours of darkness. It creates a sense of safety as we travel, and allows work to continue long after sunset. As with everything, however, too much light, and in particular too much poor use of light, is becoming a block to our ability to meeting commitments to save energy, reduce costs and rescue biodiversity. The solutions are relatively simple, unlike those involving other pollutants. Once we remove light, the pollutant is gone; there is no lengthy clean-up operation, the results are immediate, and positive changes can happen literally overnight.

[Duncan Baker]

Our dark skies are under threat. We long ago lost the ability to see the Milky Way with the naked eye from where the majority of us live in the UK. This marvel of the edge of our galaxy greeted stargazers on every clear night for generations, stretching across the sky, but unfortunately sky glow, caused by light pointing and reflecting into the atmosphere, has restricted that vision to a handful of places in the country. We have become so accustomed to not seeing the Milky Way that many assume it is restricted to professional astronomers, which I think everyone would agree is a real shame.

The Commission for Dark Skies, set up by the British Astronomical Association in 1989, has been warning of this loss of stars and campaigning to raise awareness and secure better lighting to bring back the views that are still out there. CPRE, the countryside charity, runs an annual star count, asking citizen scientists to count the stars in the constellation Orion. This year it discovered that only one in 20 participants had a clear view of our starry skies. However, it is not just amateur astronomers who are suffering; earlier this year, the Royal Astronomical Society published research showing that three quarters of major global observatories are affected by light pollution. This impact is limiting scientific productivity, and reducing the useful lifetime of those incredibly advanced observatories.

Astronomers are not the only ones who are hampered by light pollution. There is now a substantial body of evidence that shows that artificial light impacts on living things. It is altering behaviour, it is changing the physical development of species and, in some cases, it is causing death. When we consider how the natural world has evolved on a series of dark and light cycles, it is not surprising that nature suffers when we alter those cycles by extending daylight and removing darkness. Whereas humans are quick to adapt and use technology to great effect, animals and plants are not so quick to respond to rapid rises in artificial light. They simply cannot keep pace. The majority of animals are active either entirely or partially at night, yet our focus is almost always directed to the daytime species. It is important not to forget the things we do not often see.

Invertebrates, for instance, appear to be disproportionately affected by light pollution. As we all know, our smallest creatures are vital to a balanced ecosystem, carrying out important services such as pollination, pest control, creating soils and filtering water. Unfortunately, they are suffering significant decline from a range of sources, and we must now do what we can to relieve the burden we are placing on them.

A seminal paper from researchers in the UK found that local populations of moth caterpillars are reduced by 52% due to exposure to streetlights. German researchers have estimated that a third of all insects attracted to lights die as a consequence, either through collision, increased predation or simply exhaustion. We see insects out of sync with their natural cycle, emerging too early from their hibernation or larval stage and missing the flowering of food plants. We see evidence that pollination rates are reduced in areas exposed to artificial light. Nocturnal pollinators are vital for pollinating crops, fruit and flowers. A study by researchers at the University of Sussex suggests that nocturnal pollinators are, in fact, more efficient than their daytime counterparts. Those are concerning statistics.

My own species, the common glow-worm, requires darkness to carry out its actions. The flightless female glows a magnificent yellowy green, which attracts the smaller male to mate. They live for only a short window of time as an adult, and they must lay their eggs quickly. Without the dark canvas on which to perform, the males cannot find the females, and thus the chance of a future generation passes by. Glow-worm larvae are ferocious predators and feast on snails and slugs, helping to keep populations under control. Unfortunately, we are losing these charismatic creatures from our countryside in the same way that we are losing the stars.

MPs get to do some pretty fun things from time to time, and the most memorable occasion for me was back in the summer, at the beginning of July, when I was fortunate to visit Sheringham Park in my constituency—I ran around the track on the park run, and 12 hours later I was scuttling through the undergrowth on the same track to find glow-worms. I was joined by representatives from Buglife, who are here this evening, by the UK glow-worm survey and by the National Trust to see these creatures in action. Genuinely, the glow caused by a chemical reaction in the glow-worm's body was one of the most fascinating things I have ever witnessed. It was almost other-worldly, and I would encourage everyone to go and see it next summer if they are fortunate enough to have glow-worms in their constituency. It was fascinating. The first time I saw it, it looked like an LED glowing in the dark. I do not think I will ever forget it. When the male was attracted to the female's glow, we turned on a red torch and, almost immediately, the male turned away from its female and went over to the new light. It was shocking to see just how pronounced the change was in that whole set of behaviours. It is no wonder that glow-worm populations close to light-polluted areas are dwindling, if that is what light pollution will do to their mating habits.

Glow-worms are members of the firefly family, as I said. Global red list assessments of that group by the International Union for Conservation of Nature shows populations under threat. While habitat loss, chemical use and climate change are all contributing factors, light pollution is a threat that we can quickly do something about to start to reverse that downward trend.

It is not just fireflies that are threatened by light pollution. The IUCN has listed light pollution as a threat to 160 assessed species, including birds, amphibians and even primates. The more that we discover about the impacts of light pollution, the more we realise its role in nature's decline.

Hon. Members are no doubt familiar with a blackbird calling in the dead of night. I shall not sing it now, but that was an experience that the Beatles shared in the opening lyrics of their 1968 song, "Blackbird". Where did it come from? That unusual phenomenon, which was coined by the Beatles, was a bird singing through the night due to light pollution. Birds are being tricked into thinking that it is dawn or dusk under artificial lights, which makes them sing out of turn with the normal day and night cycle. What does that do? It can act to deplete their energy levels; it stops their calls at optimum times; and it prevents them from attracting a mate.

Light pollution, as we are already finding out, is contributing to the death of millions of birds. Attracted by artificial lights, migrating species such as shearwaters,

petrels and other sea-wading birds become disoriented. They may end up circling in illuminated areas. It depletes their energy reserves and puts them at risk of exhaustion, predation and potentially even fatal collisions with buildings.

Turtle hatchlings are oriented by the natural light of the moon reflecting on the sea's surface. Artificial lights are confusing them and pulling them into a fatal direction away from the safety of the sea. Closer to home, bats, hedgehogs and other mammals avoid lights, confining them to smaller and smaller habitats.

The effects of light pollution impact not only on animals, but on people, and we are beginning to understand that better. The 2017 report from the chief medical officer warned that

“pollutants such as light...may...be adversely affecting our health”.

Exposure to too much artificial light is altering our circadian rhythms and is thought to be contributing to melatonin suppression, leading to diabetes, heart disease, possibly cancers and a range of mental ill health issues. I will not speak on those matters in any great depth, but members of the Science and Technology Committee in the other place recently published a report on that, and it is well worth looking at.

We have talked about issues relating to humans, what has happened to our star-gazing and the impact on nature, but what is the solution? How do we solve this problem with so many impacts on the natural world? The answers, which often in this place are so difficult to come by, are actually relatively simple, but they require leadership and understanding. While we can solve light pollution with a flick of the switch, campaigners are not calling for us to be plunged back into darkness. Instead, this is all about using light better. We must promote better quality, community-friendly lighting and we must not artificially light environmentally sensitive locations. We can reduce our levels of light pollution by lowering the brightness of our lights, directing lights only to places that we need them and ensuring that unnecessary lights are not on when we are not using them. Every simple measure, such as shutting curtains and blinds when we turn on internal lights, will keep the light where it needs to be and prevent it from spilling into our gardens and wild places.

Local councils are responsible for planning, and I believe that they should have good planning guidelines to be mindful of light pollution. I know that many parish councils—for instance, Weybourne, Blakeney and Cley in my area of North Norfolk—really care about this. They have campaigned for it to be taken seriously, even providing their own dark skies policies. The person who hit that home for me was Lyndon Swift, the former dynamo of Weybourne, where he was chair of the parish council. He was passionate about protecting dark skies, and I remember him talking to me about it a couple of years ago. He was probably one of the inspirations for me to be standing here this evening.

Nationally, there is lots of good news. The “Good Lighting Technical Advice Note for Cumbria”, stemming from the Dark Skies Cumbria project, led by the Friends of the Lake District and produced by Dark Source, and the “South Downs National Park Dark Skies Technical Advice Note” are guidance documents that are leading the way. They should be utilised more widely across the country. There is evidence of more localised actions for change, but I believe that action should be spread across

the whole UK to ensure the results are as far reaching as possible. I hope that this debate, in one way or another, will help my own local council, North Norfolk District Council, consider closely how it can implement policies to help with light pollution.

We must treat light in the same way as we treat other pollutants. We need to monitor and set targets to reduce light pollution levels to ones that satisfy our needs and those of the planet. Guidance and encouragement are clearly not enough. We need to look at how we can create positive action. There are so many gains to be made from doing this, not least the release of the pressure on nature. Switching off unnecessary lights will save money and energy. Better-quality lighting can improve safety by reducing the contrast and shadows created by poor-quality lighting. We can restore our views of the night sky and inspire new generations about the science and wonders of space beyond our planet, and we can restore the natural canvas for glow-worms to perform that magical summer show.

Finally, I thank the staff at Buglife who have helped illuminate me to the issue and to the wonderful world of glow-worms, in particular Karim Vahed and Matt Shardlow, who arranged for my encounter with the species on that fateful July evening, and David Smith for helping me to prepare my speech.

10.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): It is once again a real pleasure to speak about such an important topic and to follow such an enlightened speech, supported by David Smith from Buglife.

In preparing for the debate, I was reminded of my little brother, who is now 40. Many years ago he had a Glo Friend, which I am sure many of us in this House remember, and he was obsessed with glow-worms. He would go down the lane to the river and see many glow-worms—not worms, but part of the firefly family. In preparing my speech, I reminded him of his glow-worm friend and he said sadly, “You don’t see them anymore.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) states on his website, we have seen a 75% reduction in glow-worms, such is the urgency of the challenge that he eloquently, powerfully and interestingly set out. I join him in thanking David Smith and Shreoshi Das for travelling down to be part of the debate. I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend and the House of the steps that we are taking to protect nocturnal and crepuscular life, and the work that my Department is doing, working with other Government Departments, to reduce artificial light.

I draw the House’s attention to the environmental improvement plan. Across its 10 goals, it explains the apex target of how we will reduce the decline of nature by 2030 and increase nature’s abundance after 2030. We will do that through the fundamentals of better-quality soil, better air quality, better water quality and increased habitat.

It is also important to stress the importance of reducing unnecessary artificial light. In the United Kingdom, we are fortunate that we are able to enjoy the marvel of the night sky. My hon. Friend referenced the Lake district, where I live, and I am very fortunate to be able to experience a luminosity level of nigh on zero. While we

[Trudy Harrison]

do have some spectacular displays of the northern lights, seen as far south as Herefordshire, we also have some of the best, earliest and largest numbers of designated dark sky areas in Europe, with Exmoor national park designated the first sky reserve in Europe.

However, in our modern society, artificial light plays a valuable role in providing security. As the previous Minister responsible for the violence against women and girls strategy, I know just how important well lit areas are to design out crime. However, an excess of artificial light can, as we have heard this evening, be very detrimental to both the public and the environment. It can also be a tremendous waste of energy, an extra cost and a real source of disturbance and barrier to enjoying the night sky.

I pay regard to my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), one of the co-founders of the all-party parliamentary group, which is working so diligently. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contributions to the debate. The evidence base on the impacts of artificial light is less advanced than that for other environmental pollutants. The technological capabilities available to us for measuring the scope of artificial light remain in development. It is an area of concern to the Government, but we are taking significant steps.

As I have said, we have committed to the halting of the decline of nature by 2030 and set out in law the Environment Act 2021. We have also introduced a strengthened biodiversity duty on public authorities, which requires them to periodically consider the actions that they can take to conserve and enhance biodiversity and then take action. Furthermore, from 1 November, Ministers will need to have regard to the environmental principles set out in the Environment Act when bringing forward any policy development.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) referred to the importance of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and all other Departments working with each other. We are taking action to work in particular with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We have supported internationally agreed guidelines on light pollution that cover seabirds, migratory shorebirds and marine turtles. These have been endorsed by the UK

and parties to the convention on migratory species. In 2020, the parties adopted a resolution on light pollution guidelines for migratory wildlife. The resolution endorsed national light pollution guidelines for wildlife, including marine turtles, seabirds and migratory shorebirds, as developed by Australia.

In the marine environment, research is ongoing to measure the impact of artificial light and the threshold at which light exposure causes an impact. Those thresholds will allow for the determination of an indicator for light pollution for the UK marine strategy, the EU marine strategy framework directive and at OSPAR, but experts are currently unable to determine what level of light causes an impact. This is what we are working hard to achieve.

I pay particular tribute to National Highways. Clearly, our roads have a considerable impact in terms of artificial light, but National Highways is working to reduce light pollution, investing in technology that allows road lighting levels to be adapted in response to lower traffic flows. That will help us to better understand where night-time accidents occur and the impact that road lighting has as a contributory factor.

On a more local level, light pollution is managed by a number of regimes in the UK, through planning, transport and statutory nuisance policies. Local authorities are encouraged by the Department for Transport to upgrade to sensitive LED lighting where feasible. Local authorities are also required under the Environment Act 1995 to work with national park authorities to conserve and enhance the parks' natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage. Through the collaboration between authorities and parks, we are proud that seven of our protected landscapes in England have achieved international dark sky status.

Finally, statutory nuisance legislation was amended in 2005 to include artificial light as a potential nuisance. This sets out the duties of local authorities with regard to artificial light. I really hope that in the short time I have had, I have given my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk reassurance that this Government take light pollution seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

10.30 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 16 October 2023

EDUCATION

Advanced British Standard

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan):

The Prime Minister has announced that we will introduce the advanced British standard (ABS) for 16 to 19-year-olds. This will bring together the best of A-levels and T-levels to form a single, overarching qualification. The advanced British standard will remove the artificial choice between academic and technical education, placing them on an equal footing, presenting a clear offer to young people while ensuring that every student studies some form of maths and English to age 18.

Since 2010, we have transformed the education children receive. We have relentlessly focused on improving the quality of our knowledge-rich curriculum and qualifications and have put in place the measures to raise standards. Eighty-eight per cent of schools are now rated good or outstanding and, thanks to our phonics reforms, we now have the best primary readers in the western world. We have introduced T-levels as new, high-quality technical routes for young people and reformed apprenticeships to raise their quality and prestige.

We now need to ensure that our 16 to 19 education system is fit for the long term and aligns England with countries across the OECD in terms of teaching time, breadth of study and parity between technical and academic routes. For example, young people in OECD countries typically study seven subjects post-16 compared to students in England who study around three. Students in OECD countries also generally receive more teaching time and study maths and their native language up to 18. We will align with some of our international competitors by increasing teaching time and bringing academic and technical pathways together into a single qualification with full parity of esteem. Within this framework, students will be able to study predominantly technical—including an occupational specialist route—or academic components, or a blend of both.

This reform draws upon the consistent principles that have underpinned our successful reforms by using the best available evidence, investing in teaching quality, and developing a knowledge-rich and broad curriculum. We will build on the knowledge-rich content and depth of A-levels and the high-quality, employer-led occupational standards of T-levels. The introduction of bigger and smaller subjects—called majors and minors—will give students greater breadth, while still maintaining depth of study in the subjects they are most passionate about and require for progression to higher education and employment. Students will typically choose five subjects, or a minimum of four if they are focused on preparing for a specific technical occupation. Given that we know that time with a good teacher is the single most important factor in improving learning outcomes, we will also increase the number of taught hours by 15% for most 16 to 19 students which will particularly benefit disadvantaged students.

This reform will take time and extra funding to deliver, including extra funding for the additional taught hours the advanced British standard will involve. We are providing £600 million over the next two years to lay the groundwork for the ABS and invest in the teachers and institutions that will be vital to delivering it. This comprises:

c.£100 million each year, doubling the rates of the levelling-up premium and expanding it to cover all further education (FE) colleges, disproportionately benefiting disadvantaged students. All teachers who are in the first five years of their career, teaching key STEM and technical shortage subjects and working in disadvantaged schools and all FE colleges, will be paid up to £6,000 per year tax-free.

c.£150 million each year to support those students who need the most support such as those who do not currently achieve a good pass—above grade 4—in maths and English GCSE at age 16. We will also invest in English and maths for all post-16 apprentices who have not gained their level 2 qualification, uplifting the funding rates to match the adult education budget.

c.£60 million over the next two years to expedite evidence-based techniques for maths teaching, including in post-16.

£40 million to the Education Endowment Foundation to expand its post-16 work and embed evidence-based approaches in 16 to 19 teaching.

This is an ambitious, long-term reform programme which will take a decade to deliver in full and require careful development and partnership working with the sector. We will therefore consult extensively, and in detail, over the coming months on the design of the new qualification. The results of our consultation process will inform a White Paper, which we will publish next year setting out our plan for delivery.

Meanwhile, students preparing to take A-level and T-level exams over the coming years should not doubt the value of their qualifications and be confident that high quality pathways remain open to them. T-levels will be integral to the vocational route within the advanced British standard and more T-level courses will be rolled out.

The ABS will ensure that all young people receive an education that is of the highest quality and prepares them to enter the changing workplace where digital transformation, AI and net zero will drive productivity. We will raise the floor and extend the ladder of opportunity for everyone, providing more breadth, increased teaching time, and a greater focus on technical education.

That is how we will give our children the brighter future they deserve, by ensuring that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the modern economy.

[HCWS1067]

Schools National Funding Formula: Correction of Error

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Today I am confirming that the Department for Education has corrected an error in the notional allocations of the schools national funding formula (NFF) for 2024-25.

These allocations were originally published, and notified to the House, on 17 July 2023. However, the Department has subsequently uncovered an error made by officials during the initial calculations of the NFF. Specifically, there was an error processing forecast pupil numbers,

which meant that the overall cost of the core schools budget in 2024-25 would be 0.62% greater than allocated. The Department therefore issued new NFF allocations on 6th October 2023 to correct that error. The Department rectified this error as quickly as possible and—because the republication of the NFF allocations took place during parliamentary recess—I am now providing this statement at the earliest opportunity.

The Department has apologised for this error in writing to both the Chair of the Select Committee on Education and the Secretary of State. The Education Secretary has asked the permanent secretary to conduct a formal review of the quality assurance process surrounding the calculation of the NFF, with external and independent scrutiny. Peter Wyman CBE will lead this review. Improvements have already been identified to ensure that similar mistakes are not repeated.

The Government are continuing to deliver, in full, the core schools budget, which includes funding for mainstream schools and funding for high needs. It will remain at £59.6 billion in 2024-25, the highest ever in history in real terms. This is a percentage increase of 3.2% compared to 2023-24.

Through the schools NFF, average funding is £5,300 per primary school pupil and £6,830 per secondary school pupil in 2024-25, up from £5,200 and £6,720 respectively in 2023-24.

Schools have not yet received their 2024-25 funding and so the correction of this error does not mean adjusting any funding that schools have already received. Likewise, the error will not impact on the publication of the dedicated schools grant (DSG) in December, or when schools will receive their final allocations for 2024-25. The 2024-25 high needs NFF allocations (which fund provision for children with complex SEND) are also unaffected by this error, as are other funding streams outside the NFF, including the teachers' pay additional grant (TPAG) announced in the summer.

I would also like to clarify that the recalculation of the NFF for 2024-25 does not affect the affordability of the 2023 teachers' pay award. There has been no change to the funding that was promised as part of the pay settlement in July, and which the unions agreed meant that the pay award is properly funded.

I recognise that the correction of the NFF error will be difficult for local authorities and frustrating for some school leaders, which is why the Department has rectified the error as quickly as possible. The Department are working closely with school stakeholders, including unions, to communicate this change and support schools and local authorities.

The following key documents that have been updated and replaced with new versions on 6th October 2023 are:

The policy document for the 2024-25 NFF, which is published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-for-schools-and-high-needs>

The "national funding formula: summary table", and the "impact of the schools NFF" allocation tables, which are published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-for-schools-and-high-needs>

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Support for Farming

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): This Government are committed to backing British farmers, who produce some of the highest quality food in the world, contribute billions to our economy and are the custodians of our countryside.

We plan to replace the basic payment scheme in England with delinked payments in 2024, making things much simpler for both farmers and the Rural Payments Agency—building on the simplifications we have already made to existing schemes. Delinking will free up farmers to focus on running their business and delivering the public goods that can be rewarded under the environmental land management schemes.

On 18 September we opened the sustainable farming incentive 2023 (SFI) to applications. As of 12 October, we have received over 14,000 expressions of interest—equivalent to more than one in eight farmers—with the first groups of farmers already implementing their SFI agreements, and many more due to start in the coming days and weeks.

We have also seen farmers continue to show their interest in other environmental land management schemes, such as landscape recovery, where we have received a significant number of high-quality applications that are now being carefully considered. With 7,881 mid-tier and 1,030 higher-tier countryside stewardship applications in this year's round, we have also seen sustained interest in the countryside stewardship offer, following a two-week extension of the application window in response to a challenging harvest. There are now over 33,000 countryside stewardship agreements in place across England in September 2023—a 94% increase since 2020. We are now spending £688 million on rewarding farmers for environmental, climate and animal welfare outcomes this financial year, as part of the wider £2.4 billion that we are committed to spend supporting farmers every year of this Parliament.

To ensure that farmers are treated fairly, we are developing new legislation to improve supply chain fairness in the dairy and pig sectors, with further reviews into fairness in egg and horticulture supply chains due to launch in October and December respectively. To support long-term decision making, the Government also intend to publish their response to the independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain later this autumn, as planned.

The Government are also committed to supporting farmers to realise their contribution to the rural economy. Together with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, we will shortly publish a review of permitted development rights on farms. We are working to grant funding for farmers to invest in the productivity of their businesses and, for the first time, barn-top solar by the end of this year.

We recognise both the pressures facing smaller abattoirs and the opportunities available to them, so we will be launching a smaller abattoir fund by the end of 2023, providing financing for capital investments to support productivity, improved animal welfare and adding value to primary products.

To continue our progress, we will maintain engagement with the agricultural sector and provide practical opportunities for farmers that maintain our food security and also deliver on our environmental ambitions.

[HCWS1061]

Global Biodiversity Framework and Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Last December, the world came together at the convention of biodiversity in Montreal, Canada, to agree the global biodiversity framework, with a priority objective to halt and reverse nature loss globally by 2030. Key to securing the agreement was the commitment to establish a GBF fund to be administered by the Global Environment Facility particularly to help the Global South in achieving this objective.

The United Kingdom announced that it would provide £10 million to the GBF fund during the GEF assembly in August, adding to the Canadian Government commitment. I am delighted that Germany became the third country to commit to this new fund during the UN General Assembly. As a consequence, the fund can now be operationalised and I expect the GEF to start funding projects next year.

Other significant progress was made on GBF implementation and our blue planet fund and ocean objectives during UN General Assembly and New York climate week. This included: the UK signing the ocean conservation pledge, building on our existing commitments to protect at least 30% of our own marine area by 2030; and announcements of funding for some key initiatives including £120,000 in funding to Plymouth Marine Laboratory, as the secretariat for the Ocean Acidification Research for Sustainability (OARS) programme and £2.5 million to tackle illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing by funding the Joint Analytical Cell, which provides much-needed intelligence for countries around the world on protecting fisheries. We have also welcomed Costa Rica, Panama and Peru to the Global Plastic Action Partnership to reduce plastic pollution, particularly in the marine environment.

Working with countries around the world is vital in making progress on the GBF. That is particularly true of working with the Commonwealth of Nations. I chaired the first ever meeting of Commonwealth Environment and Climate Ministers, alongside its Secretary General, Baroness Scotland, which explored ways to strengthen collaboration to tackle global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, ocean degradation and the energy transition.

Key to making progress on GBF implementation is bringing in private finance. Building on our 10-point plan for financing biodiversity, earlier this year we established a global initiative with France on biodiversity credits to accelerate high integrity investment that delivers for nature. At UNGA, the independent co-chairs Dame Amelia Fawcett and Sylvie Goulard of the international advisory panel met panel members in person for the first time and shared the work undertaken so far.

Further to this, the UK has been instrumental in supporting the global, market-led Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures. The TNFD framework has been designed by 40 private sector institutions representing over \$20 trillion of assets under management. The aim of the TNFD is to generate decision-grade natural capital reporting data that can facilitate the alignment of global financial flows in support of improving nature. The panel launched its recommendations on 18 September at the New York stock exchange and again in London on 25 September. The UK Government have been instrumental in providing catalytic funding and political support to the TNFD since 2019. I welcome the commitment from GSK to use this framework from 2025 and hope that many more companies and institutions will start. Now that the recommendations have been launched, the UK Government will explore how best to incorporate it into UK policy in a manner that is coherent with global sustainability reporting in general, and nature themed standards development in particular.

[HCWS1064]

Roadmap for Rural Communities

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Earlier this year, with the publication of “Unleashing Rural Opportunity”, the Government set out their roadmap for rural communities, including a range of measures across four priorities for rural areas: growing the economy, connectivity, homes energy, and rural communities.

On 1 October, I announced further measures to boost broadband connectivity, transport and the supply of affordable homes in rural areas.

The measures I announced include:

A consultation on reviewing and updating the broadband universal service obligation which already gives homeowners and businesses the legal right to request an affordable, decent broadband connection.

A consultation on further proposals to improve broadband provision for very hard to reach premises, which are unlikely to receive a gigabit-capable connection via either a commercial or Government funded intervention. This will ensure communities with the most limited connectivity experience a step-change in their digital connectivity as soon as possible, fuelling the economy and supporting jobs growth for decades to come.

A statement from Homes England setting out its work to support rural communities and families by enabling the delivery of good quality, affordable homes. The statement includes case studies of successful rural housing schemes currently operating within Cornwall and the Yorkshire Dales.

The publication of “Future of Transport: Helping local authorities to unlock the benefits of technology and innovation in rural transport” to help rural local authorities, their communities, and other stakeholders to harness transport innovation, helping to improve access to services, tackle isolation and increase access to jobs in rural and remote areas.

Whether through improved connectivity, housing or transport we are championing rural communities as we seek to grow our economy, so that every part of our country gets the support and opportunity to thrive.

[HCWS1060]

Water Companies

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The price review is an independent, five-yearly process run by the economic regulator, Ofwat, to determine investment plans for water companies and customer bills over the next five years—in this case, from 2025 to 2030. This will include assessing future investment in enhancing the resilience of our water supplies, environmental improvements and customer support.

Following Ofwat’s timeline, I can inform the House that by Monday 2 October all water companies had submitted draft business plans for the 2024 price review (PR24) and published them on their websites.

The draft water company business plans submitted are the opening position in an independent regulatory process stretching to the end of 2024. I expect Ofwat and the Environment Agency now to look closely at the plans and ensure that they meet legal requirements and give customers the best value for their money. We do not allow water companies to charge consumers twice for investment that should already have happened, and through the PR24 process Ofwat will scrutinise business plans to ensure this does not occur.

Following this scrutiny process, Ofwat’s decision on total investment and consumer bills will be finalised in December 2024.

This builds on Ofwat’s announcement on 26 September that, following its assessment of water company performance against targets set for 2022-23, under-performance by the majority of companies means £114 million will be returned to customers next year.

I am also taking this opportunity to update the House on recent developments pertaining to the Government’s actions to reduce discharges from storm overflows.

On Friday 15 September the High Court ruled in favour of the Government’s storm overflows discharge reduction plan, following challenges brought by WildFish and others. All claims were dismissed, meaning the Government won on all grounds considered by the High Court. The judgment supports the Government’s position that the targets under the Government’s plan goes substantially further than existing legislation to tackle the use of storm overflows.

The Government welcome the High Court’s decision and have always been clear that we will go further and faster to tackle the issue of storm overflows wherever possible.

That is why on Monday 25 September, following consultation, the Government published an expanded “Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan”, extending the targets of the plan to coastal and estuarine storm overflows. We have also expanded the list of storm overflows that are prioritised for early improvement, to include both marine protected areas and shellfish water protected areas.

The targets outlined in the expanded storm overflows discharge reduction plan provide an achievable, credible route to tackling sewage and delivering the improvements that customers expect without disproportionately impacting consumer bills.

Furthermore, recognising public calls for action to tackle plastic pollution in waterways, on Saturday 14 October the Government also launched a public consultation on a proposed ban of wet wipes containing plastic. This will help tackle wet wipes containing plastic breaking down into microplastics over time, which can be harmful to the environment and human health. The consultation delivers on DEFRA’s commitments set out in our “Plan for Water”.

[HCWS1063]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee: Twelfth Meeting

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee met on 28 September 2023, with UK and EU delegates joining by video conference. The meeting was co-chaired at alternate level by me and the Deputy Secretary-General of the European Commission, John Watson. A joint statement was agreed and published on www.gov.uk.

The Committee made two declarations:

The European Union made a declaration pursuant to Article 23(4)(a) of Decision No 1/2023 of the Joint Committee declaring that the EU is satisfied with the implementation by the United Kingdom of Article 5 of Decision No 6/2020 of the Joint Committee.

The United Kingdom made a declaration pursuant to Article 23(4)(b) of Decision No 1/2023 of the Joint Committee declaring that all importers wishing to operate under Article 7(1)(a)(ii) and Article 7(1)(b)(ii) of Decision No 1/2023 have been granted authorisations in accordance with Articles 9 and 11 of, and Annex III to, Decision No 1/2023.

The Committee also received an update on the work of the Withdrawal Agreement specialised committees that had met since the last meeting on 3 July 2023.

The Committee adopted the decision:

On adding two newly adopted Union acts to the Framework on Moldova and Ukraine trade liberalising measures.

[HCWS1066]

Biodiversity beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement: Update

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The agreement under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, known as the BBNJ agreement, will be laid before Parliament today. In line with the process for international treaties in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, the agreement will be scrutinised for at least 21 sitting days. An explanatory memorandum setting out the key provisions of the agreement will accompany the text.

The UK was one of the first countries to sign the BBNJ agreement when it opened for signature at the UN on 20 September 2023. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who signed for the UK, described it as “a major victory for ocean protection and multilateral diplomacy.”

To date, it has attracted 82 signatures. 60 instruments of ratification are needed for the agreement to enter into force.

Primary legislation will be required before the UK can ratify the BBNJ agreement, to ensure compliance with obligations imposed by the agreement. In particular, obligations on notification of the collection and utilisation of marine genetic resources and associated digital sequence information, and for the conduct of environmental impact assessments for new activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The work to allow for ratification is being led by the ocean policy unit in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other Government Departments. Input is also being sought from science, research, innovation and industry stakeholders to ensure that UK implementation of the agreement is informed by expert advice. The views of UK civil society organisations are also being sought. Legislation is anticipated in the first session of a new parliament after a general election.

At the international level, UN General Assembly resolution 77/321 of 2 August 2023 welcomed the adoption of the agreement and called upon all states and regional economic integration organisations to consider signing and ratifying, approving, or accepting the agreement at the earliest possible date to allow its entry into force. It also requested the UN Secretary-General to strengthen the capacity of the division for ocean affairs and the law of the sea of the Office of Legal Affairs of the secretariat to undertake activities to promote a better understanding of the agreement, to prepare for the entry into force of the agreement and perform secretariat functions under the agreement until such time as the secretariat to be established under article 50 of the agreement commences its functions. The agreement was also placed on the General Assembly's agenda for the current session to consider next steps.

The UK supports the establishment of a preparatory commission or similar body to take forward work to prepare for the implementation of the agreement and the first meeting of the conference of the parties once the agreement enters into force. We will continue to play a proactive role in this international work, working closely with others and, in particular, supporting the participation of developing countries in this process, and in their implementation of the agreement.

[HCWS1062]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Stopping the Start: A Smokefree Generation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): October 2023 the Prime Minister announced a bold and ambitious plan to create a “smokefree generation”, and the Government published the Command Paper “Stopping the start: our new plan to create a smokefree generation”. This Command Paper sets out:

Plans to bring forward legislation to make it an offence to sell tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009. In effect, this would mean that the age of sale of tobacco products will increase by one year each year, so that children turning 14 years old or younger this year will never be legally sold tobacco, phasing out tobacco over time and preventing future generations from ever taking up smoking.

A package to support current smokers to quit smoking, including by more than doubling funding for stop smoking services with £70 million additional funding per year, and £5 million this year and £15 million each year after for anti-smoking marketing campaigns.

Measures to tackle youth vaping. While the legal age of sale for vapes is 18, and will remain so, youth vaping has tripled in the last 3 years. The Government announced that they will consult on measures to reduce the appeal and availability of vapes to children, including restricting flavours, regulating point-of-sale displays, regulating vape packaging, and restricting the sale of disposable vapes.

Plans to strengthen enforcement, including £30 million new funding each year for enforcement agencies.

Smoking is the single biggest cause of preventable illness and death and one of the biggest drivers of health inequalities across the country. It is responsible for disability and death throughout the life course, from increasing stillbirths to asthma in children, to dementia, stroke and heart failure in older age. Smoking causes around one in four cancer deaths in the UK and leads to 64,000 deaths per year in England. It costs the country £17 billion per year and puts huge pressure on the NHS, with almost one hospital admission every minute attributable to smoking and up to 75,000 GP appointments each month taken up by smoking-related illness in England.

It is therefore imperative that we take action, and these changes amount to one of the most significant public health interventions by the Government in a generation.

Following the Prime Minister's announcement and the publication of the Command Paper, the government launched a formal consultation on 12 October 2023, “Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping”, to gather the strongest possible evidence on how best to implement these proposals. The consultation asks for views on three areas:

Creating a smokefree generation: the consultation gathers views on the smokefree generation policy and its scope to inform future legislation.

Tackling youth vaping: the consultation gathers views on several options to ensure we take the most appropriate action to tackle youth vaping while ensuring vapes continue to be available for current adult smokers to help them quit. The proposals in the consultation include restricting vape flavours, regulating point of sale displays of vapes, regulating packaging and presentation of vapes, and considering restricting the sale of disposable vapes. In addition, the consultation gathers views on the affordability of vapes and the role of a new duty on vapes.

Enforcement: the consultation asks about introducing new powers for local authorities to issue on-the-spot fines—fixed penalty notices—to enforce age of sale legislation of tobacco products and vapes.

The consultation will be open for a total of eight weeks and will close on 6 December 2023. I am pleased to say the consultation has received widespread support, and the Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and the Northern Ireland Department of Health have all given it their backing and agreed to a joint consultation.

Responses to the consultation will inform the measures that are taken forward and I will provide an update to the House on the response to the consultation in due course. Following consultation, we intend to introduce a Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS1059]

No and Low-alcohol Alternatives: Labelling Guidance Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): This Government set out in the 2019 Green Paper, “Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s”, commitments to work with industry to deliver a significant increase in the availability of alcohol-free and low-alcohol products by 2025 and to review the evidence to consider increasing the alcohol-free descriptor threshold from 0.05% ABV up to 0.5% ABV, in line with some other countries in Europe. We remain committed to this goal, and I am proud to announce that on 28 September we launched a public consultation, “Updating labelling guidance for no and low-alcohol alternatives”.

Reducing the harms associated with excess alcohol consumption remains a priority for this Government. As of 2021, approximately 10 million, or one in five adults in England drank above the UK chief medical officer’s low-risk drinking levels, significantly increasing their risk of health problems.

Making alcohol-free and low-alcohol products more available will increase consumer choice. It will help to promote the options of lower-strength alternatives to consumers, and changing the alcohol-free descriptor threshold in non-statutory guidance could support further innovation in the sector. We are seeking views on this potential change, as well as a number of other potential changes to Department of Health and Social Care voluntary guidance on labelling of alcohol-free and low-alcohol products, to provide greater consistency for producers, retailers and hospitality, and clarity for consumers.

DHSC will consider which, if any, changes should be made to the guidance following the consultation to support its policy aim to reduce excess alcohol consumption and associated harm among people who regularly drink above the UK chief medical officer’s low-risk drinking guidelines.

I encourage all those with an interest—the alcohol industry, public health organisations, and consumers themselves—to share their views with us through responding to this important consultation.

[HCWS1057]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 June 2023 to 31 August 2023

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

| | |
|--|---|
| TPIM notices in force—as of 31 August 2023 | 0 |
| Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period | 0 |
| TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 31 August 2023 | 0 |

| | |
|---|---|
| TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period | 0 |
| TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period | 1 |
| TPIM notices expired—during reporting period | 0 |
| TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period | 0 |
| Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period | 0 |
| Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period | 0 |
| The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period | 1 |

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. A TRG meeting was held on 10 August 2023.

[HCWS1058]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Health and Disability Benefits: Functional Assessment Service Contracts

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): I would like to update the House on the outcome of the procurement of new health and disability benefit assessment contracts—the functional assessment service contracts—for the period 2024 to 2029. These important new contracts have been subject to a rigorous and competitive process in line with public contract regulations.

The health transformation programme is modernising health and disability benefit services and will create a more efficient service and a vastly improved claimant experience, reducing journey times and improving trust in our services and decisions. It is developing a new customer-focused health assessment service and transforming the entire personal independence payment service, over the longer term. It will play a crucial role in implementing the reforms set out in the health and disability White Paper published in March 2023. The functional assessment service contracts will play a key part in delivering the service transformation being driven by the health transformation programme.

The functional assessment service contracts will bring together all functional health assessment services within a geographic area under a single provider. They will provide the foundation for the new health assessment service, which will eventually replace the different services we and our assessment providers use to undertake health assessments across all benefits, including new IT and processes. The new health assessment service will be fully integrated with other systems, including the transformed PIP service, with the aim of creating a much-improved experience for people who apply for support. The new service is being developed on a small scale initially. The new contracts will provide the flexibility to gradually introduce the new health assessment service once fully developed, before it is rolled out nationally from 2029.

On 25 May 2023, I notified the House that the Department had informed successful bidders in geographic lots 1, 2, 4 and 5. We have now concluded the procurement in lot 3—south-west England—and I am pleased to be able to announce today that the successful bidder is Serco Ltd.

We will now work with providers to ensure the transition to the new contracts is as smooth as possible. To ensure adequate time to safely transition, the functional assessment service contracts will begin in September 2024 and we have extended current contracts to this point to ensure service continuity.

We will also work with the functional assessment service providers to deliver structural reform, removing the work capability assessment via a phased approach over the lifetime of the contracts, as announced in the health and disability White Paper in March 2023.

[HCWS1056]

Petitions

Monday 16 October 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Funding for local pharmacies

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the issue of the underfunding of local pharmacies is threatening their ability to continue to serve communities and areas such as Bradford South; notes that pharmacies are vital as points of access for face-to-face healthcare advice and NHS support; and further declares that access to pharmacies is vital for preventing excess pressure on GPs and hospitals across the country.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support pharmacies as they seek to recover from the pandemic, ensuring that they can continue to provide a high standard of care to patients within the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Judith Cummins, *Official Report*, 6 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 510 .]

[P002850]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):

The community pharmacy contractual framework (CPCF) 2019-24 five-year deal, agreed between the Department, NHS England and Community Pharmacy England, commits £2.592 billion every year to the sector. In September 2022 we announced a further one-off investment in the sector of £100 million across the 2022-23 and 2023-24 financial years. In May this year, as part of our delivery plan for recovering access to primary care, we announced a further investment of up to £645 million over two years to introduce a Pharmacy First service for seven common conditions and to expand the existing pharmacy contraception and blood pressure check services. In addition, pharmacies are making a growing contribution to our flu and covid-19 vaccine programmes and can supplement CPCF income by participating in these programmes.

The current five-year deal is coming to an end at the end of this financial year and we will consider what comes next for pharmacy. As part of this planning, NHS England has committed to commissioning an economic study to better understand the cost of delivering pharmaceutical services. That study will feed into any future funding decisions on community pharmacy.

Access to pharmacies remains good, with 80% of the population in England living within a 20-minute walk of a pharmacy. There are still more pharmacies now than in 2010, and twice as many pharmacies in the most deprived areas.

Access to pharmaceutical services in local areas is assessed by local authority health and wellbeing boards (HWBs). Every three years, HWBs are required to produce and publish pharmaceutical needs assessments

(PNAs). The PNA outlines services available and assesses whether pharmaceutical services across the HWB area both meet the needs of the population and are in the correct locations to support the residents of the HWB area. The latest PNA for Bradford was published in October 2022 and did not identify any gaps in respect of the current or future needs of the population in any of the localities across the Bradford district that could not be met by existing providers. PNAs are used as the basis for informing decisions when applications for new pharmacies are received and for the commissioning of new services within community pharmacies.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

West Midlands Combined Authority

The petition of residents of Warwick and Leamington,

Declares that Warwickshire residents do not wish to join the West Midlands Combined Authority; further declares that that any discussions held between the West Midlands Combined Authority and Warwickshire County Council should be held openly and transparently; and that a referendum is held so the public can have their say on any proposed plans.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Warwickshire County Council is not absorbed into the West Midlands Combined Authority.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Matt Western, *Official Report*, 6 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 510 .]

[P002845]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):

The Government are committed to levelling up across the country to make us more prosperous and more united by tackling the regional and local inequalities that unfairly hold back communities and to encourage private sector investment right across the UK.

In our “Levelling Up” White Paper, our policy is clearly stated:

“Levelling up will only be successful if local actors are empowered to develop solutions that work for their communities”, and

“Levelling up requires effective and coherent local institutions with responsibilities defined across appropriate strategic geographies.”

The White Paper goes on to say that devolution proposals should be agreed over a sensible functional economic area and or whole county geographies, so that local leaders are empowered to make more of the decisions that shape their area.

Earlier this year, Warwickshire County Council’s cabinet undertook to explore the opportunity of seeking full constituent member status of the West Midlands Combined Authority. The council subsequently announced in July their decision not to pursue at this time their application.

There is a statutory, locally led application process that areas seeking to join a combined authority area have to follow. This requires the authority or authorities to present their proposals and evidence base setting out

what and how the proposals would be expected to improve the exercise of functions across the area, to secure local views through a public consultation, and then present this material to the Secretary of State for him to make a decision, based on the statutory tests, on whether or not to proceed with the necessary implementing secondary legislation, subject to local consents and parliamentary approval.

If Warwickshire decides to pursue this in future, it will need to follow the statutory process I outlined above, including undertaking a public consultation, following which it may submit its proposals to Government. The Government would carefully consider any such proposals as statute provides. No decisions have been taken by Government.

TRANSPORT

Levenshulme Station and Gorton Station ticket office closures

The petition of residents of the constituency of Manchester Gorton,

Declares that Levenshulme Station and Gorton Station's ticket offices are vital for residents of the area; notes that by closing these ticket offices, vital jobs will be lost; further declares that ticket offices are helpful for the older population and those with disabilities, who may have difficulty using ticket machines; further declares that this loss may prevent people from wanting to use trains in the future.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to urge the Government to prevent the closure of Levenshulme Station and Gorton Stations' ticket offices.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Afzal Khan, *Official Report*, 12 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 877 .]

[P002853]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):

Together with the rail industry, I want to improve and modernise the experience for passengers by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens to provide more help and advice in customer-focused roles. I have been clear that no currently staffed station should be unstaffed as a result of industry changes, and operators should ensure that staff are well located to meet passenger needs in future. This includes ensuring that staff are available to assist those who need additional support, do not wish to use digital tickets or do not have access to smartphones or the internet.

The public consultation on proposed ticket office changes has now closed. The independent passenger bodies, Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, are engaging with train operators on the basis of the consultation responses they have received and the criteria they have set out. I expect train operators, including Northern, which manages several stations in the Greater Manchester area, to work collaboratively with the passenger bodies in the coming weeks, to listen to the concerns raised and to refine their proposals accordingly.

When proposing major changes to ticket office opening hours, including closures, train operators are required to take into account the adequacy of the proposed alternatives in relation to the needs of all passengers,

including those who are disabled, and to include this in the notice of the proposal sent to other operators and passenger groups. When consulting, operators should also have clearly considered other equality-related needs. Operators prepared equality impact assessments, and these were made available on their websites during the consultation period.

I have listened and will continue to listen to the views of passengers and accessibility stakeholders. I have held two roundtable discussions with industry, attended by accessibility and passenger representatives. Over 20 different organisations have been represented at these sessions. My Department will also continue to engage with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee to ensure that any impact on passengers is considered.

Railway station ticket offices

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that rail firms should cancel their current plans to close the majority of the remaining 1,007 ticket offices across England; further that these offices and their staff provide vital services to ensure the accessibility of train services for all passengers; and further notes that these staff are crucial for disabled and elderly customers and visitors to the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to drop plans to shut railway station ticket offices.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, *Official Report*, 11 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 735 .]

[P002851]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):

Together with the rail industry, I want to improve and modernise the experience for passengers by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens to provide more help and advice in customer-focused roles. I have been clear that no currently staffed station should be unstaffed as a result of industry changes, and operators should ensure that staff are well located to meet passenger needs in future.

The public consultation on proposed ticket office changes has now closed. The independent passenger bodies, Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, are engaging with train operators on the basis of the consultation responses they have received and the criteria they have set out. I expect train operators to work collaboratively with the passenger bodies in the coming weeks, to listen to the concerns raised and to refine their proposals accordingly.

When proposing major changes to ticket office opening hours, including closures, train operators are required to take into account the adequacy of the proposed alternatives in relation to the needs of all passengers, including those who are disabled, and to include this in the notice of the proposal sent to other operators and passenger groups. When consulting, operators should also have clearly considered other equality-related needs. Operators prepared equality impact assessments, and these were made available on their websites during the consultation period.

I have listened and will continue to listen to the views of passengers and accessibility stakeholders. I have held two roundtable discussions with industry, attended by accessibility and passenger representatives. Over 20 different organisations have been represented at these sessions. We also continue to engage with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee to ensure that any impact on passengers is considered.

Reddish North station ticket office closures

The petition of residents of the constituency of Denton and Reddish,

Declares that Reddish North's ticket offices are vital for residents of the area; notes that by closing this ticket office, vital jobs will be lost; further declares that ticket offices are helpful for vulnerable customers and those who may have difficulty using ticket machines; further declares that this loss may prevent people from wanting to use trains in the future.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to prevent the closure of Reddish North ticket office.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Gwynne, *Official Report*, 12 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 878 .]

[P002855]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):

Together with the rail industry, I want to improve and modernise the experience for passengers by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens to provide more help and advice in customer-focused roles. I have been clear that no currently staffed station should be

unstaffed as a result of industry changes, and operators should ensure that staff are well located to meet passenger needs in future. This includes ensuring that staff are available to assist those who need additional support, do not wish to use digital tickets or do not have access to smartphones or the internet.

The public consultation on proposed ticket office changes has now closed. The independent passenger bodies, Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, are engaging with train operators on the basis of the consultation responses they have received and the criteria they have set out. I expect train operators, including Northern, which manages several stations in the Greater Manchester area, to work collaboratively with the passenger bodies in the coming weeks, to listen to the concerns raised and to refine their proposals accordingly.

When proposing major changes to ticket office opening hours, including closures, train operators are required to take into account the adequacy of the proposed alternatives in relation to the needs of all passengers, including those who are disabled, and to include this in the notice of the proposal sent to other operators and passenger groups. When consulting, operators should also have clearly considered other equality-related needs. Operators prepared equality impact assessments, and these were made available on their websites during the consultation period.

I have listened and will continue to listen to the views of passengers and accessibility stakeholders. I have held two roundtable discussions with industry, attended by accessibility and passenger representatives. Over 20 different organisations have been represented at these sessions. My Department will also continue to engage with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee to ensure that any impact on passengers is considered.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 16 October 2023

WORK AND PENSIONS

Cost of Living Support

The following is an extract from the statement on Cost of Living Support on 20 June 2023.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): When visiting schools, I am told by young children that it is not their turn to eat tonight. Schools tell me that pupils take leftovers from school friends so that they can eat a lunch. Rents are rocketing and households are paying almost £1,000 a year more on food than they did in 2021. Does the Minister honestly think that the support that the Government are offering is enough to stop rising hunger in constituencies such as mine?

Tom Pursglove: I of course recognise that food prices are a challenge not just here in the UK, but abroad, too. For example, I am aware that food inflation here is 19%, but within the EU it is 19% and in the euro area it is 18%. People are experiencing these significant challenges not just here, but abroad.

[Official Report, 20 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 709.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) in the statement on Cost of Living Support. The correct response should have been:

Tom Pursglove: I of course recognise that food prices are a challenge not just here in the UK, but abroad, too. For example, I am aware that **food inflation in March this year was 19%** here, but within the EU it was 19% and in the euro area it was 18%. People are experiencing these significant challenges not just here, but abroad.

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**not later than
Monday 23 October 2023**

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