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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 24 October 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

BISHOP'S STORTFORD CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]

Bill read a Second time.

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Lords message (23 October) relating to the Bill considered.

Ordered,

That this House concurs with the Lords in their resolution.—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sudan: Peace and Democracy

1. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support peace and democracy in Sudan. [906656]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Britain continues to advocate a return to a civilian-led Government in Sudan and improved humanitarian access. We have vigorously condemned the atrocities taking place in Darfur, as well as the other regions of Sudan.

Stephen Morgan: Labour stands in solidarity with the people of Sudan, who want only peace, justice and democracy, and who reject the generals' war. What are the Government doing to support civilian organisations, including the Sudanese community here in the UK, to build unity in opposition to the conflict and military rule?

Mr Mitchell: It is not just Labour that stands in solidarity, but the whole House and the whole country. In respect of the civilian leadership, I spoke last Friday to Abdalla Hamdok, the civilian political leader. He and many of his colleagues will meet in Addis Ababa this week. We very much hope that those meetings will yield some progress.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan has heard how people in Darfur still face daily bombings, killing, rape, pillage and torture. Members of the Darfur community here are deeply worried about the ethnic cleansing. What is happening to try to reduce the flow of weapons and to get urgent humanitarian aid to the 24 million people who desperately need it?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. We have recently contributed £600,000 to open-source investigative reporting to verify and preserve information on attacks on civilians and breaches of international humanitarian law. As she will know, we are providing £22 million of support for Sudan—£5 million was announced recently to help people who have gone across the border into Chad and South Sudan. She will also know that something like 19 humanitarian workers have been murdered, but we are doing everything we can to try to get aid and help in.

Israel and Palestine

2. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Israel on the situation in Gaza. [906657]

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Palestinian Authority on a two-state solution. [906666]

12. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What recent reports he has received on the situation in Israel and Palestine. [906668]

17. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with his Israeli counterpart on the (a) compatibility with international law and (b) proportionality of Israel's response in Gaza to the attacks by Hamas. [906673]

20. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Israel on the situation in Gaza. [906677]

23. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking with international partners in the middle east in response to the situation in Gaza and Israel. [906680]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Since Hamas's brutal terror attacks on 7 October, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have visited the region and have spoken and met extensively with counterparts totalling almost 20 countries, as part of our extensive diplomatic efforts to prevent escalation, to sustain the prospect of regional peace and to secure the free movement home of British nationals in Gaza and the release of hostages.

Chris Clarkson: It has been reported that the Palestinian Authority is to pay up to \$3 million a month in so-called martyr salaries to the families of dead and captured Hamas terrorists. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those payments to rapists, torturers and murderers, some of whom have killed Brits? Will he use his good offices to ensure that no British aid money has gone towards this filthy practice?

James Cleverly: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we always ensure that UK aid money is protected from misappropriation. I can confirm to him and the House that no British aid money goes directly to the Palestinian Authority. We have raised this issue with the Palestinian

Authority and highlighted our belief that it is not conducive to good relations and a future two-state solution.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What are the prospects of a two-state solution, given the pace of Israeli settlements on the west bank?

James Cleverly: The Government's long-standing position is that we oppose settlement expansion, for the reasons I have highlighted extensively in the conversations that I have had with the Israeli Government and the leadership of countries in the region. Despite the terrible circumstances we are experiencing, there is a renewed desire for a meaningful resolution that means that the terrible images that we saw on 7 October will never be repeated.

Marsha De Cordova: Close to 1,000 constituents have contacted me, deeply concerned about the situation in Gaza, the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding and the need for a ceasefire. Nearly 5,000 people have died in Gaza, including 1,700 children. While the whole House rightly condemned the Hamas atrocities, we must be unequivocal in our condemnation of violations of international law. Will the Foreign Secretary set out in what circumstances he believes it is legal for Israel to cut off water, fuel, food and electricity in Gaza?

James Cleverly: There is always much debate in this House about the interpretation of international humanitarian law. I have raised directly with my Israeli counterparts the need, in whatever actions they take to secure their protection, defend Israeli citizens and secure the release of hostages, for them to act in accordance with international law. I have received assurances from the Israeli President to that effect.

Steven Bonnar: There have been countless reiterations from the Israeli authorities, including in a joint speech with the Prime Minister last week, that they are taking precautions to avoid civilian casualties. However, more than 4,650 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza in the last 16 days. Palestinian lives matter, so what more action, other than just repeating promises about civilian protection, is the Foreign Secretary's Department taking meaningfully to ensure that innocent Palestinians are kept safe?

James Cleverly: I am on record mourning the Palestinian lives that have been lost in this conflict, just as we mourn, and I mourn, the loss of Israeli lives in this terrible situation. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government take the loss of life, from whichever community, incredibly seriously.

I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that Hamas routinely and consciously put civilians in harm's way, specifically to generate fatalities that they then use as part of their media operations. We are conscious of that and the Israeli armed forces are conscious of that—that is why, they explained to me, they have given notice of future areas of military operation. We have seen evidence that Hamas are routinely preventing Palestinians from leaving areas that are going to be engaged by the Israeli Defence Forces.

Karl McCartney: In contrast to the last two questions from the Opposition Benches, I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and our Prime Minister

for their important recent visits to our ally Israel. The Government's unequivocal message that Israel has the right and must be able to defend itself against the Hamas terrorist group is right and just. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support Israel in its efforts to secure the release of the 200-plus captives still held in Gaza, including any British citizens? Can the Secretary of State ensure that they receive immediate assistance from the international Red Cross?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend reminds the House that the Government remain focused on the protection of British nationals in Israel, the west bank and, of course, Gaza. It would be inappropriate for me to go into detail, but I can assure him and the House that we speak with all parties who we believe could have influence on those holding hostages: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and others. It is incredibly difficult. We do not have direct lines of communications, but we will not rest—we will not rest—in trying to secure the release of hostages and the evacuation of British nationals from Gaza.

James Sunderland: I am clear that the international community, backed by the UN, must now work together to dial down the rhetoric, open humanitarian corridors, encourage restraint and protect life. Will the Foreign Secretary commit the UK to expanding the Abraham accords as a priority, which will not only bring strategic partners to the table but may offer a future peace between Israel and Palestine?

James Cleverly: I have said regularly how much I value the Abraham accords. The improving of relationships between Israel and the Arab nations in its near neighbourhood is an extremely positive step. There is a realistic belief that part of the aim of the attack of 7 October was to derail future normalisation and negotiations. Again, I think that highlights the fact that Hamas are not a friend to the Palestinian people. They are not trying to improve relationships between Israel and the Arab world. They brought down the Oslo agreements, and they have consistently blocked all attempts to normalise relationships between Israel and the wider Arab world. We must not let them win in that endeavour, and we must work to bring peace between the Palestinian people and the Israelis.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I have been inundated with emails from constituents terrified for the future of the internally displaced Palestinians in Gaza. Since 7 October, nearly 600,000 internally displaced persons have been sheltering in 150 United Nations Relief and Works Agency facilities, 35 UNRWA staff have been killed, and 40 UNRWA installations have been damaged. When the ground invasion inevitably starts, where are these people meant to go? Who is expected to host them? Who will administer them, and where will the support come from? Finally and fundamentally, what does the Foreign Secretary believe is the Israeli politicians' long-term objective?

James Cleverly: All the conversations that we have had with Israel, with Egypt and with intermediaries who are able to maintain lines of communication with

Hamas have been about the preservation of human life. Let me put this on the record once again: we completely support Israel's right, and indeed duty, of self-defence. We are only just starting to see the scale of the brutality. Video evidence retrieved from those individuals who brutalised and murdered Israeli citizens on 7 October has now been put in the public domain, and it is worse than any of us could have imagined. We absolutely stand by Israel's right to self-defence, and we have said that we want to work with Israel, with Egypt, with the countries in the near neighbourhood and, of course, with those who are the de facto Government in Gaza to minimise civilian casualties. We have had that commitment from Israel; we have had no such commitment from Hamas.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Since I raised this question with the Prime Minister last week, indiscriminate airstrikes and a total siege blocking food, water and medical supplies have killed thousands of innocent Palestinian men and women and more than 1,000 children. Let us be absolutely clear in this House: this is now beyond a humanitarian catastrophe. Even as we stand here today, innocent blood continues to be spilt on the streets of Gaza, and mosques, churches, schools, hospitals, bakeries, water plants and homes continue to be flattened by the Israeli military.

I have a very simple question for the Foreign Secretary. Just what will it take? How many thousands of innocent Palestinians must be slaughtered before this Government condemn the brutality and bloodshed?

James Cleverly: We have consistently said that we want to minimise further loss of life, and the lives lost among the Palestinian people are of course something for which we grieve, but we must never lose sight of the fact that during the period since 7 October, thousands of rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel. Indeed, according to an assessment that we now have, one of the most high-profile losses of lives in Gaza, which was covered extensively by the British and international media, was likely caused by a rocket emanating from Gaza and targeting Israel. While I respect the hon. Gentleman's passion about the preservation of life, and I assure him that I share his passion, we must be thoughtful, and we must remember why this is happening. It must not be forgotten that the single largest murder of Jews since the holocaust was initiated by Hamas, who then put Palestinians intentionally in harm's way as part of their operations.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): One of the appalling hallmarks of the terrorist attack by Hamas on the state of Israel has been hostage taking, and we are now seeing hostage taking increasingly being used in state-sponsored terrorism. With that in mind, and given the number of British hostages who are currently being held, does my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary think that now is the time to appoint a prime ministerial envoy for hostages, with full diplomatic immunity, so that the British state can keep in touch with Britons who are being held and use our soft power to negotiate their release?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. We have one of the largest and most effective diplomatic networks, so our diplomats on the ground

are often best placed to initiate those negotiations, but he raises a good point and I will take his suggestion seriously.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I, like many others, have received hundreds if not thousands of emails from my constituents expressing their despair at what they are seeing happening in Gaza. It is more than a humanitarian emergency. Does the Secretary of State agree with Labour's calls to work with international partners to give UN agencies such as UNRWA the long-term resources they need, as well as to insist that fuel is allowed into Gaza?

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Development Minister and I have had extensive and regular talks on ensuring that humanitarian supplies get to the Palestinian people in Gaza. Indeed, the Development Minister has virtually daily conversations with Martin Griffiths, the head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the Prime Minister has recently announced an additional £30 million of humanitarian support on top of our pre-existing £27 million, making us one of the most generous contributing nations to humanitarian support for Palestinians in Gaza.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): George Mitchell, the great American peacemaker, said that diplomacy was

“700 days of failure and one day of success”.

Labour recognises the hard, quiet diplomacy required to secure the release of hostages and eventually long-term peace, but in this bloody war we cannot afford 700 days without success. Overnight, we saw reports of the possible release of 50 hostages, only to learn that those talks had stumbled. Can the Foreign Secretary update the House on the progress to secure the release of all the 200 hostages so cruelly taken by Hamas terrorists?

James Cleverly: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the calm professionalism that he has displayed throughout. I can assure him and the House that this remains an absolute focus of our attention. It was raised by the Prime Minister, by me, by my right hon. Friend the Development Minister and by others in our bilateral conversations with leaders around the region, and I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will stay relentlessly focused on this.

Mr Lammy: The situation in Gaza is heartbreaking and deeply troubling. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Israel must follow the laws of war by taking every possible step to protect civilians and by ensuring that aid is rapid, safe and unhindered, that blocks to water, food, medicines and fuel are lifted immediately, and that Palestinians who are forced to flee are not permanently displaced? Does he also agree that upholding these laws is not just a legal and moral obligation, but necessary to prevent Israel's campaign from undermining long-term prospects for peace and stability.

James Cleverly: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that that is exactly the tone of the conversations we are having. The preservation of civilian life remains a priority, and we discuss this regularly and at every level with the

Israeli Government. Of course we reflect on the point that Israel itself—as well as the countries in the near neighbourhood—is trying to prevent this from becoming a regional conflict. As I say, professionalism and restraint by the Israeli Defence Forces are an important part of preventing this from becoming a regional conflict.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State seen any evidence, been made aware of any evidence or had reasonable grounds to believe that Israel has breached international humanitarian law in its response to the Hamas atrocities on 7 October?

James Cleverly: I am not in a position, and indeed it is not my role, to make an assessment of the interpretation of events that are unfolding as we speak. There will, of course, be assessments of the nature of international humanitarian law. We are trying to make sure that, in all of its actions for its legitimate self-defence, Israel abides by international law.

Brendan O'Hara: If it is not the Foreign Secretary's responsibility to make that assessment, I wonder whose it is. He knows that international humanitarian law is unambiguous in saying that the collective punishment of a civilian population is illegal. Is he telling us that he is unaware, or has seen no evidence, that people have been forced from their homes and that their water, food, power and access to medicine have been cut off? Or is he actually saying that all of this has happened but the UK Government have unilaterally decided that international humanitarian law does not apply to this conflict?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman undermines his own question by making the assertion that his interpretation of international humanitarian law is, by default, one to which I have to subscribe. His definition of what is happening is not one that I necessarily agree with.

Iran: Support for Hamas

3. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Whether he has received reports on the potential role of Iran in providing financial and other support for Hamas for terrorist attacks on Israel. [906658]

8. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Whether he has received reports on the potential involvement of Iran in providing support for Hamas for terror attacks on Israel. [906664]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): Hamas is responsible for these appalling terrorist attacks. We know that Iran has been a long-term funder and supporter of Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran's support for these militant groups has a destabilising impact on regional and international security, and we remain ever watchful of its actions.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for that answer. Iran's fingerprints are all over Hamas's brutal massacre in Israel. Iran's blatant arming, funding—worth \$100 million a year—and training of terror groups

around the region is no secret. Hamas's leaders have even publicly lavished praise on Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for their support. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must be absolutely clear about the threat posed by Iran abroad and at home, and that now is the time for a policy reset?

James Cleverly: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's assessment of Iran's malign influence. The Government and the FCDO are well aware of this, and I can assure him that we have been clear-eyed throughout the work we do with regard to Iran and its influence in the region. We will remain ever watchful. I am sure that no reset is required, because we are very conscious of Iran's impact on the region.

Henry Smith: What diplomatic efforts are His Majesty's Government taking to protect and, indeed, enhance the Abraham accords in the light of the fact that the Iranian regime is clearly seeking to engender discord and, indeed, conflict in the middle east?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Abraham accords have been a force for good. We need to protect them and ideally enhance them. Anything that sees greater co-operation between Israel and the Arab world has to be a step in the right direction when it comes to the creation of a sustainable two-state solution. I can assure him that we remain focused on that outcome.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): This Government have rightly imposed sanctions on those states and organisations that support terrorism. Can the Secretary of State therefore clarify that if it is found, following an independent investigation, that Israel has also broken international law and committed war crimes in Gaza, his Government will consider the introduction of appropriate sanctions?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman invites me to speculate about our future response to future events. At the moment, I am dealing with events in the here and now. I am trying to prevent loss of life. I am in constant conversations with the leadership in the region to try to prevent further Israeli and Palestinian loss of life.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Yesterday I had the privilege of meeting families whose loved ones have been taken hostage. They came here to share their testimony, which was deeply moving. They raised the fact that Iran is very much behind this, so why have we yet to proscribe the IRGC? It was time a year ago, so it is surely time now. What is the excuse for waiting?

James Cleverly: I have a huge amount of sympathy for the plight of the families who have either lost loved ones or have loved ones who are still held hostage in Gaza. I will be meeting families who have members held hostage later.

As I have said regularly, we are well aware of Iran's influence. Any decision about proscription will be a cross-Government decision. The advantages and disadvantages of proscribing will always be at the heart

of any decision-making process, but as the hon. Lady knows, we do not comment on future sanctions or proscription designations.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Following on from the question of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), I emphasise that Labour has been calling on the Government for many months to proscribe the IRGC. Evidence is emerging of Iranian involvement in the Hamas terrorist attack in Israel. We also understand that the United States has called on the United Kingdom to follow its example. I therefore press the Foreign Secretary: when will the Government act, by using either existing terrorism legislation or a new process of proscription directed at the IRGC?

James Cleverly: I remind the House that the IRGC—as well as certain individuals who are members of it—is sanctioned in its entirety. As I said in response to the question of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), no international measure comes without cost. There are advantages and disadvantages to proscription, which fundamentally would mean that we could have no direct diplomatic relations with Iran. As I have said, we always take those issues seriously, and any decision will be made cross-Government, but we do not speculate on future sanctions or proscription designations.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

4. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to provide rapid resettlement routes under pathway 3 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. [906659]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The FCDO has referred more than 1,450 people under ACRS pathway 3 to the Home Office. We are supporting more than 900 Afghans in third countries, for instance with accommodation, and we are grateful to Pakistan for the work we do together to that end. Of course, we remain committed to relocating all eligible Afghan families to the UK. We are working closely with the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that they all have suitable accommodation on arrival.

Janet Daby: Before I ask my supplementary question, I would like to put on record that my thoughts are with everyone who is affected by the disturbing scenes we have witnessed in Israel and Palestine.

Shortly after the evacuation in Afghanistan, I told Ministers that many of my constituents have relatives in Afghanistan who work for the British Government. What is the Minister doing to keep the Government's promise of further support for those who helped the UK's mission in Afghanistan?

Leo Docherty: We continue our diplomatic efforts, including through supporting those Afghans in third countries. We have relocated more than 21,000 Afghans under the Afghans relocations and assistance policy—ARAP—and the ACRS, and we will continue to do that.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Last week, the Government made the right decision to lift the quota for pathway 3, thus allowing all eligible British Council contractors to come to the UK. However, many contractors and their families are waiting in Pakistan for clearance to come to the UK because accommodation has yet to be arranged. May I urge the Government to resolve that housing issue urgently, given the Pakistani authorities' threat to return the contractors to Afghanistan next month? That would be a disaster, and we need to sort it out now.

Leo Docherty: We are acutely aware of the challenge to which my hon. Friend alludes. We are working at pace with our mission in Pakistan and we are seized of the natural justice required and the fact that we need to do our duty to those people. That is why the full pace of our institutional effort is focused on doing just that. We look forward to keeping colleagues updated.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I, too, wish to put on record my solidarity with those who are living in fear and heartbreak in Gaza and Israel.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was an absolute debacle. It is a continuing source of shame to this country that so many people who helped us, trusted us, relied on us, have been absolutely abandoned. We are hearing horrifying reports from those who have done the right thing and taken terrible risks to escape to Pakistan, who are now living in constant fear of arrest or deportation because this Government have left them in limbo. My question is simple: how many are still waiting and how much longer will they have to wait?

Leo Docherty: Respectfully, we have not left them in limbo. The situation is extremely difficult. It is difficult because of the depredations of—let me be very clear—the tyrannical regime of the Taliban; that is why we are in this situation. We have relocated more than 21,000 people, and we continue to work at pace with our mission in Pakistan and elsewhere to ensure that these people, despite the local troubles and difficulties, get the support they need.

Israel, Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories: Humanitarian Access and Human Rights

5. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to support the monitoring of potential human rights abuses in (a) Israel and (b) the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [906661]

6. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help ensure access to Gaza by humanitarian organisations. [906662]

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking with his international counterparts to help open humanitarian corridors in Gaza. [906665]

18. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the safety of (a) Palestinian and (b) Israeli civilians in the Gaza-Israel conflict. [906674]

19. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help ensure access to Gaza by humanitarian organisations. [906676]

21. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help ensure access to Gaza by humanitarian organisations. [906678]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I talk to Martin Griffiths, the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, almost every day, and on Friday I attended a meeting with development Ministers convened by Samantha Power, the head of the United States Agency for International Development.

Deidre Brock: How are the Foreign Secretary and his Ministers working with international counterparts to prevent any deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Israel and Palestine?

Mr Mitchell: By drawing all parties' attention to the international rules of war.

Vicky Foxcroft: At a vigil outside Parliament this morning, the names of some of the more than 2,000 children killed so far in Gaza were read out. Children in Gaza have begun writing their names on their hands so that they can be identified and buried with their families when they are killed. What action are the Government taking to prevent more children being harmed in Israel's military action and to ensure a rapid end to this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: The Prime Minister set out yesterday very clearly what our policy is. We are doing everything we can to protect children. British aid is already making a difference by supporting the international relief effort, which is going in through Rafah.

Kerry McCarthy: I completely endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) just said about the impact on children. Trucks at the Rafah crossing are welcome, but the aid getting through is nowhere near enough to avert humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Fuel is urgently needed for the desalination plants that would ensure drinking water and for the energy generators that would power hospitals, which would prevent huge loss of life. Why is that fuel not being allowed through?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right that the Rafah crossing is currently the only way we can get food and relief supplies in. Supplies are coming to El Arish, but the number of trucks going through every day is far too small. We will continue to press all the relevant authorities to allow humanitarian support and aid of the type she describes through the Rafah crossing to help those whose circumstances are precisely as she describes.

Martyn Day: With thousands of innocent civilians dead, tens of thousands injured, hundreds of thousands displaced and a denial of humanitarian need, what level of civilian suffering will it take before this Government back calls for a ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman sets out the tremendous suffering that is happening, but he, like me, will agree with the Prime Minister that the source of this was the appalling terrorist, murderous action by Hamas, which, as the Foreign Secretary said a few minutes ago, killed more Jewish people than on any day since the second world war and the holocaust.

Kate Hollern: As the fighting continues, the UN estimates that about 160 women will give birth every day in Gaza; meanwhile the lives of at least 120 newborns in incubators are at risk due to lack of power, fuel, medicine and water. These women and children are not terrorists. Will the Secretary of State listen to the increasing calls for a ceasefire, which would be the best way to ensure the release of hostages, who are in a terrible situation, and the delivery of aid for Palestinian citizens?

Mr Mitchell: On delivering aid and support, I had the opportunity to meet a very large number of the British charities and non-governmental organisations that are trying to help in Gaza, and I keep in very close touch with them. On the issue of access and support through these trusted agencies, we will do everything that we can to help.

Sarah Owen: Thousands of innocent people have been killed, and aid workers are included in that devastating loss. UN experts on the ground have given repeated warnings that the current Israeli military strategy could lead to the permanent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box that there were mechanisms to deal with breaches of international law. Can the Minister tell us more on what the Government are doing to support independent investigations and the International Criminal Court?

Mr Mitchell: The answer to the hon. Lady's perfectly proper question is that international and legal organisations all around the world will be looking at this and giving their opinions.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): People in Cheadle are deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and welcome the doubling of aid that was announced by the Prime Minister. However, we know that Hamas have a history of diverting and misusing aid that is given to them for their own terrorist purposes. What steps can we take to ensure that this much-needed aid gets to the people in need?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is quite right to warn about the proper use of aid. I can tell her that this is probably the most scrutinised programme of humanitarian relief and support that Britain has. If ever we see anything that we think is untoward, we immediately stop using that group. None the less, we operate through trusted partners, and the proof is that they are trusted and are partners.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Last week, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency stated that Hamas had stolen fuel, medical supplies and food intended for Palestinians. It then subsequently deleted that statement, but the way that Hamas have repeatedly compromised UNRWA operations in Gaza has been well-documented in recent years. What assurances

can my right hon. Friend give that that aid will be targeted correctly and will reach the people who so desperately need it?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is right that UNRWA operates in difficult circumstances, but I can tell him that we talk to it all the time about the proper use of these resources and we will do everything we can always to make sure that they go to the intended place.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): My constituents in Hyndburn and Haslingden and I thank the Foreign Secretary for all the work that he is doing to ensure that aid is getting to Gaza, but we know that the UN has stated that it needs at least 100 trucks a day to take the aid to those who desperately need it. Can my right hon. Friend set out what conversations he is having with his Israeli and Egyptian counterparts to make sure that that aid is getting to where it needs to be?

Mr Mitchell: Foreign Office officials, the Foreign Secretary and others are talking to all the relevant authorities in Egypt and Israel. My hon. Friend will understand that the key thing is to increase the number of lorries that are getting through Rafah. The current number is wholly inadequate. I talk to Martin Griffiths virtually every day about the operations that the UN is conducting to try to beef up that number.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that we would finally challenge actions that undercut legitimate aspirations for Palestinian statehood, and there are none more fundamental than 57 years of breaches of the fourth Geneva convention by the illegal occupation of the territories, and then with 750,000 Jewish settlers being placed in those territories making a two-state solution very, very difficult. Are we actually now going to do something about that, or does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the meaningful resolution to which the Foreign Secretary referred may include the transfer of the people of Gaza and Gaza itself out of the state of Israel into the hands of another state or state system, and, more concerningly, that that would be followed by the expulsion of the Palestinians from the west bank?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend has a long-standing and principled view on these matters. I do not share his view and nor do the Government. Nor do I think that the latter part of his question and the specific points that he made are likely to come about.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to thank the Minister of State for Development and Africa for the constructive cross-party way that we have been able to work together since I was appointed to this post in such grim times? He will know that every minute counts right now in Gaza. Incubators have been switched off and children are drinking dirty water. Fresh water and power are the most pressing issues, but despite our shared hopes of progress this week, fuel was not permitted in the convoys that entered Gaza, while several hospitals have been hit and many given multiple warnings to evacuate. Can he share with the House what the Government are doing to help broker an agreement that

will protect hospitals and get fuel into Gaza so that international law is upheld, hospitals can power up and water and power can flow?

Mr Mitchell: First, I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position. It is one that I held for five years from 2005 and I very much hope that she will hold it for five years—[*Laughter.*] It is one of the best jobs in opposition and in government. She will know that we are having humanitarian discussions with everyone, intent as we are on getting humanitarian supplies to those who need them. She asked specifically about attacking a hospital. Attacking a hospital is a war crime. We should be in no doubt about that.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Humanitarian Support

7. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that humanitarian support reaches people affected by the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. [906663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): Following the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh last month, the Government called for an end to the violence, direct talks between parties to the conflict and urgent humanitarian access. We have provided £1 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross to meet humanitarian needs, and of course the UN has had access to the region. We encourage Azerbaijan to continue co-operation in that regard.

David Duguid: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I refer the House to my role as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Azerbaijan. What support are the UK Government and British companies providing in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan to help to clear the landmines laid by Armenian forces, as well as to support the reconstruction of the towns and communities that were destroyed and looted during the occupation?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge on this subject, and I am pleased to confirm that the UK is continuing to assess humanitarian needs in the region, including in relation to de-mining in Armenia and Azerbaijan. We have provided £1 million to the UN development programme since 2020 to aid de-mining efforts in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and our embassy in Baku has had discussions with the Azerbaijani Government on reconstruction and reintegration of the region.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): While unspeakable horrors unfold in Israel and Palestine, we must not forget other conflicts around the world in which crimes against humanity have been committed against innocent civilians. Following Azerbaijan's military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, almost all of the ethnic Armenian population has been forced to flee. With more than 100,000 people displaced, and reports that as few as 50 but a maximum of 1,000 remain in the region, does the Minister agree that it bears the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing?

Leo Docherty: I do not agree, but I should say that we have urged both sides to resume dialogue. Talks will be the basis of a sustainable peace. I have made that point to Foreign Ministers from both countries in recent weeks. I will make that point again when I travel to both countries in the coming weeks.

Topical Questions

T1. [906681] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities. [R]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): In response to the terrorist attacks on 7 October, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, other Ministers and I have of course engaged intensively with allies in the region, but we are equally determined to deliver on other vital priorities, notably supporting Ukraine, tackling illegal migration, supporting stability in sub-Saharan Africa and alleviating poverty around the world.

Mr Carmichael: The Foreign Secretary will be aware that the Government of France have announced today that they are sending their Foreign Minister to the United Nations Security Council to argue for a humanitarian truce in Gaza, which in their words would be capable of leading to a ceasefire and necessary for the distribution of aid to civilian populations. It would also allow the focus to concentrate on the release of hostages, which I would have thought would commend itself also to the Government of Israel. Will the Government support—

Mr Speaker: Order. Being first on the Order Paper is not permission to take all the time. Topicals should be short and sweet. The right hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that.

James Cleverly: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are trying to find every avenue to alleviate humanitarian suffering. We will be represented at senior ministerial level at the Security Council later today. We want to take action that will actually deliver aid and support to the Palestinian people who are suffering in Gaza.

T3. [906683] **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): Seven years ago, my Dartford constituent George Lowe was brutally murdered in Cyprus. We know who the killers are, and the Cypriot police know who the killers are, yet they have never been brought to justice. Although I accept that this is a complicated diplomatic situation, will the Minister assure the House that the Foreign Office will not rest until justice for George Lowe is forthcoming?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): My sincere condolences go out to George Lowe's family. Consular staff remain in contact with the Cypriot authorities and the family on this case. We passed to the Cypriot authorities a letter from George's family regarding the investigation, and have followed up for a response, most recently on 5 October. I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's advocacy in this case. We will, of course, keep in touch to see what we can do.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On 27 June, this House passed Labour's motion calling on the Government to bring forward within 90 days legislation to seize and repurpose Russian state assets for Ukraine's recovery, but it has now been 120 days since that motion was passed and we have heard nothing but vague words. When will the Foreign Secretary do what Labour has called for and deliver what Ukraine needs by taking difficult but necessary steps to ensure that Russia pays?

James Cleverly: The state seizure of private assets is a serious act that we typically condemn in other countries. The Government have made it absolutely clear that the people who are responsible for brutalising Ukraine will ultimately pay for its reconstruction.

T8. [906688] **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary agree that one of the most important messages that Palestinians need to hear from the international community right now is that the two-state solution is not dead? Will he say a bit more about his discussions with Israeli counterparts on what more can be done to resuscitate faith and optimism in a two-state solution?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the prospect of a peaceful and secure Israel alongside a peaceful and secure Palestine—a two-state solution—is our best route to navigate these terrible situations successfully, and it will remain at the heart of UK foreign policy in the region.

T2. [906682] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the delivery of fuel supplies into Gaza is essential to prevent further humanitarian catastrophe and to ensure that the delivery of aid achieves its full impact?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We are doing everything we can. The hon. Gentleman will understand that these are complex negotiations, both to get the food and other humanitarian supplies into the region and to deliver them to those who need them. All I can assure him of is that all those negotiations are taking place with vigour and speed.

T10. [906690] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): On my recent visit to the Pinner United synagogue, I heard from constituents about the impact of the Hamas terrorist attack on their family and friends in Israel. Will my right hon. Friend restate the commitment that we all share to ensure that promoters of terror are unable to do their work from the sanctuary of safe countries such as ours? To that end, will he work with our allies to proscribe the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

James Cleverly: With regard to the proscription of the IRGC, my hon. Friend will have heard the answer that I gave some minutes ago. The work that we are doing, in close co-ordination with the Home Secretary and her team, to ensure that communities here in the UK feel safe and secure remains an absolute priority

for us. Limiting, and ideally stopping, the ability of organisations and countries to fund terrorism will remain a priority for us.

T4. [906684] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said yesterday that an immediate and

“broad humanitarian ceasefire is essential for both Gaza and Israel”

and that

“if more aid for Gazans, including fuel, medicine, food and water, does not arrive in days...many more people in Gaza will die.”

He added:

“The violence will never end unless leaders stand up and take the brave and humane choices that are required by fundamental humanity.”

Will the Secretary of State heed those calls from the international community and support an immediate humanitarian ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: In order to have a ceasefire, all parties have to agree to it. I refer the hon. Gentleman to other answers that have been given during this session of questions. We are doing everything we can to address the humanitarian problem that he sets out, and we will continue to do so.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Building on the legacy of successive Governments on the threat of antimicrobial resistance, will my right hon. Friend commit to building a coalition of higher-income countries pledging to improve access to antibiotics, diagnostics, education and prevention, which we all know are vital to stopping AMR?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: AMR is the third biggest killer now. Meetings took place at the UN General Assembly, and I was there in April attending an AMR meeting. We will do everything we can, and we are greatly enhanced in our abilities by the presence of Sally Davies, who is an envoy on AMR. I can tell my hon. Friend that this has the absolute attention of the Government.

T5. [906685] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Fifty thousand women in Gaza are pregnant, with 5,000 due to give birth now in truly hellish circumstances. If bombing a hospital is, as the Minister just said, a war crime, how would he describe the deliberate withholding of fuel to power those hospitals and keep them working?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is ingeniously asking the same question that she asked earlier. I can tell her that we are doing everything we can to address the issue she has raised. It is as much a concern to us as it is to her, and we will continue to do that.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is vital for peace that the rule of law is established and upheld in both Palestine and Israel. Has my right hon. Friend made an assessment of whether the weakening of the judiciary in Israel will impact on legal decisions relating to the Israel defence forces' rules of engagement in the current conflict?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises an important point. While I was in Israel prior to the 7 October incidents, we of course discussed the proposals for judicial reform. Those proposals have not yet been taken forward by the Israeli Government, but I can assure her and the House that we remain committed to international law and will always communicate that to all parties involved.

T6. [906686] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If Government will not back an actual ceasefire, will they at least consider supporting a humanitarian pause, to allow essential supplies to reach the 2 million civilians trapped in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The Government, along with their partners, are doing everything to try to progress humanitarian support and supplies into Gaza.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Strong parliamentary democracy is crucial to the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has a central role as one of the oldest Commonwealth institutions, with you as one of our co-presidents, Mr Speaker. My right hon. Friend's Department acknowledges that new legislation is needed to recognise the CPA as an international interparliamentary organisation, to keep it headquartered here in the UK. When does he plan to have that new legislation in place?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the extraordinary contribution that the CPA makes around the world. We are very anxious to address the issue she has raised and to find a mutually acceptable solution. I hope that this can be done by legislation once parliamentary time allows, but if it is not possible to place it in the King's Speech, she will know that there are other ways of pursuing the matter.

T7. [906687] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Do the Government agree that there needs to be a full independent international inquiry into the recent terrible events in Israel and Gaza, with full access to the Gaza Strip as well as Israel? Do the Government agree that the only way forward is a proper process of accountability for those responsible for the commission of any crimes—including war crimes—identified, whether Israeli or Palestinian? Will the Government review their position on the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court?

James Cleverly: I have no doubt that, in the aftermath of the brutal terrorist attacks on 7 October and Israel's defensive response, there will be an assessment of what has happened. We would want any such assessment to be as comprehensive and independent as possible.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary make representations to his Pakistan counterpart about deeply worrying human rights abuses committed against Hindus and other minorities, especially women and girls subjected to forced conversion and forced marriage?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Notwithstanding the challenges in Israel and Gaza, protecting freedom of religion or belief, including for minority communities, remains central to the UK

Government's human rights engagement, including in Pakistan. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised the persecution of religious communities, which includes Hindus, with Pakistan's Prime Minister on 25 September.

T9. [906689] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): On Saturday I stood with thousands of Glaswegians whose overwhelming message was clear that we need a ceasefire now. The only way we can begin to de-escalate this conflict—a conflict that has led to a humanitarian catastrophe—on both sides is by ending the bombardment of Gaza, ensuring the flow of humanitarian aid and creating a space for engaging in diplomacy and dialogue. In the light of all that, why do the British Government not call for an immediate ceasefire now?

James Cleverly: As we have seen over and over again this morning, calling for a ceasefire is the easy bit; actually negotiating something meaningful is considerably harder. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said repeatedly from the Dispatch Box, we are working with all parties. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has made reference to Israel's actions, but I remind the House that a ceasefire without Hamas stopping its bombardment of Israel is not a meaningful ceasefire.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Last week, China put export restrictions on graphite, which is essential for electric vehicle batteries. Four out of 10 of the top producers of graphite are Commonwealth members. Will the Government pursue a partnership agreement on critical minerals with the Commonwealth to reinforce those supply chains?

James Cleverly: I commend my right hon. Friend on his pursuit of this subject, which I know was very much in his thinking when he was in my position. I can assure him that a critical minerals strategy is something that I regularly discuss with Commonwealth leaders and others, particularly in Africa. It is in their interest and ours that they protect their natural resources.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Let us have another try: has the international development Minister had direct discussions with his Israeli counterpart about getting fuel into Gaza? Once the fuel runs out, hospitals stop and people die.

Mr Mitchell: I have not had those discussions with my Israeli opposite number, but the hon. Gentleman may rest absolutely assured that the contact with the Israeli Government—not least during the visit of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary over the past few days—focuses on every aspect of this issue.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The war in Ukraine is undoubtedly the largest land war in Europe for decades. Notwithstanding other pressures around the world, will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reaffirm the UK's commitment to its support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people?

James Cleverly: I can confirm to the House that Ukraine's ability to defend itself remains a focus of the Government. The Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and I discuss this matter regularly, and I continue to

have regular communications with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister. This matter may have fallen temporarily from the headlines of the British newspapers, but it has not fallen from the mind of the British Government.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): When atrocities take place, we have a duty to call them out. When Hamas murdered and kidnapped innocent civilians, we rightly called it out, and when Putin targeted innocent Ukrainians and Assad targeted hospitals, we expressed our horror in this House. Now we also have a duty to speak on behalf of innocent Palestinians who are being collectively punished, starved, and indiscriminately bombed in their homes by Israeli forces. Children's bodies are lying in the street. It is wrong, and it is why we need a ceasefire. Will the Secretary of State convey that to his Israeli counterpart?

James Cleverly: Again, the hon. Lady asserts her interpretation of international law, which is not necessarily one that is shared by the Government. The preservation of all life, including Palestinian life, remains at the forefront of our thinking.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with Ministers Kamikawa of Japan and Wang Yi of China about their respective countries' role in easing tensions in the Israel-Gaza conflict?

James Cleverly: I have not had the chance to speak with the Chinese Foreign Minister on this issue, but I have spoken a number of times with the Japanese Foreign Minister about it. Of course, we are more than happy to work with any international partner that can alleviate the pain and suffering of both Israelis and the Palestinian people, particularly those in Gaza, and we will continue to do so.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will want to join me in congratulating Narges Mohammadi on being awarded the Nobel peace prize for her outstanding work to raise awareness of the struggle for women's rights and equality in Iran. Will the Minister publicly support the brave women who are campaigning against the forced hijab laws in Iran, and once again, will he commit to proscribing the woman-hating regime that is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

James Cleverly: On the proscription of the IRGC, the hon. Gentleman will have heard the answers I have already given a number of times from the Dispatch Box, but I can assure him that we continue to stand with the brave women of Iran, who are standing up for their rights in the face of their Government's oppression. Indeed, I met with women Iranian campaigners a number of weeks ago, and the hon. Gentleman and the House should know that we stand in full solidarity with them.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I pay tribute to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and their teams for their important diplomatic efforts in the middle east in recent days. The potential implications of the conflict between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas are deeply concerning for the wider region, so can the Foreign Secretary update the House on the steps the Government are taking to prevent this conflict from spreading to the wider region?

James Cleverly: In the conversations I had with the Israeli Government in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attacks, they expressed a desire for this not to turn into a regional conflict. That desire was echoed by all the leaders of the Arab world that I have spoken to. It remains an absolute priority for this Government, and indeed the Governments of the region, to prevent this from turning into a regional conflict. That is exactly what Hamas wants, and therefore is exactly what we do not want.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is it not simply impossible to get aid in on the scale that is needed if we are to end the humanitarian nightmare under way in Gaza without a ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member has heard the detailed responses from the Dispatch Box today on the difficulties entailed, and I reiterate what I said earlier: we are doing everything we can to try to make sure that we help those who are suffering in Gaza today.

War in Ukraine

12.36 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the war in Ukraine.

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey): Since I last updated the House in my opening remarks in the debate on Ukraine on 11 September, the situation on the ground has remained largely unchanged. Slow and steady progress is being made by the Ukrainian armed forces, which continue to grind their way through the main Russian defensive position. Defence Intelligence estimates that the number of Russian permanent casualties—in other words, those who are dead or so seriously wounded that they cannot return to action—now stands at between 150,000 and 190,000 troops. Total casualties are estimated to number up to 290,000.

A limited Russian offensive is under way at Avdiivka on the outskirts of Donetsk city. Fighting has been fierce, and we assess that the average casualty rate for the Russian army was around 800 per day in the first week of the offensive. As ever, Putin and his generals show no more regard for the lives of their own troops than they do for the people of Ukraine.

However, even this ex-soldier can admit that wars are not only about the fight on the land. Since the last debate on Ukraine, the Ukrainians have opened up a new front in the Black sea, destroying a Kilo-class submarine and two amphibious ships, as well as making a successful strike on the Russian Black sea fleet headquarters. The consequence, as President Zelensky has rightly said, is that the Russian Black sea fleet is no longer capable of resistance in the western Black sea. As we move beyond day 600—it is day 608, to be precise—of Putin’s “three-day” illegal war, he has still not achieved any of his initial strategic aims, and he has now ceded sea control in the western Black sea to a nation without a navy.

The UK continues to donate significant amounts of ammunition and matériel, paid for from the £2.3 billion commitment for this financial year. That follows the same amount being given the year before, and that is an important point. Our gifting is about more than headline-making capabilities such as Challenger 2 or Storm Shadow. It is the delivery, month after month, of tens of thousands of artillery rounds, air defence missiles and other small but necessary items of equipment that positions the UK as one of the biggest and most influential of Ukraine’s donors. The UK is also the only country to have trained soldiers, sailors, aviators and Marines in support of the Ukrainian effort; we have now trained over 50,000 soldiers, sailors, aviators and Marines since 2014.

Events in the middle east have dominated the headlines, but in the Ministry of Defence and across the UK Government—and, clearly, in His Majesty’s Opposition, as they brought forward this urgent question—Ukraine remains a focus. I think that seeing this very timely question will matter enormously to our friends and colleagues in Kyiv. I remain every bit as confident today as I have been on all my previous visits to the Dispatch Box over the last two years that Ukraine can and will prevail.

John Healey: Members from across the House, and people across the world, are rightly focused on the middle east after Hamas’s horrific attacks. That terrorism must be condemned, civilians must be protected, humanitarian corridors must be opened, international law must be followed, and escalation risks must be managed. I welcome the Defence Secretary’s Gulf visit later this week, and I hope that he will report back to us in the House. I also welcome President Biden’s oval office address, in which he said:

“Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common: they both want to completely annihilate a neighbouring democracy”.

Today lets President Putin know that the UK remains focused on, and united in, solidarity with Ukraine.

Last week, as the Minister said, we passed the grim 600-day milestone since Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine. War still rages, cities are still bombed, and civilians are still raped and killed. Ukraine has made important gains in recent days on the Dnipro river. Will the Minister update the House on that? I am proud of the UK leadership on Ukraine, but we must work to maintain that leadership and accelerate support. I fear that UK momentum is flagging. There has been no statement on Ukraine to Parliament from the new Defence Secretary since his appointment in August, and no statement from any Defence Secretary in this House since May.

Labour backs the recent announcements on UK military aid, the new British Army training to protect critical infrastructure, and the £100 million, raised with allies, that will come from the International Fund for Ukraine, but Ukrainians are asking for winter support, air defence, and more ammunition—and where is the UK’s planned response? No new money for military aid for Ukraine has been committed by this Prime Minister. The £2.3 billion for this year was pledged by his predecessor, and the £2.3 billion for last year was pledged by her predecessor. This year’s money runs out in March. Seven months after announcing £2 billion for UK stockpiles in the spring Budget, not a penny has been spent and not a single contract signed. Why? Putin must be defeated, just as Hamas must be defeated. We must not step back. We must stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to win.

James Heappey: I echo the right hon. Gentleman’s words about the despicable attack from Hamas and the absolute right of Israel to defend itself. As I said, I believe strongly that it is important that Putin does not see this as a moment of opportunity to sow more chaos, and does not think that the western donor community is distracted or has a preference for supporting Israel over Ukraine. He must know that our resolve is to support both.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly noted that the Secretary of State will be in the Gulf later this week. I am sure that he will want to talk about what he hears there, but I suspect that he will also want to keep some of that counsel private, as we seek to calibrate how we posture ourselves in the region in order to reassure our allies and deter those who might seek to make a bad situation even worse. The Secretary of State was in Washington last week, and has had a number of calls with other partners around the region. So too have the Chief of the Defence Staff and I, as part of a Ministry of Defence-wide effort to ensure that we constantly

calibrate our response alongside that of those who we traditionally work with in the region, and we make sure that nothing we do is misinterpreted.

The right hon. Gentleman and I are, I think, friends, so there is some dismay that he dismisses all my efforts at the Dispatch Box to keep the House updated on the war in Ukraine. I stood here as recently as 11 September to lead an excellent debate on the subject, and have given a number of statements on behalf of the Secretary of State. I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman is so rank-conscious as to deem my efforts unworthy, but I have done my best.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to point to the fact that the excellent financial contribution made over the two previous financial years is, as yet, unconfirmed for the next financial year. It will not surprise him to know that that has already been the subject of conversation across Government. It is not for me to make that announcement in an urgent question today, but a major fiscal event is forthcoming, and I know that he will not have to wait too long. That does not mean that our plans are uncertain. In fact, I push back strongly on the suggestion that they are. For a long time over the past two years, there has been a sort of misunderstanding that the UK's capacity to gift is entirely either from our own stockpiles or from our indigenous industrial capacity. The vast majority of what the UK gifts is what we are able to buy internationally, often from countries that Putin would prefer were not providing us with that stuff. However, we have been able to get our hands on it and get it to the Ukrainians with some haste. That is exactly the sort of thing that the right hon. Gentleman asked about.

It is about the small but necessary things, such as winterisation equipment, small arms ammunition, artillery ammunition and air defence ammunition, and our ability to buy that while in parallel stimulating UK industry. I reject what the right hon. Gentleman said about contracts having not been placed; substantial contracts have been placed directly to replenish UK stockpiles of NLAWs, Starstreak, lightweight multi-role missiles, Javelin, Brimstone, 155 mm shells and 5.56 mm rifle rounds. As far as I can see, there is a steady state contribution to the Ukrainians that amounts to tens of thousands of rounds per month, plus air defence missiles, plus all the small stuff, alongside the replenishment of our own stockpiles, which can only happen at the pace at which industry can generate it, but none the less it is happening.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware of the situation in the Black sea with sea mines and how they are breaking loose. Our allies in Turkey are doing an incredible job in maintaining the Montreux convention and trying to keep those sea lanes safe. Is he having any conversations with our Turkish allies about any support they may need in no matter what way to try to ensure that those sea lanes are safe—if we can get the grain deal up and running again and get grain out through maritime? We are aware that sea mines are breaking free.

James Heapey: My right hon. Friend is an expert on these matters, and I commend him for the work that he and colleagues across the House do as part of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly to ensure that Parliaments across NATO stand united in our support for Ukraine.

He rightly notes the importance of the Montreux convention in keeping non-home ported ships out of the Black sea, and the Turks have applied that scrupulously. Turkey is entirely confident and comfortable in its ability to continue to enforce the convention. Clearly, for other Black sea nations, such as Romania and Bulgaria, de-mining is already a concern and they are getting on with that. I met my Romanian counterpart at the Warsaw security forum only two weeks ago to discuss exactly that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): We cannot forget this autumn that we are seeing a broader escalation of the conflict in Ukraine into the frontiers of our Euro-Atlantic homeland. I speak in particular about the recent announcements by the Governments of Sweden, Finland and Estonia that undersea assets linking those countries have been intentionally damaged by third parties. I should declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Estonia.

My primary concern, which I am sure the Minister shares, is closer to home. Events in the eastern Mediterranean and the Baltics demonstrate the diffuse nature of the threats we need to face, but they also demonstrate the importance of keeping a singular focus on the areas that the Government can best hope to influence. While supporting the heroic and excellent bilateral support for the people of Ukraine as they continue their fight, on the day that the Defence Committee publishes a report into the Government's Indo-Pacific tilt, can I ask the Minister to reiterate his Government's commitment to Euro-Atlantic security as a central strategic concern of these islands of the north Atlantic that we inhabit together, and critically, to update the House on the security of our North sea oil and gas infrastructure?

James Heapey: It is fantastic to hear the SNP's epiphany on the strategic importance of North sea oil and gas. We take seriously the requirement to protect our subsea infrastructure, whether oil and gas, fibre-optic cables or energy interconnectors. The Royal Navy has ships permanently at high readiness to ensure that our national economic zone is secure.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point. Is a time of growing instability in the Euro-Atlantic and the near east one also to be committing more military resource to the far east and the Indo-Pacific? Every defence review—the original integrated review and its refresh—has been clear that the absolute foundation of all our military effort is around security in the Euro-Atlantic, but if our principal ally in the United States is ever more concerned, as it is, about its competition with China and the challenge in the Indo-Pacific, it is surely necessary to show our willingness to contribute to Indo-Pacific security alongside the United States, so that the United States remains engaged in Euro-Atlantic security, too.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Before I ask my question, may I quote the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace)? In an important article in *The Daily Telegraph* at the beginning of October, he said:

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

“Before I left office, I asked the PM to match or increase the £2.3 billion for Ukraine to add to the £4.6 billion we have spent already. The UK is no longer the biggest European donor to Ukraine—Germany is.”

Does the Minister agree that this is a helpful exchange of views, because it will enable him and his team to go to the Treasury and express how united the House is on the need to continue this important—indeed, decisive—level of contribution to Ukraine’s fight for freedom?

James Heapey: The previous Defence Secretary never needed any help from me in making his case to Prime Ministers. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the UK has won a position in leading the global donor community, because we have resourced that commitment and have been willing to go through capability thresholds before anybody else, but our position as a leader internationally depends on our continued willingness to be so. The previous Secretary of State, the current Secretary of State and indeed the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are all on the same page about the importance of maintaining that UK position.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I completely agree with the comments made and concerns raised by the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). Part of the reason we want the Secretary of State in the Chamber is that we really need to up the game, in convincing the British people why it is essential that we continue our massive ongoing support for Ukraine, and of the importance of defeating Russia. It is clear that Ukraine needs more resources—equipment, ammunition, armaments and so on—so we need to step up further. Will the Minister go back to the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues and say that we really do need to put more resources into supporting Ukraine?

James Heapey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we should not take for granted the cross-party and national consensus that has existed on support for Ukraine. All of us in the House continue to stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian armed forces, and I think we set the tone that the media and the nation follow, but it involves a significant amount of money at a time when everybody else around the Cabinet table will also be seeking resource for their Departments, so we must make that case, as he said. As far as I can tell, though, the case is a completely compelling one.

What the Ukrainians are doing is standing up to our main adversary—the nation that challenges security in the Euro-Atlantic most profoundly—and it is through our support for them that we are making a clear stand about how we want the Euro-Atlantic to be and, in so doing, reassuring all our NATO allies along NATO’s eastern frontier of our resolve to stand up to Russian aggression with them, under the terms of NATO’s treaties.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s clarity about how critical it is for the security of the world and the rules-based international order that there is a successful outcome for Ukraine in this conflict. Will he do everything he can to ensure that the critical longer-range missiles

and air defence systems, which are having a very detrimental effect on the Russian armed forces, continue to get through? May I add my voice to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)? We take it as read that extra money will be announced in the autumn statement—at least as much as before, if not more—to help sustain Ukraine in this dreadful conflict.

James Heapey: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend about the need to maintain our support for the Ukrainian armed forces. A number of step-change capabilities will come into Ukrainian hands over the next 12 months or so—most obviously combat air. While the UK is not an F-16 nation, it is part of the F-16 coalition and does basic pilot training before the aircraft go on to F-16 nations for conversion. I know that the Prime Minister agrees with all in the House who make the case for the need for us to continue to support Ukraine into the next financial year.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In recent days, there has quite rightly been a lot of interest about the law of armed conflict: a subject about which the Minister knows from his own time serving in the armed forces. While the conflict in Israel and Gaza has rightly made us reflect on the protection of innocent civilians, in the last couple of years we have seen a war in Ukraine in which Russia has shown little regard for civilians. What does the Minister understand by the term “proportionality” in the context of the war in Ukraine?

James Heapey: I think that some of the false equivalence that Lavrov and others from the Russian Government have sought to create is deeply misguided. The point of proportionality is not an eye for an eye or a numerical thing; it is about military necessity to achieve legitimate and proportionate military aims. It is clear in the way that Putin has prosecuted his war, most obviously in places such as Mariupol as well as in how he has systematically targeted civilian infrastructure, not as part of the initial shaping of a legitimate military operation but as part of a deliberate sustained campaign to terrorise the Ukrainian people, that there is no equivalence between what is happening in Gaza at the moment and what has been happening in Ukraine. We must stand up every time that Lavrov or his cronies try to make the opposing point, and be clear on the difference in international humanitarian law.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It cannot be extraordinary that on the same day the Russians assaulted Avdiivka, Iranian-backed Hamas decided to commit their murderous assault on Israel. We cannot fight Hamas, but we can do so much more to crush their Russian allies.

James Heapey: It is important that I do not suggest that we have any evidence that somehow the Kremlin and Hamas were co-ordinating in the awful events that happened two Saturdays ago. What we have seen is that the Kremlin is incredibly effective at spotting opportunities presented to it that would further subvert and destabilise. We have seen that in coups across western Africa and in how Putin quickly moved to contribute to a challenging narrative to the west over what happened in Israel two Saturdays ago.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I know it is difficult to get exact numbers, but the calculations so far of wounded Ukrainian troops are anything between 100,000 and 120,000, as well as about 18,000 civilians. What support is being provided to Ukraine's health services to help them cope with the wounded and injured? What support is being given with regard to specialist service link-ups between the UK and Ukraine, also to provide the best support that we can?

James Heapey: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there are significant casualties on the Ukrainian side, though it is important to note that they are less than those suffered on the Russian side. Those are both military and civilian. On the military side, there is a coalition of nations, just as there is with all other types of capability to provide military aid. There are UK medics based in Lviv as part of that. When I was Rzeszów in Poland just two weeks ago, my plane pulled up alongside a Swedish air force plane that was about to evacuate Ukrainian troops back to Sweden. In addition, the UK is rehabilitating some troops injured on the Ukrainian side to our rehabilitation facilities here. In addition to that, as part of the wider support that the UK Government provide to Ukraine, we are of course always looking for opportunities to support the wider humanitarian and civilian medical services, too.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): May I return to stockpiles and supply chains? The Minister is right that the UK has provided a great deal of matériel, but we need a steady supply of orders to restock our own cupboards and to supply the Ukrainians. Will he outline what he is doing to make sure that we have supply chain resilience? Could he reassure me that he will keep a laser-like focus on the logistics capacity needed to get kit from here to there?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. First, the industrial capacity needs to be re-established not just to replenish our supply chain, which is an important point. The Department is not seeking simply to make a single order to replace whatever has been gifted to the Ukrainians. Instead, we are looking to create orders that run on and on so that the industrial capacity can be maintained. Those contracts are being placed as the industrial capacity comes online. In the meantime, other contracts are being placed that allow more like-for-like replacement from stockpiles elsewhere in the world. He is right that having all the industrial capacity and the fighting echelon works only if we have the logistic enablers to match it all up. We are making investment in that, as was set out in the defence Command Paper refresh.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): We must not forget Ukraine and we must continue to stand with Ukraine, but the war efforts there rely on a strong supply chain here in the UK. A crucial part of that supply chain are the GMB members at Defence Equipment and Support, who assemble and transport missiles to the frontline, but they have had to take weeks of industrial action over unfair pay. Ukrainian politicians and trade unions have urged a resolution to the dispute, because they know how valuable those workers are. Will the Minister join me in doing the same?

James Heapey: I am unfamiliar with the issue of which the hon. Lady speaks and I would not want to comment on the fly. Clearly, those who work within our excellent defence industry do very important work. In my experience, many of them see themselves as contributing to a national endeavour and are motivated by patriotism every bit as much as by money. I hope that they will continue to work as hard as they have so that we can support our own armed forces as well as those of Ukraine.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Given that precision, remotely piloted and autonomous weapon systems, not to mention close air support, could be decisive to an attritional land campaign, will the Minister please update the House on the delivery of air power to Ukraine?

James Heapey: In response to an earlier question, I mentioned the F-16 coalition, which is a combination of both gifting the jets and munitions and pilot training. I have nothing to add beyond what I said earlier, other than that it is expected that those capabilities will arrive with the Ukrainians within the next 12 months. Clearly, everyone is working as quickly as possible.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): If the news is to be believed this morning, we are about to see another German U-turn—this time on providing Taurus missiles—just as we saw a U-turn on Leopards and the F-16s. Indeed, right across the Ukraine contact group, we keep seeing the same pattern of countries dragging their heels on a certain capability, only to finally give in. Admittedly, that does not include the Minister and the Government, but why does it keep happening in the contact group? Will he say a bit more about how the training of F-16 pilots is going?

James Heapey: I am minded to be much more charitable to nations who have again and again challenged themselves to go through a capability threshold—often one that the UK has demonstrably gone through first. If we consider the position that the Germans have traditionally taken and where they are now post-Zeitenwende, the level of gifting that they are providing is extraordinary. It would be invidious of me to be in any way critical; in fact, I will go the other way and say how full of admiration I am for the way that German policy has shifted so completely over the last two years.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): They say that infantry wins battles but logistics wins wars. With western stockpiles diminished, what conversations has the Minister had with the defence sector about supporting Ukraine to produce its own munitions?

James Heapey: As keener followers of defence affairs will have spotted, the chief executive of BAE Systems was in Kyiv at the back end of the summer. BAE has already announced its intention to manufacture in Ukraine. Clearly, the British Government support that. We will look at how the wider UK industry can not only support the UK MOD's support for Ukraine but increasingly manufacture directly in support of the Ukrainians.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Due to Putin's illegal invasion of a sovereign neighbouring nation, Ukraine is now the most heavily mined country on earth, leading to countless deaths of innocent civilians.

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhési]

As the Ukrainians continue making progress with their counter-offensive, what steps is the Defence Minister taking to significantly expand our support in providing mine-clearing equipment to Ukraine?

James Heapey: With the exception of the northern Kharkiv oblast, which was recovered at some pace last autumn, I am not sure that the frontline has moved anywhere near enough to start to talk about a civilian de-mining effort in the defensive belts that have been laid over the last year or so. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman's gesticulation seems to be suggesting that the progress made over the last four or five months is such that the 30 km defensive belt that was well-seeded with mines by the Russians is still very much within artillery range and a part of the defensive action by Ukraine. He is absolutely right, however, that the use of mines—even anti-armour mines, not just anti-personnel mines—is an appalling reality of modern warfare. There must be some urgency in clearing up the battlefield thereafter, but I gently suggest that the military facts do not lend themselves to any such effort right now.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With the world rightly focusing on the middle east, I welcome this question as an opportunity to show our solidarity with Ukraine once again. I welcome Labour Front Benchers likening Hamas and Putin as barbaric bedfellows in trying to annihilate neighbouring democracies. At the recent NATO Parliamentary Assembly summit, we had a briefing from Colonel Maksym Suprun, commander of the 66th mechanised brigade of the Ukrainian armed forces. He talked about the urgent need for more anti-tank weaponry, unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare capability and, of course, ammunition. How is the Minister making sure that we can deliver the munitions and military capabilities that the Ukrainian armed forces need on the frontline to so bravely defend their democracy?

James Heapey: For more than two years, the UK MOD, alongside the US Department of Defence, has had an incredibly strong relationship with the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence. Those political and military relationships and the connections between our defence procurement agencies allow us to have a close understanding of the Ukrainian requirement for the fight not just right now but in six months' time. We will continue to maintain those relationships. We will continue to invest in the resources that are needed. Quite obviously, we are guided by what the Ukrainians need to stay in the fight tonight and tomorrow and, eventually, to prevail. Everything that we set out to procure on their behalf is with those plans in mind.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We all stand with Ukraine, but there is considerable concern about the likely length of the war. Earlier this month, I attended the Pentlands Ukrainian support group for the Ukrainian refugees in Edinburgh South West, which is supported by the Currie Balerno rotary club in my constituency. Many of the women there asked me what will become of them if the war continues and their three-year visas are up. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Home Office about the need to extend humanitarian visas to Ukrainians or to look at giving them indefinite leave to remain?

James Heapey: Those are not conversations I have had, but since the hon. and learned Lady mentions them I will undertake to have them. First, I commend her local rotary club for leading the support of the Ukrainian community in her constituency. It is really uncomfortable that, while all I want to say to her constituents and the Ukrainians living in my constituency is, "Don't worry, this will be over soon; you'll be home soon," the reality is that it will probably take a while longer yet. It is important that when we stand up in this House, we show Putin our resolve to support the Ukrainians for as long as it takes, with whatever it takes, even if that takes years, because Putin must not think the west will lose patience.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Depriving Russia of the revenue from oil sales is a central platform of the west's response to its invasion of Ukraine. Twelve months ago, significant efforts were made which had a significant effect. However, at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly a few weeks ago, we heard evidence that all the blockades have now been circumvented and that Russia's oil revenue has increased. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to work with international allies to see what else can be done in this dynamic environment?

James Heapey: Clearly, it is a cause of enormous concern when international sanctions regimes are not working as intended. If I may, I will follow up with my right hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Parliamentary Assembly to understand exactly what it was that they heard. I will then speak to colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about it, and perhaps write to him and his Parliamentary Assembly colleagues with a Government response.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): At the end of last month, the Defence Secretary suggested that the UK training of Ukrainian troops could be moved in-country into Ukraine. He also suggested that there might be a possibility of UK warships on the Black sea. Can the Minister say whether those plans still stand?

James Heapey: I heard a slightly different statement, and one that I think is self-evidently true. In a post-war Ukraine, the UK will absolutely seek to demonstrably support Ukrainian security on land, at sea and in the air, but obviously that is not something that we would do while a conflict is still live, for very obvious reasons.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to Ukraine and I am proud that Stevenage-based MBDA supplies Storm Shadow and Brimstone missiles, but we know from a recent report by the Royal United Services Institute's open-source intelligence and analysis team that North Korea is now massively supplying Russia. Are there any plans to work with international partners to try to disrupt that supply or increase our supplies?

James Heapey: There are a number of outcomes that one might say reflect strategic defeat for Putin: Finland and Sweden joining NATO; growing distrust of Russia throughout its near abroad; and more recently its having to go to countries such as North Korea cap in hand to seek weapons because it is unable to sustain its own arms industry. That is not to mention the rapidly

changing dynamic between Russia and China. Of course, the UK and our allies look at ways of disrupting Russian supply chains, but that would not necessarily be a matter we would discuss any further in public.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Minister will have heard concern raised in a number of places about the potential for a loss of focus or a lack of resolve, given the pivot of interest and attention to the middle east and the harrowing scenes over the last fortnight. He has robustly responded to those concerns. A second element of concern—he invoked the spectre of our main ally, the United States—is the political turmoil and turbulence that appears to be going on in the US Congress and the dissolution of the resolve that was rightly there for Ukraine in certain political circles. I am not asking the Minister to solve that as a problem, but is he concerned by it and can he assure the House that, from the engagement he has had with his counterparts in the United States, in the Executive tier their resolve is undiminished and they will find the resource to continue their support for Ukraine?

James Heappey: The Secretary of State was in Washington last week. Indeed, his meeting was the third he has had with Secretary Austin since he was appointed. Within the Executive, there is absolutely no change in approach whatsoever. Furthermore, although what we see in the news might suggest that there is a growing impatience or a lack of resolve in Congress, that is definitely not what we are hearing in our engagements with colleagues in Congress. America has a very strong sense of what its role in the world is and what this moment of challenge is. Despite whatever domestic politics may or may not be playing out, the resolve of Congress to stand firm on the side of freedom is as strong as it has always been.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Earlier, the Minister highlighted developments in the Black sea. Clearly, they are so important for grain and feeding the world. Will he update the House on the Government's position on the Black sea grain initiative and how we can ensure that grain is getting out to feed the world?

James Heappey: The Government continue to be affronted by the idea that grain to feed the world should be traded as part of some deal. The Turks have shown admirable leadership in seeking to facilitate the movement of grain out of the Black sea and the UK continues to support those initiatives. If I may, I will write to my hon. Friend with a more fulsome response on the Black sea grain initiative specifically.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I recently met Ukrainian refugees in my constituency and they are really worried about the war lasting a lot longer than was originally anticipated. What they really want is the security to know that they can remain safe here in the UK for as long as this appalling war continues, past 31 December 2024. What conversations has the Secretary of State had with the Home Office about ensuring that Ukrainian refugees can continue to remain here in safety for as long as they need to?

James Heappey: The hon. Lady might have been momentarily distracted, but that exact same question came up 10 minutes or so ago. I will add her name to

that of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) in my conversations with Home Office Ministers.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Providing matériel support and logistical cover is crucial to pushing back the Russian aggression in Ukraine, but so is a strong sanctions regime. Earlier today, a worrying report surfaced stating that while the UK has banned Russian copper, aluminium and nickel, the EU has not done the same, as it deems them to be critical minerals. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what the Government are doing to ensure that we present a united front in our battle against Russia?

James Heappey: When it comes to EU sanctions on Russian critical minerals, my hon. Friend has exposed a significant flaw in my knowledge. I will need to write to him.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I would like to thank the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), for calling this urgent question and the Minister for his update. The Minister spoke about the new and particularly important phase of the war regarding the Black sea and Crimea. Ukraine will not be free until every Russian soldier has left Crimea. The Ministry of Defence has trained Sea King pilots and, I understand, delivered three Sea Kings, but they are for search and rescue. What naval aid is the UK supplying to Ukraine for this next vital phase of the war?

James Heappey: The UK has provided a number of capabilities that have been used by the Ukrainians in their effort in the Black sea. None of those is explicitly naval, but the challenge with the Montreux convention is that, for example, the two minesweepers the Royal Navy has transferred to the nascent Ukrainian navy cannot enter the Black sea while the convention is in place. That, of course, constrains our ability to generate a genuine naval capability until the convention is lifted.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): When Putin launched his attack on Ukraine, he not only expected to conquer a neighbouring democracy but to split the international community. Instead, he united it because people cannot remain neutral when they see that type of behaviour. The biggest rebuff to him would be a strengthened and enlarged NATO, so what conversations is the Minister having, in particular with his Turkish and Hungarian counterparts, on ensuring that the ratification of Sweden's membership proceeds forthwith?

James Heappey: It remains our firm expectation that Sweden will accede to NATO, and we continue to press all allies to ensure that that happens sooner rather than later. It is also of note—there has been a great deal of discussion about this in the Swedish media—that it is increasingly in Putin's interests to style out some of the activities that have been happening in Sweden precisely to affront the sensibilities of some other NATO allies. It is important for all our eyes to be open to that possibility.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes proceedings on the urgent question. I will now pause for a moment to allow a change of dramatis personae before the statement.

Illegal Migration

1.20 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on illegal migration.

The Government have made it our top priority to stop the boats, because these crossings are not only illegal, dangerous and unnecessary, but deeply unfair. They are unfair on those who are genuinely in need of resettlement, as our finite capacity is taken up by people—overwhelmingly young men—coming to the UK directly from a place of safety in France, but most of all they are unfair on the law-abiding British public who face the real-world consequences of illegal migration through housing waiting lists, strained public services and, at times, serious community cohesion challenges, and it is the interests of the British public that we have a duty to advance.

We have developed what is among the most comprehensive and robust plans to tackle illegal migration in Europe, and over the last year the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I have focused on delivering it. The plan starts with taking the fight to the people-smuggling gangs upstream, long before they are even in striking distance of the United Kingdom. We have already doubled the funds for the organised immigration crime work of the National Crime Agency, and at a meeting of the European Political Community earlier this month the Prime Minister announced new, tailored initiatives with Belgium, Bulgaria and Serbia, which come in addition to the enhanced strategic partnerships that we have already agreed this year with Italy and Turkey. Our two agreements with the French Government have elevated our co-operation to unprecedented levels. This is degrading the organised immigration crime groups, and in the last few weeks new physical barriers have been installed to make it considerably harder for the flimsy dinghies to be launched.

As we are increasing disruption abroad, so we are restoring deterrence at home. We are breaking the link between arriving here illegally and a life in the UK. The number of removals of those with no right to be in the UK has increased by more than 75% in comparison with last year's figure. Since we struck our enhanced returns agreement with Albania in December, we have returned more than 4,100 Albanian immigration offenders, and, as I saw for myself in Tirana last month, some of those individuals are being returned home in as little as 48 hours.

In August we announced the biggest shake-up in a decade of the penalties imposed on rogue employers and landlords who encourage illegal migration by hiring or renting to illegal migrants, and as we proceed with that, more unscrupulous businesses are getting the knock on the door. We have increased the number of enforcement raids by more than two thirds since this point last year. The surge has led to a doubling in the number of fines imposed on employers, and has tripled the number issued to landlords. However, for those who are complicit in the business model of the people smugglers, severe financial penalties are not enough, which is why we have dramatically increased the number of company directors who have been disqualified for allowing illegal working.

Our concerted efforts at home and abroad are making progress. For the first time since the phenomenon of small boat arrivals began four years ago, they are down by more than a fifth in comparison with those in the equivalent period in 2022, and in recent months we have seen still further falls—and let me dispel the myth peddled by some of our increasingly desperate opponents that that is because of the weather. The weather conditions this year were more favourable to small boat crossings than those in 2022, but we have still seen a marked decrease. By contrast, in the year to June 2023 detections of irregular border crossings at the external borders of Europe increased by a third, and irregular arrivals in Italy from across the Mediterranean have almost doubled. However, we must and will go further to stop the boats altogether. We remain confident of the legality of our Rwanda partnership and its ability to break the business model of the people smuggling gangs once and for all, and we look forward to the judgment of the Supreme Court. As the success of our Albania returns agreement has shown, with swift removals driving a 90% reduction in the number of illegal migrants seeking to enter the UK, deterrence works.

The real-world impacts of illegal migration on our communities have been raised many times in the Chamber. One of the most damaging manifestations of this problem has been the use of hotels to meet our statutory obligation to house those who arrive illegally and would otherwise be destitute. Ever since the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I assumed office a year ago, we have made it clear that that is completely unacceptable and must end as soon as practicable. Those hotels should be assets for their local communities, serving businesses and tourists and hosting the life events that we treasure, such as weddings and birthdays, rather than housing illegal migrants at an unsustainable cost to the taxpayer.

We therefore took immediate action a year ago to reduce our reliance on hotels. We significantly increased the amount of dispersed accommodation, and we have increased funding for local councils. We reformed the management of the existing estate: by optimising double rooms and increasing the number of people sharing rooms we have created thousands of additional beds, and in doing so have avoided the need for a further 72 hotels. We have mobilised the large disused military sites that are more appropriate, and have worked closely with local authorities to ensure that they have less impact on communities. We are in the process of a re-embarkation on the barge in Portland, and, as of 23 October, occupancy had reached approximately 50 individuals. That will continue as planned, in a phased manner, in the days and weeks ahead.

Nearly a year on, as a result of the progress we have made to stop the boats, I can inform the House that today the Home Office wrote to local authorities and Members of Parliament to inform them that we will now be exiting the first asylum hotels—hotels in all four nations of the United Kingdom. The first 50 exits will begin in the coming days and will be complete by the end of January, with more tranches to follow shortly. But we will not stop there: we will continue to deliver on our strategy to stop the boats, and we will be able to exit more hotels. As we exit those hotels, we are putting in place dedicated resources to facilitate the orderly and effective management of the process and limit the impact on local communities.

We made a clear commitment to the British public to stop the boats, not because it would be easy but because it was, and remains, the right thing to do. We are making solid progress, and our commitment to this task is as strong as ever. We will continue to act in the interests of the law-abiding majority, who expect and deserve secure borders, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.28 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

At the time of the last election, the asylum backlog had already spiralled under Conservative mismanagement, but the number of small boats crossing the channel was close to zero, as was the number of emergency hotels being used. If we fast-forward four years, we see before us a picture of Tory boats chaos. For the third year running, more than 25,000 people have crossed the channel in small boats, while the number of hotels being used is about 400, at an eye-watering cost to the taxpayer of £8 million a day—higher than the cost last year. And what is the Government's response? A Rwanda plan, but they have sent more Home Secretaries than asylum seekers to Rwanda; an Illegal Migration Act that is counterproductive and has not even been brought into full force yet; and a new barge that was meant to bring down hotel costs, but has only added to them. Also, the military bases promised by the Prime Minister last December are still not ready. All of this has left the Prime Minister with an asylum strategy this summer that was less akin to the Australian asylum model that he is so desperate to replicate and more in tune with the Australian cricket team during this summer's Ashes: cross your fingers and pray for rain. Surely the Prime Minister knows that this was the wettest summer since 1912, and surely he recognises the impact that this had on small boat crossings.

The Government also like to claim to be bringing the backlog down, but it stands at 176,000. They like to talk about a legacy backlog, but this is just nonsense. It is a figment of the Prime Minister's imagination. He is taking last year's workload but ignoring this year's workload. The backlog is the backlog is the backlog. You can slice the cake however you want and spin it however you want, but the cake is still the same size: 176,000 in the last quarterly figures—up, not down. As for those who are being processed and rejected—slowly, it must be said, at half the productivity of seven years ago—are they actually being returned? Removals are down 70% since Labour left office, with a 40,000 removals backlog.

On the issue of hotel use, today's announcement illustrates better than any other the utter lack of ambition the Prime Minister has for our country. It beggars belief that the Minister has the brass neck to come here today to announce not that the Government have cut the number of hotels being used but that they simply plan to do so, and by a paltry 12%. Is that really it? Is it really their ambition that there will still be 350 asylum hotels in use at the end of the winter, despite promises last year that they would end hotel use this year?

Further questions for the Minister. Is it really true that the hotels he is considering closing will be in marginal constituencies? Does he really think that the public might not see through that ruse? Will he publish a list of the hotels he plans to close over the next six months? And why does the Minister not come back to update this Chamber when he has actually achieved something—not when he plans to achieve something or done a small part of what has been promised, but when the Prime Minister has actually achieved what he said he was going to achieve? At the moment, he sounds like an arsonist who has burned our house down and is expecting us to thank him for throwing a bucket of water on it.

Better still, why will this Government not get out of the way so that we on these Benches can show the leadership shown by our leader and our shadow Home Secretary on their trip to Europol recently, where they set out Labour's plans to stop the Tory boats chaos by smashing the gangs, clearing the asylum backlog by surging the number of caseworkers, ending hotel use and fixing the asylum system, which successive Conservative Prime Ministers have utterly broken after 13 years of neglect and incompetence?

Robert Jenrick: So it is all down to the weather again. Every time I come to this Chamber, it is about the weather. The hon. Gentleman is becoming the Michael Fish of British politics: he always gets the forecasts wrong. The truth is that he cannot bear to admit that our plan is actually starting to work. Returns are up, raids are up, productivity is up 10 times and, above all, small boat arrivals are down. We are closing hotels; he wants to open our borders. The Government will never elevate the interests of illegal migrants over those of the hard-working taxpayers of this country. That is what we hold in our minds every day in this job, and that is the difference between the Labour party and this Government.

We used to think that the Labour party had no plan, but now we know that it does not even want to stop the boats. In the summer, the Leader of the Opposition said that, even if the Rwanda plan was working, he would still scrap it. How telling was that? Even if we were securing our borders, he would scrap it and wave people into our country. He also said on his fabled trip to Europe that he would strike a new deal with the EU, which would bring thousands of people into the country. The new towns that he announced at the Labour party conference would be filled with illegal migrants. We will never do that. The Labour party's strategy is to force the British public to grudgingly accept mass migration. We disagree. We believe that the British public believe in secure borders and that they want a robust and fair immigration and asylum system. Our plan is working. Don't let Labour ruin it.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Any day when an Immigration Minister can come to this House and give us good news is a day for celebration. My right hon. Friend and his team are to be commended for the hard work that has gone into the successes he has outlined today, and I hope that Ashford will benefit from one of the forthcoming tranches of hotels being closed. Can he also say whether the extra resources that have clearly gone into clearing the long-term backlog are still available,

[*Damian Green*]

so that we will be able to cope with the constant flow that one gets of asylum seekers and not see any future backlogs building up?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his good advice and wise counsel. He had to clear up the mess left by the last Labour Government, so he knows how challenging these situations can be. We have put in place more resource. We met our target of 2,500 additional caseworkers to manage the asylum system. When I stood at this Dispatch Box in my first week in this role, the Home Office was making around 400 decisions a week. We are now making 4,500 a week, and I commend the civil servants at the Home Office who have driven that extraordinary improvement in management, grip and productivity. But we on this side of the House do not believe that we can grant our way out of this challenge; we have to stop the boats in the first place. That is why true deterrence is so critical, and it is why our Rwanda partnership, which Labour has tried to frustrate at every opportunity, is so important to securing our borders.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesman.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Minister will know that Mears has recently signed a contract with a hotel in Glasgow South West, so perhaps he can update us on the status of that contract. He has mentioned the backlog. Not everyone in a hotel in asylum accommodation is illegal; some will be successful in being granted refugee status. Can he tell us what discussions he is having with local authorities—I am thinking of Glasgow City Council in particular—on supporting and providing financial support for those successful refugees who will have to leave their hotel or asylum accommodation following a decision? Will he meet me and my Glasgow colleagues to discuss this issue?

Can the Minister tell us the estimated total operational and associated costs of this new system that he is creating, including barges, military sites, detention facilities and removal centres, alongside the proposed Rwanda deportations? Finally, an investigation by “The News Agents” has found that people traffickers say they are having an easier time sending small boats across the channel because of Brexit, which removed biometric system sharing and pan-European co-operation. What steps is he taking to create a returns agreement with the European Union, binding closer alignment with the EU and system sharing?

Robert Jenrick: Far be it from me to cast doubt on the journalism of “The News Agents”, but I disagree with the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. In this role, I have come to the view that leaving the European Union was more important than ever because the migration crisis being faced by Europe today, which is likely to grow every year in the years and decades to come, will be very significant and challenging. The ability to control our own borders and make our own decisions is critical for the future of this country.

With respect to the situation in Glasgow, I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman there. Glasgow has had a high preponderance of asylum seekers, as he will know, but that was the choice of the Scottish Government. To my eyes, they did not want to house asylum seekers in other parts of Scotland. That is now changing, but it does mean that there will be a particular challenge in his community and I would be happy to meet him to discuss that.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend and the Home Secretary for the real progress that is now evident. It may not be sufficient for many at the moment, but the real issue is, as I believe the French are now beginning to understand—I would like confirmation on that, if it is true—that the Human Rights Act, in our case, and the European convention on human rights and the refugee convention are not only a European problem but a global problem. Does my right hon. Friend believe that the French are going to make real changes on this? Is he in discussions with them? As I have said for many years now, unless we sort this out, the tangible benefits will not be as evident as they could be.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support over the last year, in particular with our landmark Illegal Migration Act 2023. He is right to say—this is a point I made in a speech at Policy Exchange earlier this year and the Home Secretary made in a speech in Washington more recently—that the international framework, whether it be the European convention on human rights or the refugee convention, although undoubtedly well intentioned at the time, is now in need of serious reform. Today we find ourselves in a world in which hundreds of millions of people are on the move and eligible for refugee status. The situation is incomparable to the one we experienced in the immediate aftermath of the second world war.

The signatories and authors of those documents would be appalled to see some of the abuses we see in our present system, which frustrates our ability to support those who are truly in need and fleeing war and persecution. Across Government, the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I are raising this with all our partners and allies at every opportunity.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): At the Public Accounts Committee in July, Home Office officials told me that the Government were paying for 5,000 empty hotel beds as a buffer in case of an upsurge in people travelling across the channel. Could the Minister update the House on how many empty hotel beds the Government are currently paying for?

Robert Jenrick: I would hope the right hon. Lady welcomes today’s news that, as a result of the good progress we have made on reducing small boat crossings, we are now in a position to begin closing those hotels. It is true that the Home Office kept a proportion of hotels precisely to ensure that we did not find ourselves in the position we saw last autumn, when I took on this position and we had problems at the Manston facility in Kent. As a result of the significantly fewer numbers crossing the channel this year, those beds have not been necessary, which is one of the many contributory factors behind our ability to start closing the hotels.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Minister and the Home Secretary are to be commended for their crusade against devilish people smugglers, dodgy lawyers and deluded interest groups, but will he acknowledge that the bar needs to be raised for asylum applications? Far more applicants are granted asylum in this country than the European average. The standard of proof needs to be improved.

Does the Minister also accept that, while these improved numbers are to be welcomed, the asylum system needs fundamental change so that it is only for people in genuine fear of persecution, and so that economic migrants who just want a better life cannot come here using asylum as justification?

Robert Jenrick: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend. The Home Secretary and I are driven by two ambitions that must come together. One is efficiency in the system, and the other is rigour and integrity. We have to ensure that, as we process claims faster than ever before, we are rigorous in interrogating the evidence and weeding out those individuals who have absolutely no right to be here in the United Kingdom. We want to ensure that the UK is a place of refuge for those in genuine peril, but not a home for economic migrants. It has to be said that a very large proportion of the people coming to the UK are, in one form or another, economic migrants. At the very least they are asylum shoppers, because almost all of them come from a place of evident safety in France.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Minister has heard me say before that the use of hotels serves nobody. It does not serve the taxpayer, it does not serve local communities and it certainly does not serve those people seeking refuge in this country, so the fact the hotels are to be stopped is good news. Can he give me some indication of where the hotel in Knowsley fits into his timetable? Does he agree that people need to tone down their rhetoric and stop peddling false narratives about what is going on with refugees? Frankly, all that does is worsen community relations.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful for the work that the right hon. Gentleman and I have done on this issue, particularly on the very serious events that took place at the hotel he mentions. I contacted his office earlier today to notify him that the hotel will be included in the first tranche of hotel closures. The incident he experienced highlights why this is not an appropriate form of accommodation, as it took from his community a very valued asset that people used for weddings, birthdays and special life events. It was also a source of serious community tension, which is why we now have to exit the hotels as swiftly as we can. It is also a lesson to us that we have to be very alive to the challenges both of high levels of illegal migration and of high levels of legal migration that make it difficult for us to successfully integrate people into our communities.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his robust and confident statement, and for the significant progress he has been able to report to the House today. Can he also confirm that the hotel on the A12 near Langham in my Harwich and North Essex constituency is one of those that will no longer be used for asylum seekers?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The Home Office has a long-standing policy of not naming the hotels wherever possible, but I can say that a hotel in his constituency is part of the first tranche of closures. If he has not already been notified, he should be notified by the Home Office very soon.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Liberal Democrats submitted a freedom of information request to the Home Office to ask about the cost of the Bibby Stockholm. We asked about the cost to taxpayers of buying the barge, as well as the estimated cost of running it over the next 12 months. The cost is estimated at £20 million a year, which is well over £300,000 a week. Why has the Home Office refused to put this information in the public domain? And why has it declared that to do so would not be in the public interest?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is essentially a humanitarian nimbby. He comes to the House to say that we should be a welcoming nation and invite more people here, but he does not want to face up to the consequences of where those people should be housed. Behind his question is a view that I think is quite offensive to the British public, which is that it is okay to house British oil and gas workers on this barge, but not illegal migrants. I very much doubt his constituents would agree with him.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I assure Members that the sun often shines on our blessed corner of Kent. Indeed, we have had a heatwave on one or two occasions this year, so let us not have any more of this weather nonsense.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his update. We need to put on record the immense effort that he and everyone on the Government side have made to secure this 20% reduction. It is the first sustained reduction in small boat crossings, and that is welcome. It shows that it can be done, and that this Conservative Government are doing what they said they would do. Will he join me in thanking those in my constituency who work at Border Force and the small boats command centre and are working hard to secure our border and keep us safe, as well as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and coastguard, who do a very difficult job, day in, day out? I thank them for all their work.

Robert Jenrick: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all those who work at our facilities in Dover and on the south coast. This is very challenging and difficult work. At times, they have had to cope with immensely difficult experiences, and they have saved hundreds, indeed thousands, of lives in the process.

The point that should be reinforced to my hon. Friend's constituents is that, although today marks significant progress—certainly very significant progress compared with what we see in other European countries—it is clearly not enough. Her constituents want us to stop the boats entirely, which is what we are setting out to do. Today is not a day for triumphalism. It is a milestone, and tomorrow we get back to work and get back to stopping the boats.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): It is important, as we develop policy, to try to identify issues that might come up further down the line. As the Minister knows, in my constituency, large numbers of

[John McDonnell]

asylum seekers are being processed—I congratulate him on that. Most are gaining status—understandably, because most of them have come from war zones—and they will be seeking employment. On identifying possible issues down the line, has the Minister seen the report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in *The Independent*, which is based on the Home Office’s findings on the treatment of migrant workers? It identified wage theft, forced unpaid overtime, racist abuse, illegal charging of fees for jobs, and insanitary living and working conditions. Will he review the mechanisms for the monitoring of and enforcement against abuse of migrant workers?

Robert Jenrick: That is of concern to me and the Home Secretary. We are aware of abuse in some of our communities, and we work closely with immigration enforcement and other agencies to try to bear down on it, because it is not right for individuals to be exploited in the way that the right hon. Gentleman describes. Also, there is a strong correlation between unscrupulous employers who act in that way and other serious failings, such as not paying tax, poor health and safety standards and poor product standards. That is why we need to weed out such behaviour.

Sir Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows from the Adjournment debate we had and our correspondence over the summer the extent to which illegal migration is an issue in my constituency. Some colleagues talk about “a” migrant hotel, but we have multiple such hotels. I welcome the Minister’s announcement today that one of those hotels will be taken back. Sir Humphrey used to say that

“Gratitude is merely a lively expectation of favours to come.”

In that spirit, may I ask my right hon. Friend when we can have the rest of our hotels back?

Robert Jenrick: As we make more progress on stopping the boats, so we will make more progress on closing the hotels. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his work. His constituents have experienced the reality of illegal migration, not just in hotels that should be used for tourist purposes being taken away from them, but through a serious murder in the community, which should give us all pause for thought and urge us to redouble our efforts to stop people coming to the UK in that manner.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Unlike many Conservative Members, I am glad that the United Kingdom remains a signatory to the European convention on human rights. That means that refugees and asylum seekers who come to the UK have exactly the same rights as each of us in this House. That includes the right not to be subject to inhumane or degrading treatment. Many of my constituents are concerned about the conditions in which refugees and asylum seekers have been kept in the past. They were worried about the Legionella on the barge, and they saw the conditions in Manston and Napier—the overcrowding, and the worst spread of diphtheria in decades. What can the Minister do to reassure my constituents that the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers will be respected while they are in his Government’s care?

Robert Jenrick: We take seriously our obligations to treat anyone in our care with dignity and compassion, and when we or our providers fall below that standard, it is right that we take action against those involved. The situation is challenging to manage; the hon. and learned Lady knows that from her city of Edinburgh, which houses comparatively few asylum seekers and has no migrant hotels, and whose council explicitly turned down the opportunity to house asylum seekers on the very vessel that it used for Ukrainian refugees. If she wants to support further asylum seekers coming to her community, she has to find accommodation for them.

Joanna Cherry: It’s a Labour council, not an SNP one.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Enough. We have had that question, and we are now moving on to the next one.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My constituents have welcomed Ukrainians into their homes and Hong Kong Chinese into their communities, and our excellent domestic abuse services mean that we often give women from all over the country a fresh place to restart their life. However, that means that there is huge pressure on local schools and housing, and the more than 400 asylum seekers who have arrived in Chelmsford since early summer risk bringing those services to breaking point. Although I welcome today’s announcements, I am concerned that Chelmsford is not on the list. Will the Minister, who is doing an excellent job, work closely with those in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at housing for those who are granted asylum, so that the need is shared fairly across the country and does not just create extra pressure on areas that are already hotspots?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend has been assiduous in raising concerns about the particular hotel in her constituency—

Vicky Ford: Two.

Robert Jenrick: The two hotels; my right hon. Friend corrects me. I would obviously like them to be closed at the earliest opportunity, but today we are setting out the beginning of a phased closure, with the first 50 hotels being notified. I hope that more will follow in the weeks and months ahead. I am fully aware of the situation in Chelmsford that she described, and I would like it to be resolved.

I take my right hon. Friend’s broader point about the importance of the Home Office working closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), is sitting beside me. She and I and the Secretary of State are working closely together to ensure that local authorities can plan for any new individuals who might live in their area.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that response, the Minister talks about the planning between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office, but I wonder what experience he has of the London private rental

market. In my constituency, refugees who have been granted asylum are being kicked out of their hotels by the Home Office contractor within a week.

Robert Jenrick *indicated dissent.*

Stella Creasy: The Minister shakes his head, but I am happy to share with him the letter that shows that. No assistance has been provided for those people. They are being told to go back to the council, but the council does not have time to follow up with them, so they end up at our local homeless night shelter, which will ultimately cost us all more than an orderly system. The Minister is shaking his head, but what does his data show about the number of refugees granted asylum while staying in migrant hotels who have been rehoused? Will he look at a more orderly system, and work with those of us on the ground to ensure that today's announcement will not just be a way of passing on the cost to another Department?

Robert Jenrick: First the hon. Lady wanted us to clear the backlog; now she does not want us to do that because of the consequences of clearing it. Perhaps it would be better if she just supported us in trying to stop illegal migrants coming to the country in the first place. On her specific points, it is not correct that the Home Office gives seven days' notice; it gives 28. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to look at what she is waving in my face, but I assure her that the policy is 28 days' notice. The key point is that everybody who is granted asylum has access to the benefits system and can get a job. Given that the overwhelming majority are young men, that is exactly what they should do now: get on and contribute to British society, and integrate into our country.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased that the Minister has kept to his commitment that the North Stafford Hotel in Stoke-on-Trent will be one of the first to close. That is happening only because of the Government's work to tackle illegal migration and stop the boats. Does my right hon. Friend agree that areas such as Stoke-on-Trent, which have done more than their fair share of contributing, should not continue to see more asylum seekers, and have more refugees settled? We need to ensure that there is a fair share across the country.

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted that the hotel to which my hon. Friend refers is in the first tranche. He and I visited it with his colleagues from Stoke, and it was clearly a classic case of why we should not use such hotels. It was a highly valued and prominent business and community hotel—a landmark in Stoke-on-Trent that is familiar to anyone who passes through the station. I am pleased to announce that it will return to its proper use very soon.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think that the Minister recognises the acute pressures that local authorities could face when asylum seekers who are rapidly granted status move out of hotels, then risk becoming homeless. He said that he will meet my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) to discuss the situation in Glasgow. Will he extend that invitation to the leader of the city council and other stakeholders, to ensure that Glasgow and other local authorities are properly supported and so can continue to extend a welcome to refugees?

Robert Jenrick: It will be an interesting conversation with the leader of Glasgow City Council, because as I recall the council does not want to take any more of our refugees. It put out a statement saying it would not use a barge, even though Glasgow had itself used a barge for Ukrainian refugees. I do not know why a Ukrainian is different from an Afghan or a Syrian; perhaps the hon. Gentleman should explain those double standards.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Having stood at that Dispatch Box myself discussing this sort of subject, I imagine my right hon. Friend is much happier to come to the House with today's statement than with some of the things we sometimes end up having to discuss. I must have missed all those Opposition demands to remove more people and take a tougher stance.

I welcome the message regarding the Esplanade in Paignton and my right hon. Friend's confirmation this morning. It is appreciated. Can he assure me that we will pursue measures such as Greek-style accommodation centres and ensure an adequate supply of dispersed accommodation, fairly distributed across the United Kingdom—including the 31 of 32 areas of Scotland that used to refuse it—so that we do not have to resort to hotels again in the future?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need a fair and equitable system. That is why he contributed to the creation of the national dispersal model, which we continue to pursue. We have now created the first large sites: we have stood up our site at Wethersfield in Essex and we are proceeding to stand up the site in Lincolnshire, as well as the barge in Portland. Why are we doing that? It is because we do not want the UK to be considered a soft touch. It is not right that someone who might have been sleeping in a camp in France comes across in a small boat and finds himself in a Holiday Inn in Oxford. That makes the UK a laughing stock. We had to change that, which is why we have put in place those larger sites. They are more appropriate, they save the taxpayer money, and they send a signal about the strength of the UK's resolve to tackling this issue.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Minister is very selective with his dodgy statistics, but what I would like to know is whether he is still planning to site an accommodation barge on Teesside.

Robert Jenrick: We are always looking for further locations, but we do not currently have any agreement with ports in Teesside.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work he has done to bring down the number of boat crossings and to speed up people being sent back. I also thank him personally for coming to Stoke-on-Trent to see the challenges we have. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) mentioned the hotel that is the gateway to our city and symbolic of what we aspire to: levelling up. I am grateful that it is to be one of the 50.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's kind words and for the leadership she has shown in arguing on behalf of her constituents for that migrant

[Robert Jenrick]

hotel to close. Her argument was grounded in levelling up, to which she is very committed. I know from working with Stoke-on-Trent City Council on many different things in the recent past how important that gateway to the city is, and how much investment has been secured to improve it, so that leisure and business travellers arrive in that great city and see it at its best. Closing that hotel will, I hope, play a small part in turning that tide.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I want to push back against this dangerous “community cohesion” narrative that has been used by the Minister and others today and previously. The UK has taken fewer asylum seekers per head than most other European countries. Indeed, the UK has been shaped and reshaped by successive waves of immigration over the centuries. I speak as one who has two hotels in my constituency, so I am not a nimby on this. Most of the asylum seekers I have spoken to want to contribute to society, they want to work and they want to integrate. Does the Minister recognise the dangerous, slippery-slope implications of some of the rhetoric he is using?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is not correct in his presentation that the UK is less generous than other European countries. Statistics are hard to compare, because we are a destination country. Many of those who come here and claim asylum stay here, while in countries elsewhere in Europe people claim in multiple locations while they are transiting through them. The most important statistic is that since 2015, the UK has issued 530,000 humanitarian visas—more than at any time in our modern history. That is a very large number of people to absorb into our communities, to support properly and to integrate, and it is one of the reasons why local authorities are under great pressure at the moment. We have to be realistic about that. It is why we have said we will put a cap on safe and legal routes, and why soon we will consult local authorities, including the hon. Gentleman’s, to determine the true capacity, so that the statements we make in this House match the reality on the ground.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The strain on public services caused by illegal migration is often felt the most by smaller towns, so may I ask my right hon. Friend to make such areas the focus of his efforts to close migrant hotels in the future?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is undoubtedly true that communities with fewer hotels have fewer public services. It is harder for people to get around because public transport is weaker. It is therefore more impactful when the Home Office takes hotels in such places, and we should consider that as we proceed to exit hotels.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister’s statement and his determination to deliver solutions. It is clear from what he says that solutions are coming. I welcome the news this morning of the intention to cut the costly hotel bills, but will the Minister clarify whether that is because we are sending unsuccessful applicants somewhere else, and if so, where they are going? It cannot be a case of cutting hotel bills while

increasing council costs by the same amount. Will the Minister also confirm that local women and children will be prioritised in housing over any young, healthy, single illegal migrant male?

Robert Jenrick: I share my hon. Friend’s sentiment and conviction. Of course we should be a decent, generous and compassionate country to those coming here from places of peril, but we also have to prioritise the interests of British taxpayers. We should not be elevating the interests of illegal migrants over those of the communities we are sent here to serve. Those who are granted asylum have access to the benefits system and they can work. We should all encourage them to do so and to integrate into British society.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister for listening to my Stroud constituents’ concerns about illegal migration and speeding up processing, and for taking seriously my calls to close a migrant hotel in my patch. I caution Labour Front Benchers against playing political games over which hotels are closing, because not only do they have no plan themselves, but they do not know what many of our constituents have been through, because Members of Parliament, local police and local residents have worked hard to keep incidents out of the newspapers, so that they do not escalate. Will my right hon. Friend please clarify when we will receive more information about the closures, and confirm that, in the event of a closure in my patch, there will be close working with Gloucestershire County Council, which has been very solid on this?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend for her good work representing her constituents on this issue in her characteristically sensible and calm manner. I am pleased that we have come to a good outcome in her case. The Home Office will write today or in the coming days to all the local authorities and MPs with hotels in the first 50. In the weeks ahead, we will consider further tranches as we make further progress on stopping the boats. We will put in place the processes and personnel required to support local authorities as we decant individuals from those locations.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Skegness is a tourist economy, and hoteliers have told me that the use of hotels in Skegness for illegal migrants has led to bookings being cancelled; it has been associated with serious crime. We have also seen marches hijacked by the far right, even though they know that that is not representative of local people’s legitimate fears. I therefore hugely welcome today’s announcement that two hotels in Skegness will no longer be required for Government use. That is immense progress, but does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree with me that the local council and Government as a whole should work as quickly as possible to get those hotels returned to their proper use, rather than left to rot by unscrupulous owners?

Robert Jenrick: I am pleased that some of the hotels in my hon. Friend’s constituency will now be closed. He has seen just how challenging illegal migration can be, not least in the protests in his town and the strain that it has put on community cohesion. That is why we must stop the boats and reduce the number of people coming

over in that manner. We will work with hoteliers as far as we can to help them to reopen their hotels successfully. The hotels are on different notice periods and that is one reason the announcement that we are making today is staggered. The majority are on three-month notice periods, which gives those hoteliers and their communities the time to prepare, take bookings, hire staff and come back to life.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the Minister for the real progress that has been made in cutting the small boat crossings, and also, last month, for closing the Royal Hotel Kettering as an asylum hotel. When does the Minister expect to close the Rothwell House Hotel in Rothwell as an asylum accommodation centre?

Robert Jenrick: I am pleased that we were able to close the first hotel in my hon. Friend's constituency the other day. I know that it was one he felt very strongly about indeed. As we make further progress with stopping the boats, we will be able to close more hotels, and he has made a strong case for the second one in his constituency.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress that he is making. I am not sure what consideration he has given to this, but he has cited agreements on returns to a number of countries and also agreements with France. He may have been aware that France is announcing proposals to cancel visas, remove the right of leave to remain and force people to leave France. That potentially runs the risk of many more people choosing to take the dangerous route across the channel and come to our country. Will he take action to make sure that anyone who is in that position from France is immediately removed from this country?

Robert Jenrick: The comments that my hon. Friend has seen reported with respect to France are indicative of the much stronger postures being adopted by most European countries on this issue. In fact, Labour is now at odds with the common view of most of Europe today. Most European countries sense the extreme importance of this situation and are taking more robust action. That is generally to the benefit of the UK, as we are a destination country after people have passed through many others. We want to continue to work productively with France. In recent months, we have seen good work by the French, particularly the Gendarmerie and the préfet in northern France, who have been extremely helpful to us, by for example, as I said in my opening remarks, putting up barriers on canals and estuaries, which has made it more difficult for small boats to leave. We want to keep that good work going.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): In welcoming today's statement, I also ask my right hon. Friend to deliver on the commitment that he made to me at the Dispatch Box on 5 September and confirm that the two hotels on Bostock's Lane in Sandiacre are at the top of his priority list for closure. If he cannot give me that good news, why not?

Robert Jenrick: I did make a promise a year ago when I took on this role that we would close hotels, and I am pleased to be able to deliver on that today. We will be

writing today or tomorrow to all those MPs and councils that are part of the first tranche. I am happy to stay in touch with my hon. Friend if she is not part of that tranche and to say to her that we will do everything we can to make sure that her hotels are exited very soon.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement today and the robust action that the Government are taking. Will he put on record that this country is still open to legal migration routes and that it is just the illegal migration routes that we are tackling? On the issue of the whole of Government approach, we are, of course, tackling the pull factors, but the push factors out of places such as north Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, which he recently visited, include climate change, conflict, famine and poor governance. What more can we do across Government to stop those push factors?

Robert Jenrick: We want the UK to be a strategic partner of choice for all countries—whether in Europe or further upstream, such as in north Africa—that share our determination to tackle this issue. That is why I have travelled to a number of those countries, including Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria, to build relationships with them so that we can partner on organised immigration, crime and border security. I also work closely with the Foreign Secretary and the Development Minister to ensure that a large proportion of our foreign aid budget goes to refugee-producing countries. It is much better that the UK uses its resources upstream to support vulnerable people than always reaching to migration as the first response.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the engagement and time he has given to discuss the hotels in my constituency. Can he confirm that the Holiday Inn in Garforth and the Mercure Hotel in Wetherby, which are currently empty, will not be used for asylum seekers down the line? May I also take this opportunity to ask on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that the military base at Linton-on-Ouse, which was deemed to be thoroughly inappropriate at the time it was put forward, will not come forward in any future plans as we reduce the need for accommodation?

Robert Jenrick: We do not have a plan to make use of the site at Linton-on-Ouse that was previously considered. With respect to my right hon. Friend's constituency, we will be writing to Members of Parliament and councils today, and if he is not fortunate enough to be in that first tranche, I assure him that there will be further tranches to come. We want to exit the hotels in their entirety; that does require us to keep making good progress with stopping the boats.

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): I, too, welcome everything that I have heard my right hon. Friend say today. On Saturday, we witnessed the most appalling scenes of lawbreaking on the streets of our capital. Can the Minister reassure me that anyone found to have broken our laws and incited racial hatred and violence in this country who is here as an asylum seeker, or on a visa, including students, will have that status revoked and be removed?

Robert Jenrick: I have been very clear that people who spread hate and division in our country have no right to be here. Having a visa is a privilege, not an entitlement, and any foreign national who conducts themselves in that manner falls below the standards that we expect in our country, and will find that their visa is revoked and that they are expelled. We have already begun that process in a small number of cases, and I have written to all chief constables across England and Wales, inviting them to bring to our attention at the Home Office any examples that we should consider.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I was in northern France last week and saw very large numbers of people, visible in public spaces, waiting to put their lives at risk to make the journey across the channel to the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the work being done with the French authorities has been a very important part of reducing the numbers crossing the channel? Will he commit to doing further work to develop what is happening, particularly in the area around Dunkirk, to prevent people moving away from the beaches, seeking to evade detection by the authorities in the channel, and using the network of canals to put asylum seekers in small boats across the channel?

Robert Jenrick: I wish to put on record the Government's thanks to the French authorities for the work they have done over the course of this year. Of course, there is more to be done. We are always encouraging our French friends to go further, but they have put in place a number of significant steps, including the infrastructure that my hon. Friend describes, which is making it hard for so-called taxi boats to go through the canals and estuaries and out into the English channel. We are also working with Belgium, which is another important partner through which a number of migrants, engines and boats pass. The Prime Minister announced recently in Granada a new partnership with the Government of Belgium to deepen our ties in that regard.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the news that, although there is a long way to go to completely stop the boats, there has been a significant reduction. Likewise, I welcome the news on the first 50 hotels and was grateful to receive confirmation from his officials this morning that the Best Western in Buckingham would close on 23 November. However, given that I had previously been told that it would close on 9 September, may I ask him to confirm that these new dates are final and cannot be delayed, postponed or changed, and that the hotel will absolutely close on 23 November?

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely. I hope the letter he has received is written in blood. That hotel will close on the date in the letter.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work he has done on this issue. I have seen at first hand how hard he has worked over the last 12 months to make sure we make progress. On the upstream work, one thing we need to get a grip of is the industry of producing the crafts that are carrying these people across the channel. What work is he doing with our law enforcement and intelligence

agencies to try to smash that industry, which is clearly an important part of the broader picture of stopping the boats once and for all?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend, who was a superb Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Home Office until recently, knows that we have worked very hard on smashing the people-smuggling gangs not just on the goal line of the beaches of northern France but further up the pitch in places such as Turkey and north Africa. That involves a lot of work by the National Crime Agency, Border Force and the security services in partnership with allies in those areas. We have signed important agreements on that over the summer, including with Turkey.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): The Minister deserves great credit for all the work he has done on this issue. I am really pleased that the Novotel in Ipswich will be put back to its proper use. At the heart of this issue is fairness, and when some of my constituents who are struggling to pay their energy bills and put food on the table see men—and they are all men—living in a four-star hotel, going to the buffet every day and not paying a penny, it strikes at the heart of that fairness. Does the Minister agree that those constituents who used to work in the hotel and were pressured to resign should be offered their jobs back, ideally on better terms than before? That is also connected to the fairness point.

Robert Jenrick: I feel very strongly that we are sent to this place to represent the interests of our constituents, and we should not elevate the interests of illegal migrants over those of the communities we are elected to serve. That is the approach that my hon. Friend has taken in fighting tenaciously to get that hotel closed to asylum seekers and returned to the community uses that his constituents value. We want to see more such hotels closed across the country.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for announcing that 50 hotels will close. Will he consider putting a list in the Library so that we are able to see the names—I have hotels bordering my constituency but not actually in it—and will he do that for further tranches too? The Government propose putting caps on the number of illegal migrants we are willing to take. When will that be brought forward for a vote, and when will the consultation finish, so that we can manage the demand?

Robert Jenrick: We will not publish the list under long-standing Home Office practice, as we are advised by the police that it is preferable not to name the hotels because we have seen protests and community tensions in the recent past.

We legislated for the cap in the Illegal Migration Act 2023, and we will shortly publish the consultation, which will ask every local authority how much capacity it has to house individuals who come to the UK through safe and legal routes. We will move away from an era in which we in Westminster posture and virtue signal while our local communities and councils have to pick up the bill. As a result of that consultation, we will bring forward our proposal to Parliament and have a vote on it, if colleagues so wish.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his announcements and the progress in this area. We urgently need to move people out of hotels and to instead provide stable, cost-effective accommodation that meets the needs of asylum seekers and the communities we serve. We all need to do our bit. We have received proposals from Home Office officials for asylum accommodation locally that would not work. The officials have been very helpful, but will the Minister agree to meet me and Runnymede Borough Council leader Tom Gracey to discuss alternative proposals to do our bit?

Robert Jenrick: I would be pleased to do so. One innovation that we have started this week is to write to all local authorities with an open offer: if they can bring forward better proposals for asylum accommodation than the Home Office's providers, we would be happy to work directly with them. If my hon. Friend's local council has ideas that would be more suitable, better value for money and more in line with the wishes of the local community, we will take them very seriously.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and thank him for hearing the many thousands of voices across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke who signed my petition to end Serco's abuse of Stoke-on-Trent and get one of the two hotels closed. That is in stark contrast to Stoke-on-Trent Labour, which allowed us to become a dumping ground after it signed up to the asylum voluntary dispersal scheme. Labour is now led by a Leader of the Opposition who wants us to surrender our borders to Brussels and move them to the Mediterranean—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Immigration Minister also let the mask slip at Labour party conference by basically claiming that anyone who wants to control our borders is xenophobic. I note the moan from that Dispatch Box at the news that Stoke-on-Trent will have one of its hotels shut. Can the Minister tell me when the other hotel in Stoke-on-Trent will face closure? I hope it is as soon as possible, because Stoke-on-Trent has done its fair share already.

Robert Jenrick: No one in this place has fought harder to end the use of asylum hotels than my hon. Friend and his colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent. That is why it is so important that we have delivered on our promise to do so. We are stopping the boats and making progress, but there is still a long way to go. We want to stop the boats in their entirety, and as we do so more hotels in his constituency and elsewhere will close. The public can see what is happening: we are closing hotels, but the Opposition want to open our borders.

Points of Order

2.26 pm

Stephen Kinno (Aberavon) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order on the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in the statement. The immigration guidelines were changed in August 2023 to enable eviction within seven days as opposed to 28 days, and my hon. Friend has the letter from ClearSprings to the person she is representing that confirms a seven-day deadline. I wonder whether the Minister might wish to correct the record based on the exchange he had with my hon. Friend earlier.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As a rule, it is not correct to continue a statement with additional questions, but he appears to raise a genuinely new question arising from the statement. If the Minister would care to answer it, I will allow him to do so. If he prefers to write to the hon. Gentleman, that is also acceptable.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I could do both. I will write to set out our position, but from the information that has been made available to me, I suspect that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is mistaken. There is a twofold process: on granting an individual their asylum claim, they are notified that they have 28 days plus two days for postage to vacate their property. When they come to seven days before the end of that 28-day period, we then serve them with a notice to quit in accordance with the law. I am afraid she is mistaken.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying the situation and I trust that that satisfies the shadow Minister's point of order.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made an official visit to Charing Cross Hospital in my constituency. On arrival, he was joined by the Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) and the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Hammersmith and Chiswick. They then proceeded to use the visit for party political purposes.

A video they recorded inside the hospital concludes by saying that the hospital has

“got a really, really great future here under the Conservatives.”

That will come as a surprise to my constituents who fought for seven years to stop Conservative Governments demolishing the hospital and, earlier this year, saw it taken out of the 2030 new hospital programme, putting £1 billion of essential funding at risk.

Paragraph 8.1 of the ministerial code states:

“Official facilities paid for out of public funds should be used for Government publicity and advertising but may not be used for the dissemination of material which is essentially party political.”

Can you advise me what steps I can take to see that that flagrant breach of the ministerial code is properly investigated?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for having given me notice of his intention to raise it. I am not absolutely clear: is he saying that a Minister visited his constituency but did not give him notice?

Andy Slaughter: No, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am saying that the Minister visited and used official facilities for a party political purpose.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I heard that part of what the hon. Gentleman said—*[Interruption.]* Order. I do not need all that talking while I am dealing with a point of order because it means I cannot hear anything. The hon. Gentleman's main point is not that he was not notified of the visit but about the content of the visit. If it had been about notification, I could certainly have dealt with that from the Chair. The content of the visit is a matter for the ministerial code and not something I can deal with from the Chair, but I am confident that there are currently some senior Ministers on the Treasury Bench, and I trust that the hon. Gentleman's point will be taken seriously. If it is a matter for the ministerial code but cannot be dealt with from the Treasury Bench, he ought perhaps to write to the Speaker and the matter can then be discussed in that way.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I attempted earlier during Foreign Office questions to catch the Speaker's eye, but was unsuccessful given the number of Members who were keen to speak. On Friday, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary about a constituency case, asking him to ensure that consular assistance was provided for an imminent trial overseas. I am concerned that, given the heightened tensions in the middle east, my constituent's case may not receive the attention that it deserves. His wife, young child and other family members are understandably very concerned about his situation. I would welcome any assistance that you can provide, Madam Deputy Speaker, in encouraging the Foreign Office, which I appreciate is under heavy pressure at the moment, to nevertheless take an urgent look at my constituent's case and provide consular assistance.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I understand, from a compassionate point of view, why he wishes to raise that matter on the Floor of the House, but I think he knows that it is not a matter for the Chair. I understand why he wishes to have the matter raised and paid attention to immediately by Ministers, and I am confident that if he approaches the appropriate Minister in the usual way, the case will get the attention that it needs and that his constituent deserves. I hope that is helpful.

Parliamentary Sovereignty (Referendums)

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

2.33 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit Ministers of the Crown from making or implementing any legal instrument which is not consistent with the sovereignty of the United Kingdom Parliament, unless it has been approved by a referendum; and for connected purposes.

This Bill does what it says on the tin. The point of it is to uphold the integrity and sovereignty of this great House and this great nation. It would, for example, prevent a future Government from overturning the democratic will of the British people by taking us back into the European Union without consulting the public in a referendum. Indeed, it would stop the Government from taking us into any union without public consent, and it would move power closer to the people.

However, the Bill would also stop something that threatens the people of our great nation right now. It would stop the Government from blindly accepting the World Health Organisation's amendments to the international health regulations and the so-called post-pandemic agreement, which they appear intent on doing without even consulting this House, never mind the public. The Government signed up to the WHO pandemic preparedness treaty negotiations without a single word being uttered in Government time. The only time we have even mentioned it in this Parliament was on 17 April this year in a Westminster Hall debate forced by over 156,000 members of the public signing a petition. A further petition to reject the amendments to the IHR has closed, having reached over 116,000 signatures, but no time has yet been allocated for a debate.

Those two instruments, if followed, will control how future Governments can prepare and respond to emergencies. In my view, that would amount to making this House redundant. If allowed to progress, that treaty and the amendments to the IHR will fundamentally change the relationship between citizen and state, moving away from a parliamentary democracy that has been the envy of the world for centuries to an autocratic dictatorship led by the unelected and unaccountable director general of the WHO. That same organisation has been accused of undue Chinese influence, as well as of severely mismanaging and covering up the spread and origin of covid-19. That same organisation is mostly funded by commercial and private interests and has diplomatic immunity for its employees and families. What could possibly go wrong?

My North West Leicestershire constituents voted to leave the European Union in 2016—indeed, I campaigned for it, too—but they did not vote in their tens of thousands to leave the EU only to be subjected to an even more autocratic and unaccountable body that takes sovereignty away from this House and from our people. We voted to leave the European Union to take back control, not to give it away to the WHO or anybody else. We are all elected by our constituents to represent them and speak on their behalf, so when it comes to the matter of their sovereignty and protecting their freedoms and rights, surely it is our responsibility

to defend those rights and privileges. We are custodians of that power and sovereignty only for a brief period, after which it must be returned intact to the people at the next election, so that they can again decide who will represent them for the next parliamentary period.

When it comes to giving sovereignty away, that decision must always go back to the people, and it requires a referendum. The people should decide whether they wish to give their sovereignty away, and, in this case, whether they want the director general of the WHO controlling their life, rather than the Government of the day. To give those powers away would be nothing short of a dereliction of our duties.

The WHO would like to paint a picture of the treaty and the amendments being all about nation states working together in harmony to fight deadly pathogens, when they are in fact a power grab by an unaccountable elite. They do not want a debate on that; they would quite happily see it passed through the back door without a word being mentioned. That is not my idea of an open parliamentary democracy. The director general of the WHO will have the ability to call a public health emergency of international concern—the acronym is PHEIC, Madam Deputy Speaker—and take absolute powers to control the lives of all citizens of our sovereign nation. That is a power grab not just in this nation, but in all nations around the globe who sign up.

The new powers that the WHO will gain include the freedom to declare a pandemic—or even the potential for a pandemic—at which point all decision-making powers fall under the control of the WHO. The powers would also include the ability to call an emergency owing to human pathogens, animal pathogens, a perceived environmental threat or even the risk of any of the above; and the freedom to impose lockdown restrictions on all individuals in member states and make vaccinations or other medications mandatory, such as vaccines made in 100 days by skipping human trials and shaving safety and efficacy testing down to the bare bones. Furthermore, the WHO would seek power on the right to specify the use of certain medications in medical emergencies, and ban others—to decide healthcare for every person, with local doctors being forced to follow WHO edicts. The power to require a global health passport to be carried would also be given to those unelected bureaucrats in Geneva. Nations would be required to surveil and censor the press and social media so that no dissenting voices can be heard. The removal of the clause relating to human rights is unforgivable.

The recommendations that the WHO issued during the covid-19 pandemic were exactly that: recommendations. They were advisory, and it was up to sovereign Governments and sovereign Parliaments to implement or ignore them—Sweden bravely and successfully chose to ignore them. This treaty would make the WHO's recommendations mandatory without a debate in this House or, indeed, any other elected Chamber of nations that sign up to these flawed agreements.

As George Santayana said, those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. I have some severe worries that the lessons of the last pandemic have not been learned by the WHO itself, as it will not even have a review of its recommendations during the pandemic, so sure is it that its advice was absolutely perfect—when, in fact, we know from independently

conducted reviews that it was a litany of disasters, lockdowns, mandatory experimental vaccines and masks, all of which caused our population and economy huge harm. We are in danger of giving this organisation even more powers to overreach itself and repeat those catastrophic mistakes.

Do we really want a repeat of the measures recommended by the WHO that resulted in £400 billion on the national debt, which has caused ravaging inflation, not to mention the huge NHS waiting lists, 1 million young people in need of mental health support and the damage to our children's education and development? That begs the question, why on earth would anyone be willing to give away our sovereignty without consulting this House or the people? That is something I am not content with, and I suspect many colleagues here today share my concerns—or perhaps some of them think, rather like those who were deciding the regulations at the last pandemic, that the rules would not apply to them. I can assure hon. and right hon. Members that they will.

The very democracy that we have taken for granted all our lives is now under threat, but it is not under threat from invading armies hailing from hostile nations. No, our democracy is under threat due to the apparent corruption and decay of our own Government institutions, which are allowing this power grab to happen. Members in this Chamber should never forget that we are the servants of the people, not their masters, and the servants should never sell out their masters.

In my opinion, anyone who supports either of these WHO instruments—I refuse to call one of them an agreement, because I have not agreed to it, and neither have the people of North West Leicestershire; indeed, I think the majority of my constituents would never agree to these instruments—and any Member of this Parliament who would hand over these powers to a such discredited organisation as the WHO does not deserve a seat in this Chamber or any elected Assembly around the world.

In conclusion, to even contemplate giving away these sorts of powers to this sort of body, which affect not just the democratic rights but the human rights of every single man, woman and child in our nation, without a referendum would be quite simply catastrophic. People have said that this would lead to one world government. In fact, it is rather worse; it will be a one world dictatorship. Signing up to this treaty and binding ourselves to the WHO without a single debate on it, a single vote on it or asking the general public what they think would make being a member of the European Union look like a democratic paradise by comparison. That is why we need this Bill. I am aware that, with the looming prospect of Prorogation, even if the House supports my motion today, the Bill will fall in a few days' time. However, as the phrase goes, I will be back.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Bridgen and Mr Philip Hollobone present the Bill.

Andrew Bridgen accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 377).

Prisons

2.43 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Damian Hinds): I beg to move,

That the draft Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Removal of Prisoners for Deportation) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 October, be approved.

Last week my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor made a statement to the House setting out a number of reforms in which our sharp focus is public safety. We will ensure that the worst offenders stay locked up for longer; further enlarge our prison capacity, building on the recent growth that has been achieved, which is unprecedented since the Victorians; and ensure that that capacity is put to best use for public protection.

The removal of foreign national offenders is a priority for this Government. Between January 2019 and March 2023, we removed 14,700 foreign national offenders from the country, but there are still 10,000 FNOs in our prisons, each of them taking up a prison place at great expense to the British taxpayer. While my Department is working closely with the Home Office to increase removals, there is still more that can be done.

As the Lord Chancellor set out in his statement, it cannot be right that some of these individuals are sitting in prison when they could otherwise be removed from the country. The early removal scheme exists to deport foreign national offenders. This means that any foreign national who is convicted of a crime and given a prison sentence—with the exception of those convicted of terrorism or terror-related offences—is considered for deportation. We also remove foreign offenders through prisoner transfer agreements, which enable prisoners to be repatriated during their prison sentence. Those agreements also operate to bring British national offenders back to the UK, and we currently have over 80 such arrangements in place with other countries.

The early removal scheme—the subject of this debate—allows for foreign national offenders to be removed before the end of their sentence, subject to a minimum time being served. Once removed, they are subsequently barred from re-entering the UK, and we are clear that any illegal re-entry will see them returned to prison, where they will serve the rest of their sentence. The draft instrument before us today will ensure that certain foreign national offenders can be removed earlier.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend the Minister clarify that last point? Is he saying that someone who is removed at the end of his or her sentence cannot come back once they are free? They have served their time here, and therefore, in principle, they have paid the price for their crime, but if they go back to their country and want to come back, they are not allowed to do so.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is correct that, when someone is deported in this way, they are not allowed to return. Were there time remaining on the sentence, as I outlined, that time would be servable if they did come back illegally.

This instrument will ensure that certain foreign national offenders can be removed earlier. We seek to extend the removal window in the early removal scheme from 12 months to 18 months, meaning that we would be able to deport an eligible foreign national offender up to six

months earlier, still subject to the minimum required proportion of time having been served. This builds on changes we introduced last year in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which extended the maximum from nine to 12 months. As I just alluded to, we also added the “stop the clock” provision, so that anyone removed from the UK under the early removal scheme will have their sentence paused following removal and reactivated if they illegally return to the UK at any point, which means returning to prison to complete their sentence.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is unsustainable that foreign national offenders in our prisons are costing the taxpayer £500 million a year, and that the actions he is taking will ensure that there are savings in the system, so that prisons can work more efficiently?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the significant costs involved. It is expensive to keep somebody in custody, at an average of £47,000 a year, and we want to make sure that the British taxpayer is not paying unnecessarily for people who do not need to be here and can be removed to their home country and not be allowed to return. Extending the window to 18 months will make it possible to do so for certain foreign national offenders at an earlier point. In preparation for this change, the Home Office is increasing the number of caseworkers to facilitate those removals, and that is the central part of the combined effort between the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): On that point, does my right hon. Friend share my concern that Opposition Members have previously tried to block the deportation of dangerous criminals, and can he tell me what the Home Office can do to ensure that does not happen again?

Damian Hinds: I very much share that concern. It is all very well for people to say that they are in favour of making these removals, but their actions have to follow their words. I am afraid that, all too often, that is not what we have seen from Opposition Members, as my hon. Friend rightly points out.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I think the Minister said that offenders sentenced to over a year would be considered for deportation. Is it the case that there is a duty to remove those offenders and that that would also apply to anyone with EU settled status convicted for over a year—they would be returned to their home country and barred from coming back to the UK?

Damian Hinds: Of course, the rules are as per the broader immigration rules and people’s citizenship rights. What we need to make sure is that, at the earliest opportunity, we are making that move and deporting those eligible foreign national offenders to their home country. We estimate that this change will add around 300 foreign national offenders to the early removal scheme’s eligible caseload at any one time. In addition to that scheme, as I mentioned, we have prisoner transfer agreements, including our new agreement with Albania, which came into force in May last year. We are looking to negotiate further such agreements.

We are a Government who are unashamedly tough on crime. By removing more foreign national offenders earlier in their sentence, we will be saving the taxpayer money, banishing criminals from our shores, and ensuring we have sufficient prison places to keep the worst offenders locked up for longer.

2.51 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his speech, and for a valiant attempt to defend 13 years of failure, not just within our prisons but across the wider criminal justice system. The Opposition will be supporting this order—the change to the timing of release for foreign national offenders—because the Government have got themselves into a mess and, once again, it is the job of the Opposition to help them get out of that mess. We will be supporting this change because we are a responsible party, and because we know that the crisis in our prisons needs to be addressed. The order is a necessary measure to tackle the overcrowding crisis in our prison estate. However, I want to make it clear that it is a half-baked measure, cooked up in a panic in the Department. It is a change that has neither been consulted on nor planned, one that comes as part of a quick rush to address the overcrowding crisis—a crisis that has been long coming, but I will get on to that later.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are both old enough to know that this is a theme under Conservative Governments. I recall that, back in the 1990s, prisons were so poor that prisoners were escaping with ease—the Conservatives are in such dire straits that they have begun recycling their scandals. It is no wonder that the public, having been through this, know what failure looks like. That is what we are confronted with today: a failure to protect the public, a failure to protect victims, and a failure by the Government to ensure that our prisons have enough space.

I will cover three areas in my remarks: the lack of planning around our prison population, the implementation of this new programme, and the wider issues around victims. Let us first look at the lack of planning. The overcrowding crisis in our prisons has been looming for years, with the National Audit Office, the Justice Select Committee and the Chief Inspector of Prisons all having warned the Government about it. In 2020, the Government were told specifically by the National Audit Office that they were unlikely to be able to build the 20,000 prison places they promised by the mid-2020s on time, yet the Government ignored that warning. I guess those 20,000 prison places are in the same place in the sky as the 40 new hospitals and 50,000 new nurses.

Back in 2016, the then Conservative Prime Minister said of the Prison Service that

“the failure of our system today is scandalous”.

If it was scandalous in 2016, I am not sure what word we would need to use now—perhaps something rather unparliamentary. When asked about this failure, the Government and the Ministry of Justice will point to the new prison places they promised, yet only around 25% of those places have been delivered. Plans for new prisons have been delayed and I understand from a report in *The Guardian* that one MOJ official said that badgers—yes, badgers—were to blame for a delay in building a new prison. The crisis has got so bad that the Government have been forced to use police cells as alternatives to prison places.

We should also remember that this is not the first time that the Government have made promises about the removal of foreign national offenders. Back in 2015, the then Prime Minister, the former Member for Witney, spent £25 million to help Jamaica build a new prison—of course, like a lot of the promises he made, it fell through. Successive Conservative Governments have made promise after promise on foreign national prisoners, and those promises have fallen through every time. This is not even the first time that this policy has been looked at: we saw changes regarding foreign nationals in recent legislation, and the Government considered changes to the early removal scheme last year.

Paul Holmes: The shadow Minister has mentioned overcrowding in our prisons, which is a problem. As the Minister outlined, there are 10,000 foreign national offenders in our prison estate. I welcome the fact that the shadow Minister will vote for the motion today, but can she explain to this House why at every stage, her party has voted against legislative measures to ensure that those people are removed, which would remove the problem that she is castigating us for?

Ruth Cadbury: I am new to this brief, but I do not believe that is the case.

If the Government considered this change in the past, why did they not introduce it back then? Did they think it was better to wait for a crisis? We should remember that this prison crisis—which has been looming for years—is having an impact every day on prison staff, inmates and the victims of crime. We still have prisoners having to use a bucket as a toilet in their cell. We have prisoners locked up for 22 hours a day, and prisons so understaffed that prison officers cannot even take prisoners to the library or to classrooms for education. Education is so essential to those prisoners’ rehabilitation, and for many of them, it is a condition of their eventual release. It is no wonder that the latest figures show that the reoffending rate has risen: it now stands at 25% for male former prisoners. That cycle of crime creates more victims.

I now turn to the detail of the order and its implementation. The policy will require significant input from the Home Office, along with the MOJ. As one prison governor has said,

“I expect it will require significant numbers of new Home Office staff for this initiative to be effective.”

We understand that the Home Office already faces huge problems with staffing, and I am sure I speak for many Members across the House when I say that I do not have complete faith—or even much faith at all—in the Home Office after the mess we have seen them make over the past year. Nor can I say I have much faith in the Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), who always seems to be auditioning for the role of the next Leader of the Opposition.

We also know that this Government have talked a lot about foreign national offenders, but after 13 years of Conservative rule, the number of removals of FNOs has dropped by 40%. The Government will point to the impact of covid, but in 2022, the Government were removing around half the number of foreign national offenders that they were pre-covid. What are the Government doing differently this time? Whether they

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

are removing foreign nationals with 12 or 18 months left of their sentence, the point remains that the Government still need to be able to remove offenders from the UK.

I am sure the Minister will have prepared lines about the Opposition and our approach, so I will give him advance notice that we do have a plan. Labour would create a returns unit to triage and fast-track the removal of those who have no right to be in the UK, including foreign national offenders. We will recruit an additional 1,000 Home Office caseworkers to tackle the drop in removals that we have seen since the Conservatives entered office in 2010.

Having looked at both the Government's statement last week and the memorandum attached to this statutory instrument, I could not see any information about the estimated cost or the additional resources needed, including for any legal costs or challenges to deportation. The Government need to set out exactly how many more caseworkers are needed and how much this plan will cost the taxpayer. The prisons crisis is already costing taxpayers; for example, over £20 million is spent on using police cells for prisoners, and I suspect that number will rise. A running theme from last week's announcement is the large hole in funding. In particular, the grossly overstretched probation service will be expected to pick up a lot of the pieces from the Government's latest crisis.

I want to finish by speaking about victims, in the context of both this statutory instrument and the wider criminal justice system. As a party, we have been clear that we want a justice system that works for victims, protects them from crime and supports them. I have one question for the Minister: could foreign offenders who commit violent or sexual offences be freed to their home country up to 18 months early because of this change? Will he take this opportunity to reassure victims that that will not be allowed to happen? Victims of crime will be worried that perpetrators will be released early. Over the past month, I have heard from prison staff, probation officers, inspectors, non-governmental organisations and so many across the criminal justice system about just how much of a mess our prisons and wider justice system are in, and that is because of 13 years of Conservative misrule and mismanagement.

3.1 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor announced a package of measures to address offender management, and I thanked him for his contribution and the proposals that he outlined. Importantly, we spoke then, and I want to speak again today, about the removal of foreign national offenders from our country.

It is absolutely right that the Government do everything they possibly can to remove foreign national offenders, because they are living in the UK—often on visas, and using our laws to keep themselves here when they actually have no right to remain in this country—while committing offences and posing a danger to the public. That breach of public safety is a clear violation of their right to remain in the UK. When an offender is convicted and given a custodial sentence, it is a high bar to qualify for deportation. Certainly during my three years as Home Secretary, as the Minister mentioned, we deported

around 12,000 foreign national offenders, despite the pandemic and the travel restrictions at the time. With each FNO deported, our streets and communities become that little bit safer, and that is something on which we should all be focused. Those who remain in this country still pose a risk to safety. Sadly, we have seen some come out of our prisons, stay in our communities and commit further dangerous offences and serious crimes.

As Ministers on the Front Bench know, some in this House—I have to say this quite starkly, particularly having listened to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (*Ruth Cadbury*)—have campaigned on this year after year. In December 2020, when I was Home Secretary, 70 Opposition Members wrote to me to stop a deportation flight to Jamaica, and murderers, rapists, drug dealers—you name it—were on that flight. Day after day, Home Office Ministers would come to this House and do a valiant job in speaking about protecting the public and why the people on these flights had to be removed. It is quite shameful to hear such a level of denial from the shadow Minister, which I simply do not think is at all acceptable.

I was lobbied, day in and day out—often through national newspapers, I should add. Letters were even sent to me by those on the Opposition Front Bench, in which they relentlessly broadcast their support for criminals, as they did on social media. They made the case for murderers and sex offenders staying in our country and being able to live in our communities. They made human rights claims to enable dangerous criminals to stay in our country. They have shown more respect for and interest in the rights of these dangerous criminals than those of the victims, or in the public safety of people in our country. That is why I say, as a former Home Secretary, that the Labour party can never be trusted on law and order issues, or on offender management, and its previous track record on them speaks volumes. Living in the UK is a privilege, and those who come here, break our laws and commit serious offences should expect to have their rights removed and their liberty taken away. This is why we should be unapologetic and robust in our approach to the removal of FNOs.

The SI will enable FNOs to be deported directly from prisons sooner—18 months, rather than 12 months, before release point. It is vital that offenders be removed from our country. Of course, everyone wants that, including the public, and victims in particular. I spent time during my period in Government with the victims of some of the most appalling crimes committed by FNOs, and those victims' lives are shattered when they see those individuals not being removed from our country, but being left to be released and to rebuild their life in our country at the taxpayers' cost, which is just wrong. I would like to ask my right hon. Friend the Minister a series of questions about the practicalities of how this scheme will work, as the change is significant and has an impact on the punitive and deterrent element of sentencing.

First, what consideration will the Government give to the impact on a victim of the early removal scheme, and the measures allowing release 18 months early? Many victims will expect an offender to be in custody for as long as possible, as punishment for their crimes, and they will have concerns about an offender being released and enjoying freedom in the country of their nationality. Victims of rape, sexual offences and other serious offences

will rightly have significant concerns about the perpetrators of these horrific crimes effectively receiving back a degree of their liberty. I have a constituent who was a victim of such a crime, and prior to this measure coming in—under the current arrangement, which allows release 12 months early—she was concerned about the person who caused her the most appalling harm being at liberty, even if no longer in this country, and she made representations to me that the offender should not be allowed to be released early. It would be helpful if the Minister spoke about the practicalities of how these offenders will be managed.

Secondly, I would welcome from the Minister details about the communications that victims will receive. As we know, the Victims and Prisoners Bill is going through this House. Many of us from across the House have campaigned for it—in my case, for almost a decade. It gives a welcome focus on victims, and I back the Bill for supporting the rights of victims in the criminal justice system and getting that system rebalanced. That Bill is coming in because of the concern and frustration of victims, obviously including the victims of FNOs. I hope that the Minister will provide assurances and clarity about how victims will be supported. They do get some communication, but they are heavily retraumatised when they hear about those individuals being released from prison, given the implications that that may have.

Thirdly, given that some offenders will be dangerous, and will show no signs of remorse or make any efforts to rehabilitate, will there still be a process for keeping dangerous offenders locked up, rather than eligible for early release?

Fourthly, can the Minister explain how the Government will deal with the enforcement of this scheme when an offender—and I am sorry to say this—makes human rights claims to try to block and frustrate their deportation from the UK? Again, that brings me back to the appeals I used to receive from the Labour party when I was Home Secretary.

On the other measures announced by the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor last week, I hope that, in his summing up, the Minister can give further details and assurances, particularly on the offender management package and the proposals for staffing. I appreciate that I am asking for specific information on staffing, but that has implications for overall offender management. This statutory instrument is of course part of a wider package, and we are not discussing that entire package today, but Ministers on the Front Bench will know of my concerns about the possibility that we will see a repeat of what happened under the early release schemes of the last Labour Government, when offenders committed crimes and absconded. That caused serious concerns and had serious implications for public safety. I am looking for reassurance from the Minister about how the Government's approach will differ from that of previous schemes, and how we will ensure that victims feel that justice is done, and reassurance that there will be a solid effort to reduce reoffending and its causes.

3.9 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I congratulate the Government on bringing forward this statutory instrument. The programme set out by the Lord Chancellor for managing the prison population is proportionate and

sensible. There is a big backlog and delays in court because of covid; having 10,000 foreign nationals in our prisons is very expensive, and if we are to make place for others, this seems a logical place to start. I have heard some people speak about the crisis of having record numbers in prison, but we were elected to put record numbers into prison, so most of my constituents will be rather pleased.

We need to build more prisons, which we are doing, but the planning system is sometimes painfully slow, and we need to manage what we have. Foreign prisoners seem to be a sensible place to start; we can clear out those places and send more people to prison. What we have here is sensible, and if we work through the measures announced by the Lord Chancellor, and are given some of the reassurances that my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) asked for, I think Conservative Members will be very pleased indeed.

3.10 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is a perfectly sensible measure. I support it, as I hope will the whole House. It is a modest measure that will not make a vast difference, but it is worth while and part of an overall very sensible package that the Justice Secretary announced. We must be honest: the pressure in our prisons is the result of decades of underfunding. All parties have responsibility for that. It is not a question of blaming one Government or another; there has been a long period of this. We must also level with the British public: whenever we in this House demand longer prison sentences, or to lock more people up, it comes at a cost to the public purse. We must be up front with the public. Locking someone up in prison is sometimes necessary for public protection, but it is also exceedingly expensive, at £45,000 to £47,000 or so per annum.

As well as introducing this discrete measure, and the other measures in the package announced last week, we must think seriously about who should be in prison. Prison ought to be for those who are a threat or who are dangerous, but as anyone who has dealt with the system will know—some of us have done so for most of our working life—many people in prison are there because of inadequacy or failures earlier along the track. There are failures in education or in mental health, failures in parenting or social services, and failures in a raft of other areas around addiction and so on. People are there because their life is in a mess. They have done wrong and committed crimes, and they certainly need a degree of punishment, but lengthy periods of prison are not the answer; that is a very expensive way of dealing with things. We have to use prisons sensibly, and be honest about the fact that a degree of rationing is required.

The SI takes a sensible approach, and as I think the Minister will confirm, it does not alter the requirement that a prisoner should have served at least half their custodial sentence prior to release. The pre-release custodial period—the punitive bit—is not changed by this measure, but once someone has gone past that, we can bring forward their release date by 18 months, rather than by 12 months. That is a modest and sensible proposal, but we need a serious debate later in this House about the right way to make use of an expensive, necessary, valuable, but very pricey institution.

3.13 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I remind hon. Members of my declared interest, in that my brother is chair of the Prison Reform Trust. The statutory instrument is a sensible step forward. A number of measures have been taken to try to alleviate the pressure on our prison system, not least given the large numbers—disproportionate numbers, one could argue—of foreign nationals still in custody in England and Wales. I support the statutory instrument, but I ask the Minister to look at some of the agreements in place for prisoner transfer, to see whether the SI will have an additional, hopefully positive, effect on the statistics.

Last week, the Justice Committee meet an Albanian Minister who was very receptive to the compulsory arrangement put in place between our country and his. It seems that there is scope to go further with some of the measures that we are introducing. Will the Minister confirm how many of those whom we seek to remove through these measures will be women, and how many will be people in youth custody? It would be helpful to get those numbers as part of the overall package, so that we can understand what support and additional resources may be needed to ensure that the removal happens in the appropriate way.

3.15 pm

Damian Hinds: I am grateful for all the contributions to this SI debate, including from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the former Home Secretary my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), my hon. Friends the Members for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson).

The Chair of the Justice Committee rightly spoke about the need to combine punishment and rehabilitation. Ultimately, the system is for public safety, and both those sides are incredibly important. He rightly said that we must use the system sensibly. He asked me specifically to confirm that this measure does not alter the minimum 50% of time in custody, and he is correct about that. On the point about Albania, we need to make all our prisoner transfer agreements work as effectively as possible, and with Albania we have a particularly good partnership. It is a very innovative transfer agreement and I am sure there is further that we can go. I will write soon to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury on the question he asked about women.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham rightly raised points about victims, and victims must always be at the heart of what we do. I confirm that the victim contact scheme applies in these cases, and I confirm again that the minimum proportion of time in custody also applies. It is not just that the sentence is longer; the

proportion of time served will be longer, and it is important that we see that in the context of longer sentences. The average sentence in custody is now considerably longer than it was in 2010. Critically, the move for some of the worst offences from the automatic halfway release point to two thirds of the sentence interacts with this measure, and means that many people will be spending longer in prison than they would otherwise. Overall there is discretion not to remove someone, and that is exercised in certain cases.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth rightly pointed out that the prison population has grown. She is correct about that. Last week a comprehensive plan was set out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Justice Secretary, which ensures that the worst offenders will stay in prison for longer, and that we also make best use of the capacity we have. The hon. Lady also talked about overcrowding, and I gently remind her that prison overcrowding is lower than it was at the time of the change of Government in 2010, and that there are 2,000 fewer people in overcrowded conditions in our prison population than there were when the Labour party was in government. I also gently ask: where are her Titans? If the Labour party's build programme had taken place as planned, many of these things would not have come to pass.

The plan set out by my right hon. and learned Friend builds on what has already been achieved, first in the rapid increase in capacity that we have seen, with 5,000 places over the past year, and tougher sentences for the worst offenders, and also with the progress on rehabilitation and what has been done on drugs, employment and housing. That has resulted in the reoffending rate coming down. That is so important, because most crime is repeat crime, and when the reoffending rate comes down, overall crime comes down. That is exactly what we have seen.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth asked why we have not done this before, and the answer is that we have, given the changes that we made in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, including the stop-the-clock provisions, and the new prisoner transfer agreements, including the agreement that I alluded to with Albania. That combination of factors has seen an increase of 14% in the number of foreign national offenders removed recently, year-on-year.

The Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Removal of Prisoners for Deportation) Order 2023 will extend the benefits of the scheme by bringing forward the time from which a foreign national offender can be removed. This draft instrument is a critical part of the approach of the Ministry of Justice and Home Office to removing foreign national offenders from our prisons and our country. It will ensure that taxpayers' money is best used to protect the public, and I therefore commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I can inform the House that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

After Clause 70

LOCAL AUTHORITIES: HYBRID MEETINGS

3.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 22B.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the Government motion to insist on disagreement to Lords amendment 45, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Rachel Maclean: As we know from proceedings on this Bill in this place, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is important to this country's future. It will ensure that this Government and future Governments set clear, long-term objectives for addressing entrenched geographical disparities. It will devolve powers to all areas in England where there is demand for that, allowing local leaders to regenerate their towns and cities and restore pride in places. It further strengthens protections for the environment, so that better outcomes are at the heart of planning decisions.

In the course of the many debates on local authority remote meetings during this Bill's passage, the Government have consistently expressed our strong view that councillors should be physically present to cast their votes and interact in person with citizens. Our position on this matter has not changed. Therefore, the Government cannot support Lords amendment 22B, which would enable any Government in future to go as far as allowing all local authorities to meet virtually at any and every opportunity.

Turning to climate change, I reiterate that the Government agree that the planning system must support our efforts in meeting our legal net-zero commitments by 2050 and tackling the risks of climate change. However, we have heard the strength of feeling in both Houses about making sure that national planning policy supports our efforts in tackling the risks of climate change. Therefore, the Government have now gone a step further in tabling an amendment that will require the drafting of policies that are to be designated as national development management policies to

“have regard to the need to mitigate, and adapt to, climate change”,

taking into account the range of climate scenarios and risk relevant to the policies being developed.

I will conclude my brief remarks by again expressing gratitude to my colleagues here and in the other place for their continued and dedicated engagement with this complicated and complex Bill during its parliamentary passage. I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members will agree that the Government have shown that we have listened carefully to the views of Members from all parts of the House as we seek to improve this nationally important piece of legislation.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I supported the two amendments that the other place has returned to us in their previous guise last week, when I urged the Government to accept them. It is welcome that we have the opportunity to consider these two important issues again.

With regard to the holding of virtual meetings by councils, I prefer the original Lords amendment 22, which provided local authorities with the local discretion to pursue a common-sense and pragmatic approach on the form and conduct of their meetings. That said, the amendment in lieu tabled by my right hon. and noble Friend, Baroness McIntosh, is pragmatic, conciliatory and takes into account the Government's concerns about council meetings being held solely online. I urge the Government to consider it in the spirit in which it has been put forward.

I also re-emphasise other considerations that were raised in last week's debate. Set in the overall context of a Bill that gives local communities and local councils greater discretion and greater autonomy and looks to devolve powers away from Whitehall, it is perverse that the Government are dictating to local authorities how they conduct themselves. There is, as we heard last week, 90% to 95% support from local councils, clerks and their representative bodies for this provision. They understand best the challenges that they face, and they are responsible people who will use wisely any discretion with which they are provided. The provision will strengthen local democracy and will make it easier for such groups as the disabled, parents with young children, carers and those in full-time employment to participate in decision making in their own local communities. For those local authorities that cover large geographical areas, such as Suffolk County Council and the Broads Authority, it is sensible to hold some meetings virtually, rather than insisting that councillors—some of whom are elderly—travel long distances, often in inclement weather, such as we had last week.

When we debated this issue last Tuesday, there was widespread disquiet on the Government Benches about the straitjacket approach that the Government are pursuing. I would be grateful if in her summing up my hon. Friend could outline the strategy that the Government will be putting in place to address those concerns, if they reject the sensible and conciliatory amendment 22B.

In the wake of Storm Babet, the Lords have asked us to look again at amendment 45. The weekend's events highlighted the need for climate change mitigation to be fully and deeply embedded in local and national planning policy. Although the Government are proposing again to reject the amendment, they have proposed their own alternative, which is to be welcomed. It is necessary to consider, first, whether that will help deliver a more consistent alignment of planning policy and development management with the existing framework for tackling climate change and, secondly, whether it will provide the certainty, consistency and clarity required to deliver the enormous amount of private sector funding required to achieve our net-zero obligations.

I would be grateful if my hon. Friend answered the following questions in her summing up. Will the Government's amendment bridge the gap in planning policy due to the delay in the review of the national planning policy framework? Will she give an assurance that the review will start as soon as possible, and ideally provide a timescale?

[Peter Aldous]

Secondly, there is presently an inconsistency in that a local planning authority's well thought-through and bespoke climate change mitigation policies can be overturned by either the Secretary of State or the Planning Inspectorate. In that context, will my hon. Friend advise whether the Government's amendment in lieu removes that contradiction, which undermines proactive and bespoke local planning?

I am grateful to you for your time, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is welcome that the Lords have provided us with a further opportunity to improve the Bill. While the two amendments are in many respects very different, they both give local communities a full opportunity to shape the future of the places where they live and work and, in doing so, achieve meaningful regeneration and levelling up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson.

3.30 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow that characteristically sensible speech from the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). I put on record our thanks for their lordships' continued engagement on the Bill and all the work they have done on it over many months. After considering an extensive number of Lords amendments to the Bill last week, just two issues remain for us to debate again. The first is remote local government meetings.

Labour remains firmly of the view that while in-person council meetings should continue to predominate, there are circumstances in which virtual or hybrid local government meetings might be either useful or necessary. We also maintain that permitting their use in certain instances would have a number of additional benefits, not least in helping to reduce barriers to public engagement in the planning process, which is a goal shared across the House. As has been previously noted, an extremely broad range of organisations support change in this area, including the Local Government Association, Lawyers in Local Government, the Association of Democratic Services Officers, the Society of Local Council Clerks and the National Association of Local Councils. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) pointed out during last week's debate, evidence from NALC suggests that support for it among local councils is overwhelming, with 90% of town and parish councils wanting the ability to hold virtual meetings in some form to widen participation.

As we just heard, it is not just those organisations and authorities and those on the Labour Benches who support greater local discretion in this area. In last weeks' debate, the right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and the hon. Members for Buckingham, for Waveney and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) all expressed support for a degree of flexibility so that councils could enable remote participation in meetings in certain circumstances. No one is arguing that we should require every local government meeting to be virtual or hybrid. Doing so would clearly undermine the principle that members of the public should have suitable opportunities to interact in-person with their local representatives.

Instead, the case is being made for a degree of local discretion so that such meetings would be permitted in certain circumstances.

Lords amendment 22B addresses the Government's understandable concern that permitting councils to hold wholly virtual meetings might have unintended and adverse consequences for local democracy. The amendment would allow Ministers to determine by regulations the range of circumstances in which hybrid meetings could take place. For example, they might choose to enable parish councillors in more remote parts of a given authority area to attend meetings virtually while ensuring that most are still required to be present in person. To take another example, they might choose to allow members of the public—say, people with mobility issues or those with children—to participate actively in planning committees, while councillors would still be required to attend in person. We believe that this is a reasonable and proportionate amendment, and we will support it.

The second issue concerns the planning system's role in mitigating and adapting to global heating. The Government's amendment in lieu is noticeably weaker than Lords amendment 45 as it applies only to national development management policies rather than all national policy, planning policy or advice relating to the development or use of land. It also excludes precise statutory definitions of what constitutes mitigation and adaptation. Nevertheless, we welcome that the Government have made a concession on this issue by tabling their amendment.

However, while we welcome the fact that the Government's amendment in lieu would ensure consideration of climate mitigation and adaptation in the preparation or modification of NDMPs, it would not achieve what Lords amendment 45 would: namely, to establish genuine coherence between the planning system and our country's climate commitments, not least by requiring local planning authorities to have regard to climate when making decisions on individual planning applications. The planning system in its current form is manifestly failing to play its full part in addressing the climate emergency. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that it is actively hindering our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change in myriad different ways.

The Bill is a missed opportunity to fully align the planning system with our climate mitigation and adaptation goals and ensure that new development produces resilient and climate-proofed places. The provisions in the Bill that require local plans to be designed in such a way as to contribute to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change are welcome, but they are transposed from existing legislation introduced 15 years ago, and, alone, they are not sufficient. The promised related update to the national planning policy framework to ensure that it contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation as fully as possible is vital, but it will not take place until well after the Bill has received Royal Assent if it materialises at all during what remains of this Parliament.

As we have argued consistently throughout the passage of the Bill, there is a pressing need for clear and unambiguous national policy guidance on climate change, a purposeful statutory framework to align every aspect of the planning system with net zero, and an overarching duty on the Secretary of State, local planning authorities and those involved in neighbourhood plan making to

achieve climate change mitigation and adaptation when preparing plans and policies or exercising their planning decision-making functions.

The Climate Change Committee recommended in its 2022 progress report that

“Net zero and climate resilience should be embedded within the planning reforms”

contained in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

As things stand, they have not been. In this week—of all weeks—when we have seen once again the impact on communities across the country of the more frequent extreme weather events that climate change is driving, we should look to improve how the planning system responds to the climate emergency. The Government amendment in lieu is welcome, but it does not go far enough. For that reason, we will support Lords amendment 45.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I would like to start by thanking the Minister for her involvement in the very long saga that is the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which, finally may be drawing to a close. It is good to see the areas of difference between the two Houses reduced.

I appreciate that Lords amendment 22 on councils meeting virtually is a significant issue, as it could set a precedent for other parts of the public sector. I understand the Government’s concerns and why they have resisted it up to now, but I hope there is room for further compromise and at least some flexibility to allow councils to deploy hybrid meetings. If the amendment still goes too far, I hope that Ministers can come up with something, perhaps specifically in the planning context or in at least some circumstances, to make the life of our local councillors a little easier. We must remember that they do a difficult job; they work hard and many are trying to hold down day jobs at the same time. A bit more flexibility for virtual meetings could help to enhance democratic participation.

An amendment that we did not get back from their lordships was on NDMPs. I have a certain amount of regret about that, because I continue to believe that the replacement of local development management policies with a single centralised diktat is the wrong approach. However, I welcome the fact that, thanks to the Government’s amendments in lieu, we now see in the Bill a commitment to consult on NDMPs. That was an important part of the compromise announced last December by the Secretary of State to tackle problems outlined in the amendments package headed by new clause 21, which I tabled. It resulted from concerns felt by many on the Government Benches about problems leading to massive pressure for blocks of flats in the suburbs and housing estates on greenfield and agricultural land in rural areas. Now, we need to see the remainder of that package delivered by the national planning policy framework. Once again, I encourage and urge Ministers to get that published.

We also need to see the new set of planning policy guidance—another document that will be crucial to ensuring that the reforms promised in the planning system deliver real change. Concern remains among Back Benchers about the rush for volume of units at all costs. We all accept the need for new homes and want more homes built, but they need to be the right homes in the right places. I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, strongly agree with that.

With that in mind, I can understand the rationale of Lords amendment 45 on climate change mitigation and adaptation. We need to do more to ensure that the developments that come forward for approval are consistent with our net zero goals. I am not necessarily saying that Lords amendment 45 is the right vehicle to deliver that, but if we are to make that huge transition to carbon neutrality, construction and development has an enormous part to play, and significant change needs to be delivered. I hope that the Government will make every effort to ensure that the new NPPF reflects our climate goals, in terms of both mitigation and adaptation.

In particular, as we have heard many times during the debate on the Bill, we must take care in relation to areas prone to flooding since, even if we deliver net zero on time, the climate has already changed to make such episodes more serious and more frequent. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my great sympathy to anyone who has been affected by the floods of recent days. I hope they are back in their homes soon. I truly understand what a miserable experience it is to be subjected to these climatic episodes.

Returning lastly and briefly to the December compromise announced on Report by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), I reiterate what I have said a number of times in this House: we need the compromise to be implemented. The issues raised in new clause 21 on excessive targets have not gone away. Back-Bench concern has not gone away. We are all determined to defend our constituencies from overdevelopment. We believe it is vital to shift the focus of home building to big urban city sites like Old Oak Common, Beckton and central Manchester. The Docklands 2.0 approach outlined by the Secretary of State in his July speech and in his long-term plan for housing reflects our climate commitments by situating people close to jobs, services and public transport systems. It helps to take the pressure off suburban and rural areas, protecting green spaces and the green belt, and supports our ambitions for nature recovery. So, please, let us make sure that that change really happens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I would like to begin by expressing my disappointment, but not necessarily my surprise, at the unelected other place’s refusal to push for amendments that would protect devolution. Given how unclear, unfocused and unfit for purpose the Bill is, I had hoped the other place would advocate for some revisions to mitigate its impact. I will keep my remarks relatively short. Both amendments do not necessarily relate to Scotland and, unlike the actions of the Conservative Government which would imply otherwise, it is important that we respect the devolution settlement.

Lords amendment 22B sought to allow local councils in England to conduct procedures in a hybrid environment. Throughout the covid emergency, we saw how critical those procedures were in raising participation and in opening meetings to different demographics in society. We saw that virtual meetings can work well in response to challenging circumstances. Actually, we saw that over the last week. The storms that Scotland experienced—England also experienced them—provided a perfect use

[Ms Anum Qaisar]

case for hybrid meetings. It is unlikely that a physical meeting could have taken place in those storm conditions. Hybrid meetings also allow people from different demographics, who historically have been disengaged due to the challenges of getting to and from physical meetings, to participate. If Lords amendment 22B is accepted, it will mean that groups such as lone parents and those with caring responsibilities can engage. I am also concerned that the resistance to hybrid meetings stems from a larger culture war narrative being propagated by out of touch Tories who want to remain in the 1800s. We have seen those culture wars being fought in this very Chamber. It is a disgrace and a disrespect to democracy that my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), if we all remember, was unable to participate remotely in this Chamber after she had a brain haemorrhage. In February 2022, she attended Parliament physically against her doctors' orders to raise the plight of her constituents, and she continues to attend today. While that is an incredible depiction of her service to her constituents, it is shameful that when solutions such as hybrid meetings exist, we slam the door in their face.

Since the pandemic, Scotland has continued to allow local councils the autonomy to hold hybrid proceedings. It is particularly beneficial for local authorities that cover large geographic areas, allowing those who live far away from council headquarters to access democracy if they so wish. Such measures only increase participation in local democracy. I think we can all agree that that is essential to a healthy democracy.

Lords Amendment 45 relates to climate change duties on planning authorities. Again, the amendment does not cover Scotland. However, with the storm and the harsh weather conditions over the last week, and the likelihood of such once in a generation weather events seeming to happen on such a regular basis, it is imperative that we take the necessary action to tackle climate change.

In this place, we might not necessarily feel the impact of the legislation we pass straightway. As Members, we have a duty towards future generations. Now, I am only 31, so I count myself in one of those future generations. I am not sure that some of my more experienced colleagues can say the same.

One of my favourite quotations is an old Greek proverb which has not been attributed to anyone in particular: "A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit." When I think of that quotation, I often think of climate change provisions. The reality is that the planet is on fire, and we are simply not doing enough to help our future generations. We need to pass legislation whose benefits we may not see, but the generations to come will. I appreciate that the Government still recognise the need to tackle climate change with their amendment in lieu, but the measures that it outlines are simply not strong enough. It is important for us not to get into the way of thinking that these are binary choices: it is perfectly possible to construct while maintaining our moral duty to tackle the climate crisis.

The SNP will not be voting on these amendments, but we do hope that our neighbours in England are able to participate in a hybrid system, and engage in local democracy and have the ability to take the climate emergency seriously.

3.45 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I do not propose to detain the House for long, but I want to refer specifically to Lords amendment 22B. Part of me wants to be sympathetic towards it, especially after the measured speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). However, I have a concern about the understanding on which it is predicated, namely, that councils do their job properly. Unfortunately I have experience of Soviet Sandwell Council, which does not do its job properly.

I remember the pandemic, and I remember the lack of accountability that we saw when virtual meetings cut out halfway through and the public were seemingly unable to access meetings at which key decisions were being made. It therefore frightens me that we might consider potentially giving a local authority—I am sorry to say this—as corrupt as Sandwell Council any possibility of hiding itself behind virtual meetings. The fact that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had to intervene on this local authority some 12 months ago because of the utter failure in its governance processes is one reason why I hesitate to support the Bill.

I recognise that local authorities broadly can and do get this right, but where it goes horribly wrong, we have seen it and we have lived it, and it terrifies me. Even today, when we are back in physical meetings, let me give Members an example of what might transpire if the amendment were passed. If a monitoring officer fails to advise that a council is in breach of section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003, that effectively allows councillors to vote on a pecuniary matter in which they have an interest, which, as Members will know, is against the law. I believe that this local authority would use the provisions in the amendment to hide itself and mask itself, and to allow even more of the inept and, in fact, borderline corrupt behaviour that we have seen. Unfortunately, officers at a high level—I do not mean all officers, but certainly the officers in the local authority with whom I have dealt—seem quite happy to be complicit in some of that behaviour at times. That is why it would terrify me to allow this amendment to be passed.

The core of the amendment, however, involves accessibility. The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) touched on that, and I agree with him: I think we need to get better at accessibility, and to consider broader ways of doing that. Although the amendment may not be passed, I think it has drawn out something that we have to do. Whatever the colour of our Government, we need to get more people into council meetings to talk about their experiences. However, I am terrified by what this amendment would do to my constituents. Effectively, it would allow the authority to mask itself even more.

I have come to one conclusion on this. I think there is a way in which the amendment might work. Sandwell Council is, ultimately, an embarrassment for the Black Country and a stain on local government in the west midlands, and we are undergoing a review of local government in the west midlands at the moment. The only conclusion I can draw is that it is now time to abolish Sandwell Council, and subsume the towns that make it up into other parts. I am thinking particularly of my communities in Tipton and Wednesbury. They need their identity back, but, more important, they

need that accountability. It is time for Sandwell to go, because it has been an embarrassment for the last 50 years. It is time to put it in the bin.

I support some of the underlying aims of the Lords amendments, which I think we must take forward. I think we can all agree on that, across the House. However, owing to the experiences I have had for the last four years as a Member of Parliament, this particular mechanism concerns me a great deal, and I can only support it if there is some sort of guarantee that Sandwell Council will be put in the bin.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I am going to make some brief comments because I spoke in the debate last week. I reiterate the concerns about this legislation, which has been poorly drafted. Lords amendment 22B would allow councillors to attend meetings virtually or hybrid-style meetings. The amendment is a good opportunity to increase participation in local politics and I think that we should be encouraging it.

For many councillors, the reality of fulfilling their role means working around another full-time job, working late into the evening as well as at weekends, or balancing their parenting commitments, so councillors' time is under great pressure. Most councillors are in their post purely because of their commitment to their local community, and we should be helping them out by allowing the occasional virtual attendance at a meeting if that reduces the time burden on them. I have heard the argument that our constituents rightly expect us to attend Parliament in person and that elected members of the local council should therefore be expected to do the same, but that argument misses the incredibly important point that, for most people, being a councillor is not a full-time salaried job. To expect them to sacrifice yet more of their time to travel to meetings to offer contributions that could otherwise be made online is simply unfair.

Travel brings me to a particularly pertinent point at the moment. In my constituency and other rural parts of Britain, it is not uncommon for council meetings to be held many miles away from the ward or division that a councillor represents or from where they live. In some cases, that will mean travelling 20 to 50 miles one way to attend a council meeting. Clearly this is a problem in poor weather, as we only have to look at the damage and chaos of the last week to see. It also means that councillors usually have to have their own car, not least because an evening meeting will be held when most bus services have stopped running for the day. That means that people are being excluded from becoming involved in local democracy simply because they do not have access to a car. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill was supposed to put greater devolution at its heart and encourage more people into the democratic process. If we really want to engage people in politics and widen representation and access, we should be making it easier for people to represent their communities, not more difficult.

I move briefly on to Lords amendment 45. It is the Liberal Democrats' view that the original amendment is superior to the Government's amendment in lieu. It

would place duties on the Secretary of State to mitigate and adapt planning policy to reflect climate change. Planning is an integral part of achieving net zero, and as such it is only right that it puts climate considerations at its heart. At the moment, net zero goals are inconsistently applied to planning applications. Local development plans consider climate complications, whereas individual planning applications do not and, without the Government's amendment in lieu, national development management policies—NDMPs—will not either.

The Lords amendment would extend environmental duties to all aspects of the planning system with a sharpened focus, ensuring that new plans would contribute to specific climate and nature targets. A dual approach is particularly important because climate and ecological decline are closely intertwined, and unfortunately both are accelerating. I do not think that this amendment should be controversial. It is publicly backed by environment businesses, local government and environmental NGOs. The time has run out for looking at climate change simply as an add-on or an afterthought, and given the Government's recent back-pedalling on their net zero commitments, this should be an easy opportunity to put climate change at the core of the planning process.

Without these Lords amendments, the Bill will miss two key opportunities to encourage local democratic participation and consider climate complications to planning applications. Both these factors are surely at the core of what levelling up should be about.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): With the leave of the House, I call the Minister.

Rachel Maclean: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate today and for their contributions throughout the passage of this important Bill. I will address briefly the points made by Members. First, let me turn to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). He has spoken with his customary good sense and practical bent, as have others, including the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), who speaks for the Scottish National party, about the real problems faced by people who wish to take part in local democracy without being excluded because of where they live, because they do not have a car or because of other barriers. This is important, and the whole House recognises those barriers and supports that admirable objective. We need our politics to be as inclusive as possible.

However, I have also heard loud and clear the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), who alerted us to the problems that could exist if we were to accept Lords amendment 22B. It is right that we consider all the possible consequences, and it is the Government's view that the amendment goes too far and is too expansive. It would allow any future Government to allow any local authority to meet virtually at every opportunity, which is not something the Government can accept. It is a long-standing principle that local democracy should take place face to face.

I agree with some of the shadow Minister's comments, and we are looking very carefully at how we encourage more engagement from the community, particularly on

[Rachel Maclean]

planning applications. We can do a lot of that through technology and wider reforms to our system, and it is right that we continue that work.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): What is the Government's view on how effective such arrangements might be? Is remote working more effective or less effective? Do the Government have a view on that?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for that point. He will know that, with this Bill, we are pushing power down to local people, local areas and local councillors, who are elected to represent their communities. As I said, the Government have a very clear view that local democracy should take place face to face. Through our levelling-up work, we are in the midst of a once-in-a-generation devolution of power to allow local areas, such as the one he represents, to make the best decisions for their local communities, notwithstanding this particular point, on which the Government have strong views.

The vital issue of climate change was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). It is important to stress that the planning system already has considerable systems for taking account of climate change and further work is under way, as my hon. Friend knows. He specifically asked about how to bridge the gap in planning policy. I make it clear that, as part of our proposed changes to the planning system and as we committed to in the net zero strategy, we were the first Government to legislate for net zero. We stand by those commitments both in the planning system and elsewhere, and we intend to do a fuller review of the national planning policy framework to ensure it contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation as fully as possible, following Royal Assent of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

Last but by no means least, I turn to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet. She reiterated what is a vital issue: the Government's commitment to publishing the response to the NPPF consultation after this Bill, with Godspeed, receives Royal Assent. We remain committed to doing that, and I reiterate that it remains the Government's policy to ensure that we identify and build on urban brownfield areas such as the ones she mentioned in Docklands, Beckton, Silvertown and elsewhere. We need to see housing delivered there. We have seen 30-year record highs in housing delivery under this Conservative Government, and we intend to continue delivering the right houses in the right places, supported by local communities. I want to take this brief opportunity to put on record, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet did, my thanks to councillors who represent my communities in Redditch, Wychavon and Worcestershire, and to all the frontline services involved in the responses to the floods—to the emergency services, the Environment Agency and others. We all wish everybody to be back in their home soon.

I hope that all Members, having seen that the Government have listened and responded to their concerns, will feel able to support our position. Our amendments are effective and proportionate, and I hope that they are agreeable to all. I commend them to the House.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 22B.

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 177.

Division No. 347]

[4 pm

AYES

| | |
|---|--|
| Afolami, Bim | Costa, Alberto |
| Afriyie, Adam | Courts, Robert |
| Aiken, Nickie | Coutinho, rh Claire |
| Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>) | Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey |
| Anderson, Lee | Crabb, rh Stephen |
| Anderson, Stuart | Crosbie, Virginia |
| Andrew, rh Stuart | Crouch, Tracey |
| Ansell, Caroline | Daly, James |
| Argar, rh Edward | Davies, rh David T. C. |
| Atherton, Sarah | Davies, Gareth |
| Atkins, Victoria | Davies, Dr James |
| Bacon, Gareth | Davies, Mims |
| Bacon, Mr Richard | Davies, Philip |
| Badenoch, rh Kemi | Davis, rh Mr David |
| Bailey, Shaun | Davison, Dehenna |
| Baillie, Siobhan | Dines, Miss Sarah |
| Baker, Duncan | Djanogly, Mr Jonathan |
| Baker, Mr Steve | Docherty, Leo |
| Barclay, rh Steve | Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M. |
| Baron, Mr John | Donelan, rh Michelle (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>) |
| Baynes, Simon | Double, Steve |
| Bell, Aaron | Drax, Richard |
| Benton, Scott | Drummond, Mrs Flick |
| Beresford, Sir Paul | Duguid, David |
| Berry, rh Sir Jake | Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain |
| Bhatti, Saqib | Dunne, rh Philip |
| Blunt, Crispin | Eastwood, Mark |
| Bowie, Andrew | Edwards, Ruth |
| Bradley, Ben | Ellis, rh Sir Michael |
| Brady, Sir Graham | Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias |
| Brereton, Jack | Elphicke, Mrs Natalie |
| Bridgen, Andrew | Eustice, rh George |
| Britcliffe, Sara | Evans, Dr Luke |
| Browne, Anthony | Everitt, Ben |
| Bruce, Fiona | Fabricant, Michael |
| Buchan, Felicity | Farris, Laura |
| Buckland, rh Sir Robert | Fell, Simon |
| Burghart, Alex | Firth, Anna |
| Butler, Rob | Fletcher, Katherine |
| Cairns, rh Alun | Fletcher, Mark |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | Fletcher, Nick |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory | Ford, rh Vicky |
| Carter, Andy | Foster, Kevin |
| Cartlidge, James | Fox, rh Dr Liam |
| Cash, Sir William | Francois, rh Mr Mark |
| Cates, Miriam | Frazer, rh Lucy |
| Caulfield, Maria | Freeman, George |
| Chalk, rh Alex | French, Mr Louie |
| Chishti, Rehman | Fuller, Richard |
| Churchill, Jo | Fysh, Mr Marcus |
| Clark, rh Greg | Garnier, Mark |
| Clarke, rh Sir Simon | Ghani, Ms Nusrat |
| Clarke-Smith, Brendan | Gibson, Peter |
| Clarkson, Chris | Gideon, Jo |
| Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey | Glen, rh John |
| Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse | Goodwill, rh Sir Robert |
| Colburn, Elliot | Gove, rh Michael |
| Collins, Damian | |

Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel

Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob

Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles

Abrahams, Debbie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Elliott, Julie

Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wigin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Joy Morrissey and
 Scott Mann

NOES

Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive

Lightwood, Simon
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Powell, Lucy

Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Strathern, Alistair
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wilson, Munira
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Mary Glindon

Brereton, Jack
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam

Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 22B disagreed to.

Clause 87

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES: MEANING

Amendment (a) proposed in lieu of Lords amendment 45.
 —(*Rachel Maclean.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 176.

Division No. 348]

[4.15 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi

Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham

Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, David
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary

Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

Joy Morrissey and
 Scott Mann

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike

Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary

Betts, Mr Clive
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan

Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex

Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Strathern, Alistair
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz

Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wilson, Munira
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mary Glindon and
 Colleen Fletcher

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 45. Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their Amendment 22B;

That Rachel Maclean, Mr Gagan Mohindra, Paul Holmes, Sara Britcliffe, Matthew Pennycook, Mary Glindon, and Ms Anum Qaisar be members of the Committee;

That Rachel Maclean be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(Mr Mohindra.)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (24, 25 AND 26 OCTOBER)

Ordered,

That—

(1) at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Penny Mordaunt relating to Correcting the record not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the business may be proceeded with, though opposed, at any hour; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply;

(2) at the sittings today and on Wednesday 25 October, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords has been received and any Committee to draw up Reasons which has been appointed at that sitting has reported; and

(3) at the sitting on Thursday 26 October—

(a) the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Message from the Lords has been received; and

(b) in the event that a Message from the Lords Commissioners is expected, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until that Message has been received.—*(Penny Mordaunt.)*

Correcting the Record

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, Correcting the record, HC 521; Correspondence from the Leader of the House to the Procedure Committee, on the Committee's report on Correcting the record, reported to the House on 13 September 2023.]

4.28 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):
 I beg to move,

That this House approves the Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, Correcting the record, HC 521.

It is a pleasure to open this debate on proposals put forward by the Procedure Committee in its fourth report of this Session. I would like to thank the Committee and its Chairman for their work on this important matter. The House is being asked to consider the expansion of the formal ministerial corrections process to all MPs. It is an important principle that all Members of the House—be they Ministers of the Crown, Members of the official Opposition, or Back-Bench Members—adhere to high standards of accountability and openness. We have a similar responsibility to provide accurate information.

The obligation on Ministers is to ensure the information that they provide to Parliament is accurate, as set out in the ministerial code and the House's 1997 resolution on ministerial accountability, and Ministers take that obligation very seriously. The current system for ministerial corrections is well established following the House's approval of the 2007 Procedure Committee report on the subject, and the Government believe that the process relating to Ministers' corrections is generally effective. The lack of a formal mechanism for Members of the official Opposition and Back-Bench MPs, however, means that there is no clear way of identifying a correction given and linking it to the original statement, and the public should not have to work their way through *Hansard* before finding that correction. The Government therefore welcome the proposed expansion of the formal corrections process, and believe that this change would improve the clarity and transparency of corrections.

In addition, the Government agree with the Procedure Committee in its assessment that the existing procedural mechanisms for challenging the accuracy of contributions made in the House are sufficient. The House is also asked to endorse further recommendations from the Committee regarding the visibility and accessibility of corrections, which are that cross-referenced hyperlinks provided in the *Official Report* should be improved; that cross-referenced hyperlinks currently used in the ministerial corrections system should also be added to the corrections made through points of order and other oral contributions; and that corrections should be easier to access through the creation of a central corrections page.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): What procedure does the Minister envisage being used where a non-Minister misleads the House or gives incorrect information, and declines to correct the record?

Penny Mordaunt: All these matters are matters for the House. We asked the Procedure Committee to consider these matters and bring forward recommendations to the House, but it is very clear that we have a code

of conduct. Often, if a Member has not adhered to their obligations to this House, points are raised through the Chair; however, it is ultimately for the House to decide what sanction it provides to individuals who do not adhere to the rules that we ourselves create in this place.

The Government's priority is that the process ensures transparency and that the visibility of corrections made to the *Official Report* is sufficient. Should the House agree with the Committee's recommendations to further improve the transparency of corrections, that would, of course, be a positive step. Trust and confidence in our democracy and its institutions are vital, and it is therefore important that we have clear and transparent processes when MPs make inadvertent errors. I hope that these measures carry the support of Members, and I commend the motion to the House.

4.33 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I put on record my thanks to the Procedure Committee for its report on correcting the record, and to all those inside and outside the House who contributed to that report. Any strengthening of transparency and accountability for Members is welcome, as are steps to make this easier to understand and contextualise.

When speaking to the House of Commons, Members are expected to tell the truth to the best of their knowledge. If they identify an error in something they have said to the House, they are obliged to correct the record at the earliest opportunity. Since 2007, we have had a system in place for ministerial corrections to be linked to the Minister's original error, and it is right that the Procedure Committee looked at the effectiveness of that system and how it can be extended to Back-Bench and Opposition Members. We can see from the Committee's report that ministerial corrections reached a high point in the 2019-21 Session, and that during this Session, Ministers have corrected the record 1.5 times a day. The Committee also received evidence from a number of sources—including Members from across the House, Full Fact, and the Constitution Unit—about their concerns that there are currently few effective mechanisms for challenging inaccurate statements made by Ministers and, indeed, other Members. However, recommendations were not made to that end.

It is ironic that we are discussing transparency, as it has emerged that the Government published 160 transparency documents on by-election day last Thursday. That is the highest single total for more than three years, beating the previous record of 130 documents published on the day that three by-elections were held in July. Data in this dump, but unable to be reported because broadcast media were unable to do so during the by-elections, included the news that 42 hospitals and 43 additional schools have been identified with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and details relating to the Prime Minister's spending on flights.

In conclusion, we support this motion. The current system can be opaque for Members and members of the public, and bringing corrections together in one place will make these more accessible and transparent.

4.35 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): One of the reasons why I became an MP was to serve those I represent. Having been proudly elected in 2019, it is increasingly

clear to me that it is incumbent on all of us in this place to improve the covenant between Parliament and our constituents by ensuring that what we do as public servants is as transparent, credible and authentic as it can be. It therefore gives me pleasure to commend this motion to the House, and I am honoured to speak on behalf of the Procedure Committee.

I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this work, and for making time for the House to debate our recommendations. I am grateful, too, for the support of the shadow Leader of the House. The House is always at its best when we come together with a common purpose. I would also like to commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) for her excellent leadership of the Procedure Committee—regrettably, she cannot be here today—and her superb team, including Richard Ward, Ffion Morgan and Margaret McKinnon, all of whom have contributed significantly to this work.

What we say in this place matters, and it must be accurate. Constituents place their trust in us to do and say the right thing on their behalf, and we have a responsibility to set a high bar for how we conduct ourselves.

Sir Greg Knight: I congratulate my hon. Friend and other members of the Procedure Committee on this excellent report. Is there not a case, when a Member or Minister corrects the record, for stating in that correction how many times in the same Session of Parliament that person has had to correct the record previously, so that we can easily identify anyone who is being rather cavalier with the truth?

James Sunderland: I agree with the thrust of what my right hon. Friend is saying, and I will come on to that in due course. However, what is important is that the record that is going to be available at a single point on a website will make it possible, very quickly and easily, to work out who perhaps has a record in this particular area.

What we say in this place matters and must be accurate. Sadly, it is inevitable that mistakes sometimes happen, but it is what we do about it that matters. It should be routine for adjustments to be made where a Member has given incorrect information and needs to correct the record.

The motion, in effect, enshrines three improvements in procedure. First, it means that all MPs will be able to correct the record, not just Ministers. While it will not compel Members to do so, due to parliamentary privilege, it will provide the means for it to be done. Secondly, the visibility of any corrections will be improved in the official record. The exact mechanism for this is being worked through, but it will be obvious in *Hansard* where corrections have been made.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I very much support the Procedure Committee's report. As part of the next stage of looking at the detail, has the Committee considered whether, when we talk about correcting the record "at the earliest opportunity", that will be part of what is published when the correction is made?

James Sunderland: The technical detail of how this will work is yet to be thrashed out, but I have no doubt it will be subject to further work between the Procedure Committee and the House authorities.

[James Sunderland]

As I have said, the visibility of any corrections will be improved in the official record and the exact mechanism for that is being worked through. It is, for example, possible that the format of cross-referenced hyperlinks in *Hansard* will be improved so that they are much clearer, whether in relation to a point of order or through other oral contributions. Thirdly, there will also be an easily accessible corrections page, probably on the parliamentary website, and linked elsewhere, where anyone will be able to see a bespoke record of parliamentary corrections.

While we believe that existing mechanisms to challenge the accuracy of contributions made in the House are sufficient, and that understanding those mechanisms can assist Members in effectively and creatively challenging accuracy, these improvements are necessary. Importantly, the Procedure Committee does not believe that distinction between Ministers and non-Ministers justifies any difference in the means by which Back Benchers may seek to correct themselves when they discover that they have made an error. We have therefore concluded that the rules should apply equally to all MPs.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am supportive of the Procedure Committee's report, and I wonder if I could pick up on the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington—[*Interruption.*] I apologise. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight)—I will correct the record. If a Back Bencher chose not to correct the record when they were made aware of something, would the Procedure Committee consider that that may be a contempt, and as a consequence of not correcting the record, would there be a referral to the Committee of Privileges?

James Sunderland: The Procedure Committee considered that issue carefully, and we concluded that the existing procedural mechanisms to challenge the accuracy of contributions made in the House are sufficient. It is difficult to compel any Member to do anything, but we hope that with the new improvements to the process, Members may be feel obliged to do so.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): For the sake of clarity, I take it that the position the Committee has adopted is that if the House feels that an individual Back Bencher has misled it, that is one thing, but it cannot compel that Back Bencher to withdraw anything if that Back Bencher feels that they have not in fact misled the House.

James Sunderland: My understanding is the same. It is difficult to compel any Member to do what he or she does not want to do, but as the Leader of the House said earlier, this is a matter for the House. It may be that a track record of poor behaviour may attract further attention from the House authorities and the House itself.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is doing a sterling job of reporting from the Procedure Committee. Pulling some of the threads and discussion together, would it be appropriate for the Procedure Committee to look at publishing, perhaps in the form of a written statement and possibly at the end of term, a list of people who have offended?

James Sunderland: I think that is a very fair point, and if I may, I will report that back to the Committee. It may well be subject to further work, but a termly report could be a good way forward. It should be obvious in *Hansard* and on the corrections page where people have offended, and whether or not they have corrected the record.

In conclusion, the Procedure Committee recommends that the system of ministerial corrections be extended to all Members, and that the corrections should adhere to the same rules as set in the ministerial corrections system. We are pleased that the Leader of the House is supportive of our recommendations, and we hope that the House will agree to them today. If it does, *Hansard* will begin work with the parliamentary digital service to bring those changes in. It will take time.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): There is probably no more suitable Member of this House to report back from the Procedure Committee than one who knows well the importance of integrity from his time serving in the Army. Could the measure that we are hearing about deal with the sort of campaigning that we saw ahead of the last election, when sometimes false statements were made deliberately so as to lead to denial and repetition?

James Sunderland: I thank the hon. Member for his kind remarks. I have a problem, as I am sure we all do, with falsehoods and false statements, and it is incumbent on all of us in this place to make sure that we are accurate with our facts and not disingenuous with how we use them. I acknowledge his remarks and agree with them. Again, we will put to the Committee in due course how we take that forward. Finally, we will work also with the House administration, which will write to the Committee in the coming weeks with a timeline for implementation.

Honesty, transparency and credibility in politics do matter, as we have heard, and this proposal is the right thing to do for everyone whom we serve. I therefore commend this report to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesman.

4.45 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I echo the comments of the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), in welcoming this report and the work of the Procedure Committee, its members and its Clerks, and that is not just because I am a former member of that Committee who was serving on it when this inquiry started. That is purely coincidental.

With these changes, we are effectively creating a level playing field. Ministers currently have the ability to issue corrections, but other Members do not. The process if a Member realised that they had misspoken in the House was rather cumbersome. The Member made a point of order to draw attention to the fact that they had misspoken. That is then not in any way linked or joined up to the comment that they originally made, which stands in *Hansard*. Putting in place these changes makes a lot of sense for openness and transparency and making it easier for members of the public to find their way around the comments that have been made.

It is easy at times to get carried away by what we mean when we say “correcting the record”. It could be something as simple as what the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) mentioned in a debate yesterday in Westminster Hall on honesty in politics; it could be as simple as someone saying “billions” instead of “millions”. That is the sort of thing we could be talking about, albeit we all know there are situations where it is taken significantly further than that. We have seen now former Members of the House perhaps almost doing it deliberately.

On a lack of willingness to correct the record, that probably does need a bit more work, but that is not a matter for today or this situation. But we need to look at that. If there are persistent offenders who simply refuse to acknowledge when mistakes have been made, a system is being put in place that makes this very straightforward. That will warrant further attention. It is in all our interests to get this right. Openness and transparency and honesty in politics are what our constituents expect. It is the very least they can expect from all of us, and it is incumbent on us all to make sure that we can find mechanisms, where appropriate, to make that as easy as possible. For most of us, it would be a genuine mistake—an accidental misspeak—and something that, if this proposal is agreed, will be easily corrected.

I look forward to seeing how this proposal can work in practice when the Committee goes off to work with digital services to implement it. I look forward to what comes next.

4.47 pm

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I thank again the Procedure Committee, its Chairman and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who stepped into her shoes today, for all the work they have done on this? All Members who have contributed this afternoon have given the matter careful consideration. I am glad that this report is very much welcome.

I will pick up on a couple of points that have been made. The first is that it is difficult to give this House statistics about how many deliberate misleading statements have been made by non-ministerial colleagues versus simple errors, because there is not currently a central corrections page where we can go and look at those things. But I am going to stick my neck out here, and hope I will not have to correct the record, and say that I think most errors that are made are just that—errors by Members of this House. I think that all Members generally come to this Chamber wanting to get the facts on record and have a genuine debate. I hope that, when the central corrections page is up and running, we will be able to see that. Of course this is in relation to things that are said to this House in this Chamber.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Has any thought been given to protections? If we are to publish these lists, there may be fast-moving debates, such as we had during the pandemic, where a Member could willingly state one piece of information and find out that it is incorrect because the science has moved on quickly. Creating a public list of those people ranked as making the most mistakes could inadvertently lead to attention or possibly even abuse of those people. Are there any protections for Members who find themselves on top of that list?

Penny Mordaunt: The Procedure Committee has thought carefully about that and distinguishes between things that, all things being equal, are incorrect and were factually incorrect at the time. Clearly, during the pandemic, science information was developing. This is not about rewriting what has been said in a different context or going back on that. The report is clear that this is simply about facts that at the time were not correct or misled the House. It just relates to things that are said in here. I note what the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) said. Bar charts on Liberal Democrat leaflets are not covered by this set of rules. *[Laughter.]*

A couple of hon. Members raised the point that this is about the House holding itself to account. These rules and procedures are here for the benefit of all Members. The Procedure Committee looked at whether this would require an enhanced role for the Speaker but very much felt that that was not what was required. There are existing mechanisms—points of order and other ways—by which people can raise their concerns. I thank again the Procedure Committee and all Members. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE, NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Representation of the People (Franchise Amendment and Eligibility Review) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Public Charge Point Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Bescot Stadium station disabled access

4.51 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): This is a petition of the residents of the United Kingdom, and there are 474 signatures to the petition in similar terms. The petitioners say that Bescot Stadium station served over 90,000 passengers between 2021 and 2022, that passengers can access the platforms only via stairs to a footbridge and there is no accessible route from the platforms to the station car park, other than by stairs. The petitioners

[Valerie Vaz]

say that Perry Barr and Witton stations on the same line have been upgraded for the Commonwealth Games, making them accessible. The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to recognise the need for lifts at Bescot Stadium Station to make it accessible and to work with the appropriate body such as Network Rail.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Bescot Stadium Station is used by travellers with disabilities and travellers with prams; notes that the Bescot Stadium Station served over 90,000 passengers between 2021 and 2022; further declares that passengers can only access the platforms via stairs to a footbridge without any accessible route from the platforms to the station car park other than the stairs; declares that Perry Barr and Witton Station, on the same line, have been upgraded for the Commonwealth Games making them accessible.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to recognise the need for lifts at Bescot Stadium Station to make it accessible and to work with the appropriate body such as Network Rail.]

[P002863]

Botley West Solar Farm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Witney and West Oxfordshire, who have grave concerns about the Botley West solar farm proposals. We all accept the critical importance of increasing domestic energy production and reducing emissions. Renewables must be at the heart of that, but that does not mean that there can be carte blanche to develop huge greenfield sites, which would have a negative impact on both our countryside and the character of local areas.

The construction of solar farms on fertile farmland should not be a first resort. The proposals risk losing vast swathes of iconic open countryside that is vital for local amenity and rich in biodiversity. We must pursue decarbonisation, but not in a way that is destructive to our natural environment. I have engaged closely with local residents on this matter and I have run a similar petition online to the one I am submitting, which has received 2,022 signatures.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject the application when it is presented and immediately update the National Planning Policy Framework to give clearer, stricter guidance on the appropriate location, scale and design of solar farms, including the definition to be used when sites are declared to be ‘temporary’, furthermore that this updated guidance give weight to factors such as the preservation of farmland for food security, local amenity, overall scale and impact upon the local community, rural character and green belt preservation.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire,

Declares that the large scale solar farm application known as “Botley West Solar Farm” is detrimental to the local community, notes that its scale and design are incompatible with the current infrastructure of the area; further declares that preservation of farmland for food security, local amenity, rural character and green belt preservation must take precedence when considering solar farm applications.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reject the application when it is presented and immediately update the National Planning Policy Framework to give clearer, stricter guidance on the appropriate location, scale and design of solar farm including the definition to be used when sites are declared to be “temporary”, furthermore that this updated guidance give weight to factors such as the preservation of farmland for food security, local amenity, overall scale and impact upon the local community, rural character and green belt preservation.]

[P002866]

Dental provision in North Devon

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I rise to present a petition of 723 of my constituents in North Devon, in which they ask the House of Commons to urge the Government to assist with emergency dental provision in North Devon. Alongside online signatories, more than 1,750 of my constituents have signed, due to their inability to see a dentist. The Government are bringing in long-term changes to increase our dentistry workforce, but North Devon needs dentists now, so that children can set up positive dental habits, teenagers can have their braces taken off and adults can go about their daily lives without worsening tooth pain. The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to assist with emergency dental provision in North Devon.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of North Devon,

Declares that the sustained lack of dental provision in North Devon has led to critical reduction in health outcomes; notes that access to dental services has worsened since the pandemic and despite ongoing from government ministers, the NHS, the County Council and Integrated Care Board the situation continues to get worse, not better; further declares that to ensure that the people of North Devon’s health is not negatively affected any further, concrete steps need to be taken now to bring more dental provision over our constituency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to assist with emergency dental provision in North Devon.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002867]

Cost of Energy: Dalmarnock

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

4.56 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): For those unfamiliar with the Dalmarnock neighbourhood in my constituency, it is located in the east end of Glasgow, between the River Clyde and Celtic Park. People there are generous, kind and welcoming. It has been an absolute pleasure to represent them, first, as a councillor and now as an MP for the past 16 years. Dalmarnock has seen a lot of change over the years, as heavy industry has declined and the population has moved away to the new towns. In more recent years, it has seen significant regeneration from the Clyde Gateway—I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as the unpaid chair of Clyde Gateway—and it was host to the world as the site of the Commonwealth games village.

I will speak first to the wider picture that people face. Over the past two years, families right across Glasgow and Scotland have struggled with soaring energy prices. While France implemented a price tariff shield on electricity and gas, the UK Government took more limited measures, which have left many people struggling to keep their homes warm and pay their bills. Inflation related to Brexit and the disastrous mini-Budget also increased the cost of food on our shelves. The energy price cap brought in by the UK Government was welcome, but prices remain significantly higher than they were prior to the war in Ukraine.

Last year's energy bill support scheme, which, again, we in the Scottish National party welcomed, was supposed to give every household a £400 discount on their energy bills from winter 2022 to March 2023. I recall very well the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the time not understanding exactly how a prepayment meter worked. That speaks to some of the issues that have happened with the scheme. There were many people whom it did not reach. We feel that the crisis has not gone away. We are calling for a further round of an energy bill support scheme with a £400 rebate this winter, because the crisis has not gone away and people are still struggling.

On some of the issues we faced in administering the scheme through the casework I had in my office, these things ought to be addressed in any future scheme to ensure that everyone gets what they are entitled to. In many cases, people did not even realise they had received the vouchers, because they had been automatically applied to their smart meter and the cost had gone up so dramatically that they did not feel the difference. It was so hard to do the various checks and to go back to people and explain that they just were not entitled to any further support. To make matters worse, it was estimated that more than 13,000 energy bill support scheme vouchers went unclaimed in Glasgow Central, including for residents in Dalmarnock. The vouchers for constituents with prepayment meters were so important because, disproportionately, they are both on lower incomes and charged higher prices for the energy that they consume.

The energy support schemes of the future should be targeted at those who need it most. A flat scheme across the board, regardless of need, is not progressive in any

way and does not support those with larger families or people with disabilities who need the heating on for longer periods. I am concerned that so many people did not receive the support to which they were entitled, which raises serious questions about the efficacy of the scheme. That money should have been in the meters of my constituents, not the coffers of the UK Treasury. I would like to ask the Minister how energy firms are being held to account for the vouchers that did not reach their customers, because in many cases they know exactly who those customers are. What review are the UK Government doing of the effectiveness of the scheme that they created and forced on companies at short notice? From speaking to the companies, I know that they found the scheme difficult to administer at times. It is clear that there are complexities in our energy system. Complexity of supply and market failure is resulting in limited choice, and very varied and poorly insulated housing stock, in the UK as a whole and even in individual neighbourhoods such as Dalmarnock.

People in Dalmarnock have been affected more acutely by the cost of living crisis than the general population of Glasgow, or than people more widely in Scotland. Dalmarnock is exactly the sort of community that the UK Government should have in mind when constructing an energy support scheme. As Understanding Glasgow's Glasgow Indicators Project stated:

“Estimates of male and female life expectancy in Parkhead and Dalmarnock are lower than the Glasgow average. Single parent households make up 61% of all households with dependent children. The rate of claiming unemployment and disability related benefits is higher than the Glasgow average. Levels of deprivation and child poverty are also significantly higher than average. Thirty-two per cent of the population are limited by a disability.”

If the scheme does not work for Dalmarnock, it does not work anywhere.

Dalmarnock also contains a real mix of housing types, from the traditional sandstone tenements we think of when we think of Glasgow, to interwar tenements, four-in-a-block homes, terraces, houses built in the 1980s and the 1990s, the Commonwealth games Athletes' Village, and brand new flats built to Passivhaus standard. Dalmarnock is also home to a significant population of Showpeople, whose chalets and caravans come in all shapes and sizes. The energy supply is just as varied; it ranges from traditional gas boiler and storage heaters, to a district heating scheme and rooftop solar in the games village, and a communal boiler in the new Riverside Dalmarnock development.

I was aware from my casework of the many challenges my constituents faced with their energy costs, so I went out to conduct a survey in Dalmarnock to get a better picture of what was going on and what additional support might be required. The results were heartbreaking. Where my team and I have been able to assist people, we have done so, yet much more is required on a UK structural level to tackle the issues my constituents face. The survey was conducted in the period after the energy bills support scheme closed. We surveyed over 1,000 people in the Dalmarnock area, and received a response rate of around 10%. Respondents were from right across different housing types, so results showed the breadth of people's experience with this issue. Replies are still coming in.

We asked about housing type and tenure, energy supplier, the proportion of income people were spending on their bills, and how much that had gone up in the

[Alison Thewliss]

past year. We also asked people about dampness and condensation in their home. Many reported regularly running out of credit on their prepayment meters, and having had prepayment meters forced on them because they were in debt.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for taking my intervention. I wanted to come in earlier on prepayment meters, but I was very keen to listen to what else she was saying. Despite the fact that Ofgem has, for the moment, stopped energy companies from being able to force prepayment meters on people, and despite the fact that the Courts and Tribunals Service stopped that happening in England and Wales, Scottish Power applied, I think in the last week, for over 100 such meters to be installed, and got the warrants. Does she agree that it can be doing that for only one reason, which is to intimidate people who are struggling to pay their bills?

Alison Thewliss: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and for all the work she has done to highlight the issues facing people on prepayment meters. That is an absolutely brutal way to go about your business: forcing your way into people's homes, forcing people to take prepayment meters, and then clawing back money off them that they could have used to heat their house, rather than to service a debt caused by soaring energy prices. The energy companies have made significant profits out of these people—profits that really have not been earned through anything that the companies have done, but that have resulted from global circumstances. People in our constituencies in Glasgow are paying the real price for that, living in cold, dark flats through the depths of winter.

A woman wrote to me who lives in a new-build flat. She is in debt now. She works full time, but has had to ask for payment holidays on her credit cards and other loans. She is not the type of person who gets into this situation. She said:

"I have had to cut my food shop. I live now on soup and sandwiches. I don't put my heating on unless it's freezing. I don't have any disposable income now and I'm contemplating giving up my car".

The impact of these high bills on whether people can afford to eat properly is stark. Another woman reported:

"I can't cook during the day on weekdays. I can only cook at night or weekends in order to save energy and money. I can't cook my local or native food because it takes longer to cook. We eat more junk foods which is not healthy for us."

People recognise that this is causing them harm, but there is really nothing that they can do about it. A gentleman who has diabetes reported to me that he goes to bed early, he feels cold all the time, and his diet is not good owing to money concerns. Another woman told us:

"I was worried about accidentally running hot water as it would cost so much. I refused to have friends or family around because I was embarrassed to be living like that."

Even those in new-build houses are struggling, with one constituent reporting that the house ventilation system in her new home cost 15p a day in 2015, and now costs £1 a day, which is a 600% increase. As a result, she opts to use it only when the condensation starts to

build up, and after mould has appeared on the windowsills. That is no way for people to live, but they simply do not have the money to make ends meet. Another constituent reported that the price of her gas and electricity had risen from £72 to £184 a month. The family are supported through universal credit, and there is no means of getting extra money in. I do not understand how this Government expect people to live.

The survey asked people who were not comfortable putting the heating on what alternative methods they used to get warm. Some said that they would not even boil the kettle for a cup of tea, while others, including a pensioner couple, reported going to bed early to stay warm. Many respondents said that the cost of energy bills had caused them stress or other adverse mental health issues. Some had physical health issues such as fibromyalgia, anaemia or even cancer, which they felt could be alleviated by a warm environment in their homes. It is even more worrying that so many—including the constituent whom I mentioned earlier—reported damp and mould in their home, which is a risk factor for future respiratory problems. One said that they had to paint rooms twice over the last year, to cover up damp patches.

I am aware that housing associations in the area are worried about the impact on their tenants and housing stock in the long term. Although they had some money to distribute to their tenants through the Scottish Government's social housing fuel support fund, that does not fix the systemic issues, which are reserved to Westminster. One of those systemic issues is the regulation of heat networks—an issue that has affected people in the Riverside Dalmarnock development. In January this year, those residents, whose heating is supplied by a communal boiler system operated by the company Switch2, received a notice informing them that the price of a kilowatt-hour of gas was increasing from 12p to 33p. That has had a serious impact on many residents, a number of whom have disabilities, because the development was sold to them on the basis that it was accessible and affordable. One resident reported no longer using gas and washing in cold water; electricity was okay, but Switch2 had increased the cost of heating to unrealistic levels, and the resident could not afford hot water. The price of gas had risen from between £40 and £55 to £160 for the same usage.

In the post-covid "working from home" environment, some people are weighting up the cost of transport versus the cost of energy. One of my constituents said:

"If I work from home my home bills go up and my employer saves. But if I commute to work I need a car and fuel costs a lot too. I don't have a choice and just have to foot the bill. I can't default as it will affect my job."

These constituents do not have alternative options for heating. The homes in that development are not equipped with traditional boilers, and cannot be supplied with heating in any way other than via the communal heat network. Switch2, for its part, purchases direct from energy providers and passes the cost on to its customers. The issue with the lack of regulation and support is not really of its making.

For those on communal and district heating, the energy bill relief scheme failed to provide the support that other energy customers across the UK managed to get, and the energy price guarantee does not apply to homes on heat networks. The regulation of heat networks remains forthcoming; plans for that were set out in the

Government's Energy Bill, but those plans are unlikely to be implemented before the winter. These constituents cannot wait. They cannot live in fear of prices going up still further. They need real support with their energy bills now, not after the situation has worsened. Can the Minister confirm the date on which those regulations will be put in place? May I also ask her what assurances can be given to those who are on heat networks? At what rate will the price be fixed when the regulations come into force? Will it be the rate that customers pay now, or the rate that they will be paying at that time? The prices may have gone up again by then. What information will they receive about the implications of these new regulations?

I would like to make a few points about business customers, because there is a relevance to them, too. A large employer in the east end came to me despairing that they could not cope with the price increase that they faced; they worried that they would not be able to keep their staff. They strained every sinew to keep their loyal staff during the pandemic, and they want to do right by them now. They felt thoroughly unsupported by the Government and, like many businesses, they are now marooned on a very high tariff, which they will be stuck with until it comes up for renegotiation. What more is the Minister doing, in conjunction with the regulator and suppliers, to tackle the patent unfairness of some businesses being stuck on a high tariff and struggling to pay their staff, while other businesses have a much better deal? There has also been scant support from the UK Government for the third sector. It should be a real source of shame that the churches and community centres that provide some of the most valuable support for vulnerable people also face these kinds of contracts, and have had to consider closing their doors because of the price of energy.

There is a further complexity for a particular group of business customers in my constituency—those who operate the Showpeople's yards that I mentioned earlier. One of my constituents operates several yards and cannot get an explanation from his supplier, Scottish Power, as to why he is on different rates for different yards in the same street. He has had to pass the costs on to the tenants, and they too are struggling to understand the disparity. His costs have also gone up dramatically, as everyone else's have. For example, he is paying three times as much for gas and electricity, which has gone from 17p per kW and a 28p standing charge to 56p per kW and an 81p standard charge. He has also struggled to get support, in common with others known as park home residents.

I received an email this week, by coincidence, from an organisation called Charis, which is administering a warm home discount scheme for park home residents, but as it is benefit-dependent and targeted towards a group of people who traditionally do not claim benefits and are self-employed, I would question whether this scheme will really reach those who desperately need it right now. They have already waited a considerable time for this help to come. I ask the Minister to consider what more can be done for this group of people. On a technical point, how she will monitor the uptake of schemes such as this?

Temperatures in Scotland have already started to drop. It was 0° with frost on the ground in Glasgow on Monday morning this week, and there is the prospect of

further chills. The Minister cannot wait—and my constituents cannot wait—for the freezing temperatures to hit the south-east of England before she takes further action on this. In Scotland, we are doing what we can in a grim situation. The Scottish Government have invested in social housing, and they introduced the energy efficiency standard for social housing in 2014. As a result, homes in the social rented sector are now some of the most energy-efficient in Scotland, with 85% achieving level D or above on their energy performance certificate. We are working hard to tackle fuel poverty, but responsibility for the structural issues and the cost of energy, which affect our constituents, does not lie with us; it lies in this place, and it is for this Government to try to fix them.

Today's Joseph Rowntree Foundation figures on destitution in the UK make for utterly grim reading, but they find that the actions the Scottish Government are taking, such as the Scottish child payment, mean that

“Scotland has improved its position to lie below the GB average, having experienced by far the lowest increase since 2019.”

But these are just a few glimmers of light when energy and food prices are driving 3.8 million people across the UK into destitution.

It is beyond comprehension to me that people can be shivering this winter in energy-rich Scotland. It does not have to be this way. Independent Ireland will invest some of its budget surplus into energy support to see people through the winter. I urge the Minister, who I know is very keen to help, to do what she can to support people in Dalmarnock, in Glasgow and in the rest of Scotland with their energy costs. We face particular challenges. It is colder and people need that support. We need to reform the market to make it fair for the customers, not the shareholders. The will to change does not come from Westminster; it will come from an independent Scotland.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for tabling this incredibly important debate on the cost of energy in Dalmarnock. She makes a strong case for her constituents and, as the Minister for affordability, I am mindful of the issues that she raises. That is why the Government spent nearly £40 billion protecting households and businesses from spiralling energy bills last winter. That included robust support for households, covering around half of a typical energy bill last winter through the combined support since October 2022 of the energy price guarantee and the energy bills support scheme, with a typical household saving around £1,500 by the end of June 2023. The energy price guarantee subsidised the per unit cost that a household could be charged for its gas and electricity usage. The typical household was therefore paying £2,500 a year for its energy when prices were at their highest, between October 2022 and June 2023.

To put that in context, the Ofgem price cap reached £4,279 for quarter 1 of 2023, which is what a typical household would have paid for its energy had the Government not intervened. Alongside the EPG, the energy bills support scheme delivered a £400 non-repayable Government discount on electricity bills to help 28 million households in Great Britain.

[Amanda Solloway]

The hon. Lady mentioned the difficulties some people in her constituency faced in accessing energy support last winter, particularly those who were unable to be reached automatically. The EBSS alternative funding was available to over 900,000 households in Great Britain that did not have a domestic electricity supply and were not eligible to receive support automatically through EBSS, providing them with £400 to support them with their energy bills. I note the comments from the survey, and I am very interested, as we discussed before, to see the results of that survey.

The scheme remained open for three months from 27 February to 31 May, and the Government used a range of methods to ensure that as many eligible households as possible knew that they could apply. That included press notices to highlight the scheme in national and regional media, and a request for local authorities to write to care homes and park homes in their area.

The alternative fuel payment scheme delivered £200 to households that use alternative fuels such as heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas, coal or biomass, helping around 2 million off-gas-grid households to meet their energy costs last winter. The scheme particularly supported households in areas that are not connected to the gas grid, and support was doubled to £200 in the autumn statement to reflect the price rises experienced by people using alternative fuels to heat their home.

Only last week, my Department published figures showing that over £24 million had been spent on EBSS and AFP support in Glasgow Central, where the district of Dalmarnock is located. That is just two schemes and does not include the significant support provided through the EPG. In total, the Government spent around £1.2 billion to support households in Scotland.

The Government have welcomed recent reductions in household energy bills. The energy price cap for quarter 4 of this year has been set at £1,834, which is significantly down from the £4,279 at the start of the year. The energy price guarantee will remain in place until March 2024, providing a safety net for consumers should energy prices spike unexpectedly by limiting the amount that suppliers can charge per unit of gas or electricity.

Additional support has been delivered through the welfare system for the most vulnerable households, with eligible households receiving a £900 cost of living payment during 2023-24. This is an increase from the £650 such households received the previous year. The Government will continue to provide targeted support for the most vulnerable, with 3 million households across Great Britain expected to benefit from the £150 warm home discount this winter. Eligible households will also receive the winter fuel payment, worth between £250 and £600, and the cold weather payment that provides £25 during very cold weather.

As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, fuel poverty is a devolved policy. We have responsibility for England, but it is right that we note the work that the Scottish Government are doing in this space and the lessons learned. Multiple schemes have been set up, including the winter heating payment, the home heating support fund and the child winter heating assistance scheme, to

help reduce fuel poverty specifically in Scotland. As set out in the autumn statement, we are exploring the best approach to consumer protection as part of wider retail market reforms.

We welcome Ofgem's new rules for energy suppliers, which will ensure that all energy customers get the good service they deserve. Suppliers will now be required to prioritise vulnerable customers when they request help, offer timely repayment plans for those struggling with bills, and make customer ratings easy to find on their websites.

In the longer term, improving energy efficiency will be key to tackling fuel poverty, contributing to the long-term reduction of energy bills, and reaching net zero. In addition to the £6.6 billion allocated in this Parliament, £6 billion of new funding will be made available from 2025 to 2028.

The Government have also extended the energy company obligation—ECO—from 2022 to 2026 and expanded it to a total of £4 billion to accelerate efforts to improve homes and meet fuel poverty targets, and £1 billion has been committed through the Great British insulation scheme, which will improve more than 300,000 of Great Britain's least energy-efficient homes.

The Government's vision for the energy retail market is one that works better for consumers, is more resilient and investable, and supports the transformation of our energy system. Much remains to be done to deliver our vision. That is why we are pursuing further targeted reforms, which will set us on a path to unlocking competition, investment and innovation, and helping the energy market to achieve net zero while protecting the most vulnerable.

The hon. Member mentioned talking to suppliers. I assure her that I talk to suppliers and other stakeholders, such as Citizens Advice, on an ongoing basis. It is important to have those conversations.

We are also looking to provide protection to those using heat networks, including people in Dalmarnock. Subject to the passage of the Energy Bill, heat network customers in Scotland will be protected by UK-wide consumer protection legislation, as well as the regulatory framework established by the Heat Networks (Scotland) Act 2021.

The Government will closely monitor energy prices and keep energy support schemes under review, as well as provide longer-term support to keep energy bills more affordable for all. One of the schemes that we are considering is the "It All Adds Up" campaign, which I encourage the hon. Member to support. We are trying to encourage households to look at where they can make further savings.

I am planning to visit Scotland in the near future, and I welcome the opportunity to engage more closely on this issue.

I sincerely thank the hon. Member for introducing this important debate and for all her efforts to ensure that her constituents are fully supported.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 24 October 2023

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

IVF Provision

9.30 am

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of IVF provision.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Robertson. I start by thanking everyone who came along to the briefing on this matter yesterday, and in particular, Megan and Whitney, Laura-Rose Thorogood from LGBT Mummies, and Michael Johnson-Ellis from TwoDads UK for sharing their deeply personal stories and for the time they spent talking to MPs about this important issue.

As a mum of two wonderful boys, one of whom was conceived through IVF—in vitro fertilisation—this subject is close to my heart. Everyone deserves a chance to start a family, no matter their sexuality or gender identity. It was around 14 or 15 years ago that I started the IVF process as part of a same-sex couple. At the time, we went through unnecessary procedures, a long waiting list and significant costs, but despite the hurdles, it was achievable and my wonderful youngest son is now 13.

In the 13 years that my son has been alive, life for LGBTQ+ people in the UK has got progressively worse, and not just in terms of IVF. In many ways, life for LGBTQ+ people has gone backwards over the past decade. Homophobic and transphobic bullying is on the rise, trans hate crime has risen, waiting lists for LGBTQ+ physical and mental healthcare are through the roof, and virtually every day we see an attack on our community from this Government. From attacks on LGBTQ+ refugees to attacks on inclusive education in schools, to language outright denying trans rights, the Government have ramped up their war on woke using divisive and inflammatory rhetoric that is designed to stoke hate and distract from the mess they have made of this country, ahead of the next general election.

Ministers have failed to keep their promise to ban so-called conversion therapy in full, allowing the barbaric practice to continue. As for IVF for same-sex couples, we are still waiting for the Government to keep their promise to remove the discriminatory practical and financial barriers that LGBTQ+ couples face.

Since the IVF journey that I was part of, NHS waiting lists have become longer and the hurdles that LGBTQ+ couples have to jump through have increased. A fragmented NHS means that there is a postcode lottery for provision, and the financial cost is significantly higher. If I were starting my journey to become a parent now, even on an MP's salary, I doubt I would be able to afford to complete the process. It is a disgrace that 14 or 15 years later, couples like Megan and Whitney still have to go through the same unnecessary fertility tests that we had to go through.

When speaking to people ahead of this debate, it has been depressing to repeatedly hear from women who have given up on their dream to become a parent

because they have run out of money. LGBTQ+ people are being priced out of having a family. Lesbian, bisexual, non-binary and trans women couples are expected to demonstrate their infertility before the NHS will fund IVF. To do so, they must pay privately for up to 12 rounds of artificial insemination.

Yesterday, MPs heard at first hand from people this is having a huge impact on, including Megan and Whitney, who are here again today to listen to this debate. Megan and Whitney spoke about their integrated care board requiring them to pay for 12 rounds of artificial insemination before they would be eligible for any treatment on the NHS, which led to their decision to take their ICB to a judicial review. I have spoken to many couples who have spent £30,000, £50,000, or £60,000 on treatment, and many more have given up because they cannot afford to start the process. They have been priced out of having children. Last week, the BBC referred to the situation as a

“‘gay tax’ facing same-sex couples starting a family”.

Megan and Whitney's legal case more than a year ago helped to prove that NHS England's IVF policy discriminated against same-sex couples. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that couples who have been unsuccessful in conceiving after two years should be offered three full cycles of in vitro fertilisation for women under 40 and one cycle for women aged between 40 and 42. The current requirement is that same-sex couples are expected to self-fund up to 12 intrauterine insemination cycles before they are eligible for NHS IVF treatment.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): One thing that is becoming more dangerous as a result of same-sex couples having to pay for artificial insemination is the rise in people on Facebook offering their services at a low-cost price. This means that unofficial sperm donors are selling their sperm on social media sites, and that is not covered by the Online Safety Bill. It is really dangerous and exploits same-sex couples, and there are all the health ramifications to which this could lead.

Kate Osborne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will touch on that later. The guidelines are due to be updated next year. The Government have accepted that the situation is unfair and discriminatory. Last year's women's health strategy promised to remove the additional financial barriers to IVF for female same-sex couples in England, including removing the requirement to privately fund artificial insemination to prove fertility status before accessing NHS IVF services.

I am pleased that the Minister with responsibility for mental health and women's health strategy is responding to this debate. In May she said:

“We expect the removal of the additional financial burden faced by female same-sex couples when accessing IVF treatment to take effect during 2023.”

On 11 September 2023, in response to a parliamentary question, she told the House:

“We remain committed to remove the requirement for female same-sex couples to self-fund six rounds of artificial insemination before being able to access National Health Service-funded treatment. NHS England are intending to issue commissioning guidance to integrated care boards to support implementation, which is expected shortly.”

[Kate Osborne]

We are still waiting for that guidance. The response also failed to acknowledge that, even now, some ICBs are still requiring self-funding for up to 12 rounds. With just 10 weeks left of 2023, the promise to remove the additional financial burden in 2023 will obviously not be met.

Of the 42 integrated care boards in England, only four offer fertility treatment to same-sex couples without the requirement to pay privately for artificial insemination. Ten more have said that they are reviewing their policies, but without the guidance from the Government or NHS England, there is not even a timeline for ICBs to make the changes needed. The Minister must ensure the full implementation of the recommendation from the women's health strategy and work with NHS England to set out a clear timeline to bring an end to the inequalities experienced by LGBTQ+ couples when accessing fertility services.

In England, the NHS will fund in vitro fertilisation for heterosexual couples who have been trying for a baby unsuccessfully for at least two years and who also meet certain other criteria such as age and weight, yet even here, there is a postcode lottery for IVF. Some ICBs use the outdated tool of body mass index as a way of measuring health and refuse women IVF on the basis of their or their partner's BMI. Some ICBs set their own criteria—that happened to one of my constituents—and refuse to offer IVF if either person in the couple already has a child with a previous partner. I hope that the Minister's guidance deals with all those inequalities in provision.

Stonewall and DIVA's 2021 LGBTQI+ Insight survey found that 36% of LGBTQI+ women and non-binary respondents who had children experienced barriers or challenges when starting their family. One in five of those stated that the greatest barrier or challenge was the high cost of private fertility treatment.

Stonewall's latest research shows that 93% of ICBs are still falling short of the women's health strategy's target. The Government and NHS England have said that they have a 10-year strategy to tackle that. Most women cannot wait 10 years for the rules to change. For the majority of people, raising tens of thousands of pounds is impossible. The policy is making them financially infertile.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. As well as the point about the strategy's length of time, there is the age of some of us in the LGBT community. The fact that same-sex marriage did not come until some of us were older, and that many of us came out later in life, means that there is a very short window for older LGBT people to take the opportunity to get pregnant or be parents.

Kate Osborne: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Generally, couples are starting their families later, and all these barriers make it almost impossible for so many to start a family.

Many organisations have been in touch with concerns about IVF provision, such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, the Progress Educational Trust, the

National AIDS Trust and many more. The National AIDS Trust has been challenging discriminatory legislation that prevents many people living with HIV from starting a family.

Under UK law, people living with HIV do not have the same rights as everyone else in accessing fertility treatment. Scientific evidence has demonstrated that there is no risk of HIV transmission through gamete donation, due to advances in HIV treatment. That has been accepted for people in a heterosexual relationship. Heterosexual couples are classified as being "in an intimate relationship" by the Government's microbiological safety guidelines, and people living with HIV are allowed to donate gametes to their partner. However, that intimate relationship designation is not available to LGBTQ+ couples, creating yet another layer of discrimination on access to fertility treatment for LGBTQ+ people living with HIV.

Yesterday, LGBT Mummies told MPs that, in some cases, when people are denied fertility funding access, they look to alternative routes, such as home insemination. Going down that route comes with physical, psychological and legal implications, which, in turn, cost the Government and the NHS more than if the treatment and chance of family creation were offered in the first place. Laura-Rose told us that although home insemination has really worked for some people, and they have a great relationship with their donor, it can be dangerous for others. It has led to inappropriate proposals to donate only if people have intercourse with the donor. As well as the health risks, if people do not use registered banks or clinics to obtain sperm, there is the possibility that a donor could later try to claim parental rights over a child.

Laura-Rose spoke about how lucky she is to be a parent, but she is still paying off the debt after incurring costs of more than £60,000. So many families she is working with are simply priced out of having a family. TwoDads UK also raised similar concerns in their briefings and contact with MPs, with Michael setting out that the inequality is pushing a community of people to take risks. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists told me that there is significant and unacceptable variation in the availability of NHS-funded fertility treatments in the UK, and that it strongly believes there should be equal access to fertility treatment for same-sex couples. It called on the Government and NHS England to support integrated care boards to ensure that that commitment is realised as soon as possible.

I hope that the Minister has listened to all the concerns and evidence from the many organisations I have mentioned, and others will no doubt be referenced in the debate. Ministers and NHS England can put an immediate end to the discrimination in IVF provision facing LGBTQ+ couples. It is unacceptable that the fertility treatment available for women through the NHS varies depending on where they live. The financial burden on same-sex couples is unacceptable, and we cannot wait any longer. The Government's guidance and timetable for this to end should be published now. The Minister has recognised that the discrimination is unacceptable, and I hope to hear in her response that immediate action will be taken to remove these unnecessary additional practical and financial burdens from LGBTQ+ couples.

9.44 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this important debate about IVF provision for the LGBT community, but I think we need to talk about the whole of IVF provision across the country. This is so important, particularly in the week before National Fertility Awareness Week. We are not here next week, unfortunately, so we have to speak about it this week.

IVF has become a focal point for much of the work that I am doing in Parliament, ever since I received disturbing correspondence from a constituent. She told me her story and when I looked into it, I found that it resonated with women across the country. She was working in the financial sector and had had a very successful career for 20 years. She decided to use IVF to get pregnant because of her fertility issues. After complications, her employers discovered that she was undergoing IVF treatment, and from that day onwards, they put pressure on her to move from the UK to Switzerland for her job, which meant she would not be able to continue with her IVF treatment.

My constituent made the really difficult decision to leave her job. She went to an employment tribunal and ended up getting a non-disclosure agreement. She has not been able to speak publicly about her experience and the unfairness that so many people face when it comes to IVF provision, whatever their sexuality or gender, and that is why I have taken up her case.

Unfortunately, stories like that are repeated too often across the country. To make matters worse, the issues relating to the availability of treatment—the inability of people to access it due to work commitments—are countrywide. Work commitments are not the only constraint on accessing IVF treatment. For example, the availability of treatment has, for years, been based on where an individual lives. However, 2023 has provided us with reasons to be hopeful for the future: for the first time in over a decade, all areas of England now have access to NHS-funded facility treatment. But as we heard from the hon. Member for Jarrow, that does not always mean that people can get instant access to it. It is vital that we end the postcode lottery that has been established in this country when it comes to accessing IVF treatment.

The NHS estimates that one in seven couples may be struggling to conceive, and obviously, for the LGBT community that is higher because of same-sex marriages. I have always said that infertility does not discriminate. It does not matter what a person's background is. I have heard some really emotional testimony from people from ethnic minorities who have struggled even further in this country because of egg donation, and who have to go to Nigeria, in particular, to get their eggs. We have to widen the understanding of how people from ethnic minorities in the LGBT community struggle even more than same-sex white couples in this country. That is why it is so important to have this debate.

Hannah Bardell: There are, of course, many in the LGBT community who will suffer from infertility, but the reality is that, as a starting point, it is not necessarily the infertility that is the issue; it is that we are same-sex. Does she recognise that the guidelines are based on infertility rather than recognising the unique nature and differences of various LGBT families?

Nickie Aiken: Absolutely, and I will come on to that point. It is always about infertility, is it not? It should be about fertility and fertility treatment.

According to the UK fertility regulator—the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority—it takes, on average, three cycles of IVF to achieve success. I would like to praise the regulator for its recent announcement—I think from last week—regarding its grading of supplementary fertility treatment to help individuals and couples to determine what is a proven treatment and what is safe and cost-effective. That is most welcome, and I have had so many people come to me over the past year or so saying that the cost of IVF can be added on to all the time. In particular, people in clinics say, “Oh, you should have this scan” or “You might need to have this blood test—it might prove more successful.” When a person is in that situation, they will do anything they can to get pregnant. The costs do add up, so I am really pleased that the HFEA has released that guidance. I hope clinics across this country will take note.

Nevertheless, fertility treatment is still an emotionally draining, costly, risky and very long process. Undergoing treatment while juggling a job is particularly tough, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Unlike employment legislation on pregnancy, maternity and paternity, there is no enshrined legislation that compels employers to give time off work for fertility treatment or any initial consultation. The Equality Act 2010 was well intentioned and removed some forms of discrimination in the workplace, but unfortunately it does not help to prevent discrimination against those who are pursuing fertility treatment, as it does not class infertility as a disability. For example, most workplace protection policies exclude elective medical procedures, putting fertility treatment on a par with cosmetic surgery.

Last year, I introduced the fertility workplace pledge. While my private Member's Bill, the Fertility Treatment (Employment Rights) Bill, has faced its difficulties progressing through the House, the fertility workplace pledge that I launched asks businesses to sign up voluntarily to provide employees undergoing IVF treatment with the support and the time off they need. We have consistently seen new businesses signing up over the past year, including the likes of Channel 4, Aldi and NatWest—even the Houses of Parliament have signed up to become a fertility workplace ambassador. More and more businesses are signing up, and there are now several a week. I ask hon. Members to encourage employers in their constituency to look at the fertility workplace pledge and consider signing up. If we can do this voluntarily rather than through employment law, all the better, because it changes the debate, the discussions and the attitude towards fertility treatment.

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member is making a brilliant speech; I thank her for all her work in this area. One of the problems is that the societal stigma around fertility treatments persists and is quite vicious and vocal. Infertility is not seen as a disease, and it is not seen as something with equal weight to other conditions. We need to change this in schools. There has been a lot of talk today about the Government's sex education programme. In school we are taught how not to get pregnant, but we are never told that we might not be able to get pregnant. There are serious conversations to be had about how to change the cultural stigma around fertility treatment. That starts with education in schools.

Nickie Aiken: The hon. Member makes a very good point. On sex education in schools, it is imperative that we teach our children about all types of relationships, including same-sex and heterosexual couples, at an age-appropriate time. In my opinion, four and five-year-olds need to be taught about same-sex couples as much as about heterosexual couples. I really hope that that goes ahead—but I digress.

I want to pay tribute to all the organisations that have been helping me on my fertility workplace journey: Fertility Matters at Work, Fertility Network UK, TwoDads UK and many more whose help has unquestionably been vital to push towards the fertility workplace pledge and improve access to IVF for everyone.

As we have heard, there is one particular group who can benefit greatly from IVF and deserve equal access. The LGBTQ+ community are reliant on IVF to have their own biological children. I was pleased to hear the Government promise to make access to fertility treatment fairer last year. For too long, many in the LGBTQ+ community have faced what has been labelled the gay tax. This is because LGBTQ couples have to pay privately for their first six to 12 rounds of artificial insemination to prove their infertility, which would then grant them access to NHS IVF treatment or, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said earlier—

Hannah Bardell: I remind the hon. Lady—not to boast too much, but to share positive experiences—that that is only in England in Wales. People in Scotland do not have to go through that process.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Lady for pointing that out. It is not often that Scotland is ahead of England on the NHS. I am delighted to hear that.

I acknowledge that the change in policy will take time to implement. However, I ask the Minister to look into speeding up support to our LGBTQ communities. Such support is needed desperately in this area. They should not have to wait longer even than heterosexual couples.

Ultimately, I believe that we are on the cusp of real progress in access and attitudes. As the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) made clear about attitudes towards IVF, it is important that we break down the barriers from as early an age as possible. I know that the Minister is as passionate as I am about supporting individuals as they decide to go through fertility treatment. I therefore see it as vital that we all work together to bring down the remaining few barriers to make IVF treatment a viable option for everyone and anyone who wishes to start their own family, and to make it as stress-free as possible.

9.55 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for raising the issue of IVF provision and setting the scene so well. I will raise some examples from my constituency, where IVF treatment issues have had a detrimental effect on ladies who wish to have a family, with costs and financial implications for their lives, which have been changed in dramatic ways. A number of my constituents have contacted me about the issue over the years.

I am ever mindful that the Minister present does not have responsibility for the figures or the subject matter in Northern Ireland, but there is a real anomaly that I have to put on the record. I always bring a Northern Ireland perspective to these debates, as everyone knows. I do so because I hope to add to the conversations that we are having and perhaps show where the shortfalls are.

This important issue has an impact on many parents daily—it is indeed daily—and it is a pleasure to speak about it as my party's spokesperson on health issues. Nothing is more precious than the gift of life. It is awful that for so many it is a struggle, so it is great to have the opportunity to debate, discuss and request further provision of IVF across the United Kingdom.

I will first highlight some differences between the mainland and Northern Ireland to add perspective to the debate. It was recently brought to my attention by a young constituent going through the process of IVF that on the mainland a person whose BMI is 35 can access medicated ovulation support, but in Northern Ireland it is 30. Sometimes that request is difficult for people in Northern Ireland to achieve. On the mainland, too, a person whose BMI is 30 can qualify for IVF, but in Northern Ireland it must be 25. Again, the criterion set in Northern Ireland is more stringent and difficult to achieve than that on the mainland. That is not the Minister's fault, but it provides perspective for the debate.

Many women in Northern Ireland have stated that the BMI issue is by far the biggest, and it leaves them with a feeling of sheer inequality. We have a clear issue of inequality in the system. Some of my constituents have come to the mainland to get IVF treatment. It can have a significant cost for them, which cannot be ignored. Why do they have to have a lower body mass index and be smaller to achieve the same fertility treatment as their English counterparts?

There is definitely an equality issue to be addressed. The hon. Member for Jarrow set out inequality in the system, and I support what she said. I reiterate the clear inequalities that my constituents face in comparison with those here. It is also worth mentioning that a woman suffering from polycystic ovary syndrome will struggle to lose weight at the same pace as someone who does not have PCOS.

There is already a prolonged process in place before people even achieve the criteria set back home. In England, according to NICE, women under 40 should be offered three rounds of NHS-funded IVF treatment if they have been trying unsuccessfully to start a family for two or more years. In Northern Ireland, it is only one round, and if the person or their partner has prior children, the entitlement is zero. As the hon. Member for Jarrow set out, the inequality is very apparent. Additionally, given that the chances of success vary depending on age, one round can be completely worthless in some cases. Unfortunately, some of the ladies who have come to me over the years have put themselves into debt in excess of a five-figure sum just to have a child, and the treatment may not be successful. Some of them are still paying the money back, and they have not had the child they sought to have in their life. It really is frustrating.

The Stormont Executive committed in 2020 to increase the number of funded cycles for a woman to have a baby. However, this is purely dependent on the money

that Northern Ireland receives under the Barnett consequentials. Financial capacity restraints are the reason why the change has not been implemented. In this afternoon's Westminster Hall debate on the future of NHS funding, I will highlight the issue of IVF funding and how it affects my constituents. We cannot expect to have a sustainable NHS if we do not make the effort to fund it properly.

I understand that capacity is different in Wales, where women are able to have only two rounds of IVF treatment. The fact that women in Scotland and England get three is completely unjust, as those in Northern Ireland get only one. It is a clear example of how we continue to be left behind, and it demonstrates the inequalities in the system for us in Northern Ireland.

NHS funding for IVF cycles varies considerably across the United Kingdom. In 2021, Scotland had the highest rate of NHS-funded IVF cycles, at 58%, compared with 30% in Wales and 24% in England. I know that the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) will give the figures for Scotland; I commend the country for achieving that percentage. Let us give it credit for doing so, because we should all be trying to achieve that.

The figures for Northern Ireland are not available, although I have sought hard to get them. I have written to the Department of Health back home to see whether they can be accessed, so hopefully I will have them in the next week or two. Self-funding is not always an option for couples due to the sheer cost of the process, but it is important to note the comparison.

Every time a lady undergoes an IVF cycle and is not successful, anxiety, depression and disappointment creep into the process. Then she might do it again and again. I know of one lady who has had IVF treatment at least five times, but it has never been successful. I feel for ladies who are keen to have a child and who go through the cycles of IVF treatment but are not successful. I believe that children make a marriage or a relationship. They might sometimes stress parents out but, at the end of the day, children are a bonus and a pleasure to have. I am pleased that at least some of us have had that opportunity.

I urge the Minister to take my comments into consideration and to discuss these matters with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. I seek the Minister's input; she always responds with compassion and understanding, which we appreciate. In relation to where we are in Northern Ireland, will she accept my request to have discussions with the Department of Health back home and see whether there is some way we can work together better to help my constituents and those across Northern Ireland who do not have funding for IVF? We must allow people in Northern Ireland the same right as those in the rest of the United Kingdom, and implement NICE's recommendation to have three cycles of IVF for women struggling to conceive.

I wanted to make this small contribution to the debate, because it is important that we share our experiences. For those in Northern Ireland whose IVF treatment has been successful, the experience has been wonderful, but for many people it has not. The inequalities are clear.

10.4 am

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship this morning, Mr Robertson. I thank all colleagues for their contributions, which

really have been excellent. This is the best of Parliament. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on her fantastic speech and on securing this vital debate.

It is fair to say that we are living in difficult times, with a huge range of issues facing us as parliamentarians, from healthcare to education and from energy prices to job insecurity. They all have an impact on our constituents up and down the country, but there is absolutely no reason why fertility and IVF provision—issues that clearly impact so many people—should not take centre stage.

It has been genuinely fascinating to meet and hear from so many families impacted by infertility and access to fertility treatment, including some who are here today. The brilliant Megan and Whitney Bacon-Evans, Michael Johnson-Ellis from TwoDads UK and Laura-Rose of LGBT Mummies are some of the many who have campaigned hard on this issue for many years.

As we have heard, one in six couples suffer issues related to fertility. My IVF journey began in 2018, and I have been open that I knew right from the start that my road to pregnancy would not be easy. I am certainly one of the lucky ones—I was able to take out a loan and borrow from family to pay for my treatment, and after only one round of IVF I was blessed with my beautiful son Sullivan—but I still had many eye-opening experiences during my fertility journey that have led me to this point today. Ask anyone who has experienced IVF, whether personally or from watching loved ones go through the process, and they will say that IVF is one of the most emotionally, mentally and physically challenging and financially demanding processes that anyone can ever undertake.

We must be clear that the current state of the IVF and fertility treatment offering across the UK is far below what would-be parents deserve. It is vital that we right those wrongs that I am many others have experienced at first hand as IVF patients. The main issue, as has been discussed today, is the sheer lack of consistency across the UK in IVF services and provision. I was incredibly fortunate because I was in a position to pay privately for my IVF and because my partner already had two children from a previous relationship, although that meant that we suffered from what we call the step-parent tax. It should not have to be that way.

As we all know, the NICE fertility guidelines are crystal clear; we have heard them this morning. The NHS should offer women under 40 three full cycles of IVF if they have been trying for a child for more than two years. When policies and cycles offered are so different between integrated care boards, and do not take same-sex provision into account, that means that women and would-be parents across the UK are not being offered IVF services in a fair and transparent manner. That is an incredibly important point, made even more complicated by the huge discrepancies between fertility treatment providers in the data they publish.

Colleagues may be aware of my private Member's Bill, the Fertility Treatment (Transparency) Bill, which is due to have its Second Reading on 24 November. The Bill will

“require providers of in vitro fertilisation to publish information annually about the number of NHS-funded IVF cycles they carry out and about their provision of certain additional treatments in connection with in vitro fertilisation”.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Those add-on treatments, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), have been offered to patients who are at their wits' end and will do absolutely anything to improve their chances of having a child. I know their pain, because I was one of them. That is why I work closely with the HFEA, the Progress Educational Trust, Fertility Network UK and many others in the fertility sector who are concerned that many patients are frequently being offered and charged for optional extras to their treatment that claim to improve their chances of having a healthy baby, but are really exploiting people at their most vulnerable.

I was particularly pleased to see last week that the HFEA launched a new rating system to support patients undergoing fertility treatment. Patients are offered add-ons that claim to increase the success of treatment, but for most fertility patients the evidence to support that is missing or not very reliable. The HFEA add-ons rating will help patients to make better informed decisions about their treatment, although it is still only guidance and clinics have the right to ignore it. There is no right to enforce it: as we have heard, the HFEA as a regulator has very few teeth for enforcement. I urge the Minister to look at the issue more carefully and ensure that the regulations are being adhered to and that clinics are adopting the guidance. The new rating system, developed with patients and professionals in the fertility sector, has five categories giving detailed information for patients on whether add-ons increase the chances of success, along with other outcomes that also have an impact on miscarriage rates.

Although I welcome the progress, the wider issues on accessing IVF persist and we clearly have a long way to go in improving the situation. The Government's women's health strategy was a good starting point, but sadly we have still not seen any commitment on concrete action to improve access to IVF and fertility treatment. The strategy was published more than a year ago and was an opportunity for the Government to finally take some direct action, but instead it is once again clear that IVF is not an immediate priority.

I know that the Minister is listening. She has made her position very clear in previous debates on this subject, and I thank her for that engagement, but I sincerely hope that her colleagues in the Department and across Government are also listening and are taking the issue seriously. We have heard the strength of feeling this morning. I know that the Government are listening and that the Minister is listening; I just urge some direct action.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches.

10.10 am

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson, and I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for bringing forward this debate. She spoke beautifully and eloquently about her experiences; it enhances debate when Members, like the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), bring their own personal experiences.

It is very clear that there is unanimity, which does not happen often. I trumpet and champion the positive equality and the better standards that we have in Scotland, but I would love to see those standards rolled out, so that they were the same throughout the UK. It is not about political point scoring; it is about genuinely working together and sharing best practice. However, although it is significantly better in Scotland, we still have arbitrary limits across the board on the age when women are offered IVF. That is global—not just in the UK.

A recently-published report showed that, for the first time since the second world war, more women in their 40s than women in their 20s are having children. That is just a reality. There are all sorts of reasons for that—the cost of living crisis, the cost of accommodation, women's career paths and the lack of childcare. All Governments in the UK are trying to do more around childcare and I recognise those challenges, but the reasons are varied and complex.

A Conservative Member recently said that more people need to have babies. I will not mention the Member, as I have not given due notice. It was an offhand comment and it rightly came in for a lot of criticism because of the intent. However, there is an irony there in that some on the Government Benches are saying that, yet we need more action from the Conservative Government. They need to reflect on that. They should look at the reasons why we have a stagnant birth rate and fewer people having children, and at what more can be done.

We have heard, particularly from the hon. Member for Jarrow, about the issues with the women's health strategy: it is ambitious and the guidance is good, but it is not mandatory. We need it to be. We need to move away from the pot-luck nature of treatment, particularly in England and Wales. I was struck by the briefing, which led through the different levels of care, all the different boards across England and Wales and how challenging that must be for people—not just LGBT people but anyone seeking fertility treatment.

The hon. Member for Jarrow also spoke about the outdated BMI criteria and how those can vary. That is particularly challenging as well. Women's bodies come in all shapes and sizes and for all different reasons. We must recognise that. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also spoke about that issue in relation to Northern Ireland: that arbitrary line is discriminatory. We need to remove the discrimination and those barriers.

The hon. Member for Jarrow also spoke about those with HIV and how they are being discriminated against, and both she and the hon. Member for Pontypridd talked about black-market sperm. Members may remember the 2017 BBC Three documentary. I watched it and was horrified. It showed LGBT couples and female same-sex couples searching the internet for donors and often facing quite dangerous situations. In 2023, people who so desperately want to have a family and to have children should not be forced into those situations. It is unthinkable.

Someone very close to me has been through several rounds of IVF. It cost her tens of thousands of pounds. She talked to me about going to a fertility fair in London, and all the different stalls and what an amazing experience that was in her journey; but a man came up to her and, in the middle of the fair, handed her a note with his phone number and a really inappropriate message, basically trying to push himself on to her to offer his

sperm. She reported it and that person was removed, but that is a truly shocking story, showing just how predatory some men can be in such situations.

We also have to recognise that there are a lot of incredible men out there who donate their sperm and make it possible for others to use it, and there are also incredible women who donate their eggs. Such people make it possible particularly for those in the LGBT community but also heterosexual couples to have children.

It is a particular privilege to be able to represent Scotland's approach to IVF, which, as I said, I am extremely proud of. Not only are we providing a higher proportion of NHS-funded cycles of treatment, but that means that the ability to have a baby is less affected by income.

There are particular challenges for LGBT couples, but I think we are pioneering some work in relation to those challenges. In addition, one of the things that happens if there is more standardised NHS treatment is that the clinics across Scotland—in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen; I think that is correct—collaborate, whereas when people are moving around, particularly in the private sector, they find that those private clinics keep their pioneering work—I am afraid to say—to themselves. I am sure that there is some collaboration, but that seems to be the case.

So, under the SNP-led Scottish Government, we have become a “gold standard” for IVF treatment. Those are not my words but those of Sarah Norcross, the director of Progress Educational Trust, which is an independent, London-based charity that advocates for people affected by fertility issues.

I must say that this is an area where the priorities of the Scottish Government and those of the UK Government are different. I hope that the UK Government will follow our lead; if they did, I am sure that my colleagues in the Scottish Government would be happy to share their experiences and best practice. Ms Norcross said that in Scotland IVF services were

“as good as it gets”.

The UK Government obviously have a different standard. So, as I say, I hope that this is something that we can share best practice on.

I also recognise that, as has already been mentioned by other hon. Members, the briefing yesterday by Megan and Whitney, LGBT Mummies and TwoDads UK was particularly powerful. It was really stark about the challenges that our community—I say this as a member of the LGBT community—has to face.

However, I also have heterosexual friends who have been through IVF. I have one friend who was fortunate enough to have her first baby through natural means. However, for various reasons she then went on to have secondary infertility. She cannot get fertility treatment on the NHS in Scotland. We will offer it to blended families. So, in the situation of the hon. Member for Pontypridd, I can tell her that if she had lived in Scotland, she would have been entitled to treatment. However, if someone has one child and wants to have more children with the same partner, unfortunately they would not be entitled to treatment. That is something that we need to look at in Scotland. Blended families are very much the norm now. If it is the case that someone has a child, or they and their partner both

have children from previous relationships, and they are unfortunate enough to experience secondary infertility, they should have access to fertility treatment.

NHS-funded cycles in England decreased in number from 19,634 in 2019 to 16,335 in 2021, which is a 17% reduction. Covid will undoubtedly have played a part in that. In Wales, the number of NHS-funded cycles decreased from 1,094 to 704 over the same period. In Scotland there was a slight decrease, of just 1%, in that period.

In England, treatment is much more likely to be outsourced to private clinics, even when the costs are covered by the NHS, which has a serious negative impact on overall services. Fertility experts have pointed out that the major reason that fertility care in Scotland is so consistently excellent is that there is the collaboration that I mentioned.

I have also heard from a number of people I have spoken to that people are going abroad for fertility treatment. It would appear that they are going to clinics in Europe because the service there is better. That IVF tourism, as some people call it, is cheaper and seems to be better than the treatment here in the UK, but we do not want people to have to go abroad for that reason; we want people to be able to have their babies here.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) spoke very powerfully about her work in workplace fertility support. That is interesting, because a lot of people will not want to disclose information about their fertility, or they will not feel comfortable about doing so unless their employer is being open. I have perhaps a slightly different opinion from that of the hon. Member. Of course businesses should just provide such support, but businesses have a lot of pressure on them, and sometimes legislation can be the precursor or the catalyst for changes in behaviour and lead to the provision of real, solid support for people who are going through things such as IVF treatment.

Obviously, National Fertility Awareness Week is coming up; however, it was Baby Loss Awareness Week just the other week. I know somebody who, having gone through expensive fertility treatment, only managed the one embryo transfer, which unfortunately did not work. It can be very upsetting when an embryo transfer does not work, no matter the person's sexuality.

I thank LGBT Mummies for the excellent job it has done on briefings. I will briefly go through its asks for the LGBT community, which include equal and equitable access, national mandated funding policy and provisions for all LGBTIQI people. As the hon. Member for Jarrow powerfully highlighted in her speech, the LGBT community is facing discrimination and attacks like never before, including the removal of health services, which is something we all have to reflect on and look to improve. Its asks also include personalised fertility care and education for staff—something I have experienced myself, in the language health practitioners use and in their understanding of the different healthcare requirements of the LGBT community. They also include access to funded medication and tests for home insemination, co-produced funding provision with the community, and the ability to create our families safely by our chosen routes—not being forced down a route.

The difference in Scotland is that we do not have to go through those IUI cycles, but a challenge we have across the board is the arbitrary two-year timeline,

[*Hannah Bardell*]

where people have to have been in a relationship for two years. I do not know of anywhere where we say to heterosexual couples, “Don’t be having a baby until you’ve been together for two years.” We don’t do that, do we? So why are we doing that to LGBT people? That really does not make any sense.

Briefly, I want to reflect on my personal experience. I had a partial failed attempt at IVF with a former partner—I will not go into the details—but I did not start my journey until after I turned 40. I now regret that, because I am 40 and I will get only one shot, rather than three. I am only at the very beginning. I want to highlight to the Minister that piece about those of us who came out later in life. When I came out at 32, most of my friends were getting married and having kids, or already had kids, and I was just working out who I was. One reason that I did not come out earlier was that I so strongly wanted to have a family, and I did not think that would be open to me if I was gay. Equal marriage came much later in life for many people. Like many of us who did not start life as their authentic self, as some people say, until much later, I have felt like I am perennially playing catch-up, and I have now decided to just do it on my own. I do not know where my journey will take me, but I know there is a lot of support out there, and a lot of incredible people.

I am in a very fortunate position, but not many are that fortunate. As we have heard, people are going to the black market and putting themselves in massive debt; we should not be putting anybody in that situation. I hope the Minister will hear the calls from across the House, and I look forward to working with colleagues on this very important issue.

10.22 am

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship this morning, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate, and thank her for championing such an important issue so eloquently today. She talked about the barriers that LGBTQI+ couples face to having children, particularly being priced out, and the fact that while the guidance is good, more work needs to be done.

I thank Megan and Whitney for sharing their hard-hitting story, along with many others who have done so much work to ensure that we are informed about these challenges. I know that there was an urgent briefing yesterday on IVF provision. I am sure everyone will agree with me that this has been a good debate, and that it is clear that a number of changes need to be made for the sake of equality and fairness.

I also thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), who has clearly done a lot of work in this area, for talking about the barriers that individuals may face in the workplace when undergoing IVF treatment. She mentioned businesses signing up to the fertility workplace pledge. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about how the IVF process was impacting his constituents and, as always, gave a helpful picture of the situation in Northern Ireland. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for

Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for sharing her personal story and for her work on the private Member’s Bill, the Fertility Treatment (Transparency) Bill.

As we all know, becoming a parent can be a special and rewarding time for many people. It is the start of an exciting journey into parenthood and a time to celebrate new life. However, as we have heard, there are many challenges that women and families face when conceiving and many challenges in the way of those who seek NHS fertility treatments. As my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow powerfully said, the challenges—both financial and emotional—for LGBTQ+ couples are so much higher. IVF is one of several techniques available to help people become pregnant. This medical procedure has transformed countless lives, providing hope and the possibility of parenthood to those who might otherwise never experience it.

While IVF is a celebrated medical advancement, the lack of accessibility and the inequality of provision in England and across the UK are issues that cannot and should not be ignored. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is responsible for making recommendations about who should have access to IVF treatment on the NHS in England. The current guidelines for England recommend that IVF should be offered to women under the age of 43 who have been trying to get pregnant for two years, as has been mentioned. The exact NICE recommendation is three full cycles for women under 40 and one full cycle for women aged 40 to 42. While in some areas women under 40 can access three cycles of IVF, in other areas they are offered one or even none.

For example, in 2020, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service used freedom of information requests to find out that 86 clinical commissioning groups—now ICBs—funded only one cycle of treatment. More concerning, it found that three CCGs in England did not provide any funding for IVF services at all. In fact, only 23 CCGs funded three cycles as recommended by NICE.

Unsurprisingly, the provision of IVF services across England, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow, has been described as a postcode lottery. I am sure we all agree that this is not right, that the policies are unfair and out of date, and that they must be updated as soon as possible.

I want to tackle the important issue raised by my hon. Friend about the need to break down barriers for all couples. As Stonewall has highlighted in its campaign on this issue, LGBTQI+ couples face incredible financial costs to achieve the same outcomes as everyone else. While the women’s health strategy pledged to remove financial barriers for female same-sex couples in England, the statistics prove that little progress has been made. According to Stonewall’s research, only four of the 42 ICBs in England officially provide NHS funding for artificial insemination, and nine in 10 ICBs in England still require same-sex couples to self-fund at least six cycles of intrauterine insemination before they are eligible for IVF treatment on the NHS. As the Minister will know, that means that LGBTQI+ couples are forced to go privately and end up paying large sums of money—thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds—before they can access NHS fertility services.

I agree with the crucial point that the Government must commit to tackling inequality in access to NHS-funded fertility services. ICBs should ensure fair access to treatment

for all, and ensure that individuals within the LGBTQI+ community, including lesbians, bi women and trans individuals, are not left behind but have the same access to NHS-funded care. However, sadly, going private is now not the last resort but the norm for all individuals in England. In recent years, fewer and fewer women can access IVF treatments on the NHS, with everyone else having to go private. In fact, the use of privately funded IVF cycles by patients across the UK aged 18 to 34 increased to 63% in 2021 from 52% in 2019. That coincides with a fall across the board in numbers of NHS-funded IVF cycles. It is a damning result, highlighting the lack of support available on the NHS for women in the UK. Women are being forced to go private, and parents and families up and down the country face the added financial burden.

The Government must acknowledge that one of the main reasons for the falling levels of provision has been the extraordinary waiting times that women face prior to starting treatment. As the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has shown, although waiting lists were growing too quickly before the pandemic, the impact of the pandemic has made the situation significantly worse. There is an urgent need to reverse the growth of NHS waiting lists in gynaecology, and to ensure that women can access high-quality, timely care and treatment. I know that the Minister and this Government have committed to tackling those extraordinary waiting times, and I hope that she can update us regarding their progress on this critical issue. We all know that the quicker women are seen, the better the outcome will be.

Another critical factor is non-clinical access criteria, where mothers and parents can be denied access to treatment because of their relationship status—as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow—their body mass index, or the fact that one partner has a child from a former relationship. The women's health strategy seeks to remove non-clinical access criteria to fertility treatment, and to address geographical variation in access to NHS-funded fertility services. We on the Labour Benches welcome that ambition, but we know, as do the Government, that it cannot be realised without providing the NHS with the staff and resources it needs. As part of the work, the Minister has said that her Department will work with NHS England to assess fertility provision across ICBs, with a view to removing non-clinical access criteria. Can she confirm the extent of her conversations with NHS England and update Members on the timeline for making the changes?

For far too long, women and their partners have faced unnecessary obstacles to accessing IVF treatment. The Government have had 13 years to address those problems. Instead, I am concerned that they have weakened standards for patients, who are paying more tax but getting worse care. On the important issue of provision of IVF treatment, I welcome the ambitions outlined in the women's health strategy. I hope that, along with Megan and Whitney's powerful story, the Minister has been listening to hon. Members, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow, who has made it clear that the reforms need to happen sooner rather than later.

I urge the Minister to assure us today that there will be full implementation of these aims, and to give us a timeline for when they will occur. I urge her to give us hope that there will be an end to the postcode

lottery, and to the inequality in provision faced by so many individuals and partners across England and the UK.

10.34 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for tabling this important debate, and all Members across the Chamber for their contributions. It has been a positive debate—a good example of putting politics aside and debating how to do the right thing. While I am not denying the challenges for the LGBT+ community raised by the hon. Member, I want to highlight that the Government have brought in major changes over the years with the introduction of same-sex marriage, and the transformation of the management of HIV with the roll-out of opt-out testing and PrEP treatment.

I am pleased to announce that, following the advice from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs, the Government will be introducing secondary legislation to allow the donation of gametes by people with HIV who have an undetectable viral load; we will be introducing that as soon as we can. We will also be addressing the current discriminatory definitions of partner donation, which result in additional screening costs for female same-sex couples undergoing reciprocal IVF; again, amendments through statutory instruments will be introduced as soon as possible.

Those are some of the measures that we have been working on, but I absolutely understand from what I have heard today that there are many issues still to be dealt with, and I welcome the hon. Member for Jarrow holding my feet to the fire to deliver change. Hopefully some of these updates will provide reassurance. This is a priority area, which is why IVF, fertility, and particularly same-sex access to IVF, were in the first year of the women's health strategy, and it is why we are not going to wait for the 10 years of the strategy to introduce the changes.

To be clear, the Government are implementing a policy that no form of self-financed or self-arranged insemination is to be required for same-sex couples to access fertility treatment. I acknowledge that is taking a little while to be rolled out across the country. Hon. Members, especially the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), have spoken about infertility a lot. We absolutely recognise that it has a serious effect on individuals and couples, which is why it is a priority—particularly for the women's health strategy.

As the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out, I can only speak on the provision of IVF in England, but I am very happy to work with colleagues in the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to achieve a consistent approach. Although we are dealing with the inconsistencies in England, if we are a United Kingdom, these matters need to be addressed across all four nations and I am not precious about stealing best practice from other parts of the UK.

In our call for evidence for the women's health strategy, women told us time and again that fertility was a key issue and that they felt very frustrated about the provision of, and access to, fertility treatment. Colleagues have made a number of important points which I will respond

[*Maria Caulfield*]

to in turn, but it has been recognised that there has been unequal access to IVF in England since the treatment was introduced; that is why this is such an important issue. There is resistance in some parts of the country to the changes the Government want to make, but I think we will be able to make progress on them.

NICE is reviewing its fertility guidelines, taking account of the latest evidence of clinical effectiveness. These will be published next year and we will be working with NHS England to implement these guidelines in England quickly and fairly. I am told that they will end regional variation and create a compassionate and consistent fertility service across England, but that does not mean that we cannot improve services in the meantime.

As has been set out, integrated care boards are now responsible for delivering IVF services. They were previously determined by CCGs, but from July last year the 42 ICBs across England are now responsible. Since the ICBs were created, we have seen a levelling up of IVF provision in many. Where CCGs have come together, ICBs have often adopted the higher rate of provision, rather than the lowest level. That is to be welcomed, but by no means does it mean that the level of provision is where we want it to be. Some, but by no means all, ICBs, including in north-east London and Sussex—I declare an interest as a Sussex MP—are now fully compliant with the current NICE guidelines and the provision of three cycles. Others are improving their integrated offer, but some ICBs have kept their pre-existing local offer. That is not good enough, and we are aiming to tackle it.

Abena Oppong-Asare: What conversations has the Minister been having to make sure that ICBs are currently being updated to be as robust as possible?

Maria Caulfield: I will go through that. One of the first things we have done is to be transparent about what is being offered. We have asked every ICB—the whole 42—to detail their provision. We are now publishing that on gov.uk, so if ivf.gov.uk is entered, the table will come up. That illustrates the number of cycles offered by every ICB, the age provision, the previous children rule and what funding is offered for cryo-preservation. That is not just to say, “This is what’s on offer” so that women and couples can see what is available in their area; it is also the start of the process of holding ICBs’ feet to the fire—and for local MPs to be able to say, “Look, they’re offering free cycles in Sussex; why are we not offering that in our local area?”

Abena Oppong-Asare: The Minister may be about to get to this point, so I apologise if I have intervened too quickly. In terms of transparency, it is great that the Minister is publishing the data, but what are the Government doing to make sure that more work is being done by ICBs to provide a better—or adequate—service, given that publishing data does not require them to take any action?

Maria Caulfield: As the hon. Lady will know, it was only last year that we published the women’s health strategy. IVF was front and centre of that—the first year priority. Getting that information is the first step, and then we are able to look at the ICBs that are

not offering the required level of service, have those conversations about why and have a step change to improve the offer. That is just one tool in our box to fulfil our ambition to end the postcode lottery for fertility treatment across England.

Colleagues have also raised the issue of lack of information about IVF, both for the public and healthcare professionals. We are working closely with NHS England to update the NHS website to make IVF more prominent, and also with the royal colleges to improve the awareness of IVF across healthcare professions. One area we are dealing with is that of add-ons, which the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) addressed. As part of our discussions with the HFEA, it now has the add-on rating system, so that people can see what percentage difference an add-on would make and make an informed choice about whether they want to do that as part of their IVF treatment.

I have also just received the HFEA’s report about modernising the legislation, with particular regard to its regulatory powers. That will cover the provision of add-ons, and I hope to be able to respond to the report as quickly as possible. We are making really big changes to some of the issues that have been holding back IVF for a long time. I know that for many people this is not quick enough, but I reassure hon. Members that progress is being made.

For female same-sex couples and same-sex couples across the board, I know that this is a really important matter. I took the position that it was unacceptable for female same-sex couples to shoulder an additional financial burden to access NHS-funded fertility treatment. On the transparency toolkit now on the gov.uk website, we can easily see which parts of the country are asking for six cycles of self-funded insemination, for instance. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough it is 12 cycles, in Bristol and north Somerset it is 10. As the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) said, that is exactly the information we need so that we can tackle the issue head-on and directly with the ICBs. Indeed, one of our key commitments in the women’s health strategy was to remove this injustice once and for all. We were hoping to do that completely in the first year; it will in fact take us a little longer, but it will not take us 10 years.

Hannah Bardell: It is certainly comforting to hear that, but I urge the Minister to supercharge that work, so that female same-sex couples and, indeed, the trans community can make sure they can access that. Will the Minister say something about surrogacy, because I know that across the UK—though, again, we have somewhat better standards and access in Scotland—there are still major challenges, legal and otherwise, for male same-sex couples accessing surrogacy?

Maria Caulfield: The Law Commission has recently produced a report on changes to surrogacy, which we are in the process of responding to. It will address some of the issues raised today. The Government’s position is to abolish the requirement for female same-sex couples to undergo six cycles of self-funded treatment before they can access NHS-funded treatment. We have been clear that the NHS-funded pathway should now offer six cycles of artificial insemination followed by IVF to

female same-sex couples, giving everyone access to NHS-funded fertility services. Some ICBs are doing that already, but others have delayed implementation, and that is what we want to focus on now. We are clear that that needs to be urgently addressed, because same-sex couples' expectations have rightly been raised and the service has not met them swiftly enough. I take that on board from the debate today and reassure colleagues that that is a priority.

To accelerate action, NHS England is developing advice to assist ICBs. I hope they will be able to share that soon. I will share that with the House as soon as it is available. When it is published, we expect ICBs to update their local policies. There should be no further delay and no waiting for NICE guidelines when they are published next year. ICBs must urgently address all local inequalities in access to fertility treatment. There is a reason that IVF was made a priority in the women's health strategy and a reason it was a priority in the first year.

Our health service pioneered the use of IVF in the 1970s. It is a great British invention that should be available to every couple who want to start a family, because the Government back women and families and the accessibility of IVF to those who need it. I look forward to the hon. Member for Jarrow continuing to hold my feet to the fire until we have delivered the change—deliver it we must.

10.46 am

Kate Osborne: I thank everyone for their valued contributions and support for this important issue. I am pleased to have been able to secure this debate ahead of National Fertility Awareness Week. I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for an excellent contribution and for all the work she has done on fertility and employment practices, and for highlighting the disproportionate impact on black and minority ethnic women who need fertility treatment.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I apologise to the Minister for not being here at the start of this debate on a subject that is very important to me. I echo the concerns about the dangers of the current system, which may drive same-sex couples towards potentially unsafe methods, such as seeking sperm donors who might not be known to them. I have friends who have experienced that very thing. If not married or in a civil partnership, the donor will be considered the legal parent of any children, giving him rights over and responsibilities for the child. The safety of sperm is also a concern as the donor might be less likely to have their health and medical history fully screened, which is important.

Kate Osborne: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. In my contribution I touched on the unsafe and inappropriate online advances facing same-sex couples, which the hon. Member has just raised, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). Megan and Whitney told us yesterday of horrific, very detailed, explicit and inappropriate proposals that they have received online, and many other couples have

reported the same. In 2023, we should not be forcing desperate women to turn to black market sperm and be pushed into tens of thousands of pounds of debt.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for describing the situation in Northern Ireland and adding to the concerns that I raised around the inappropriate use of BMI as a factor in deciding IVF provision, particularly how BMI is different for people with PCOS. I would add other conditions such as lipoedema. BMI is not an adequate measure to deny people IVF. Indeed, I believe that BMI is not an adequate measure in pretty much anything.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd for sharing her story, for highlighting financial risks taken and the concerns about regulatory practices in fertility clinics, and for her incredibly important private Member's Bill.

Hannah Bardell: One other condition or disease that has not been spoken about is endometriosis. Endometriosis sufferers often have a terrible time conceiving and face significant challenges. I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that we must include them in all our conversations.

Kate Osborne: I absolutely agree that we should include those sufferers. The hon. Lady's own contribution to the debate was incredibly powerful. She shared her personal story and pointed out how much better the situation is in Scotland, although improvements can always be made. She rightly pointed out that people are going abroad for treatment. TwoDads UK made that point eloquently in our briefing yesterday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) spoke about the need to end the postcode lottery, with that additional emotional and financial toll. I am pleased the Minister confirmed that she will remove discrimination against HIV as soon as possible through secondary legislation. I hope that "as soon as possible" means imminently and that we are not still talking about this in a year's time.

The Minister mentioned the HFEA and changes to regulation. The 2021 guidelines for fertility clinics highlight the need for improved understanding of consumer law and how it applies to clinics and patients. The guidance significantly improves the availability of knowledge of the topic, but it still misses out conditions and vulnerabilities faced by same-sex couples and transgender people, so I look forward to receiving her update.

I am glad that the Minister welcomes me holding her feet to the fire on discrimination in provision for IVF. I will continue to do so. She said that it has taken a bit longer than she would like—but not 10 years. I want to see an urgent timeline from her. The inconsistency in IVF provision across the UK is unacceptable. We must end the postcode lottery for fertility treatment and the unacceptable financial burden on same-sex couples. As has been pointed out today, many women cannot wait any longer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of IVF provision.

10.52 am

Sitting suspended.

BBC Commissioning: Oversight

11 am

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the oversight of BBC commissioning.

It is a joy to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I will start by using a number of quotes from the BBC that are directly relevant to the topic. On editorial integrity and independence, the BBC describes itself as

“independent of outside interests and arrangements that could undermine our editorial integrity. Our audiences should be confident that our decisions are not influenced by outside interests, political or commercial pressures, or any personal interests.”

On fairness, the BBC says:

“Our output will be based on fairness, openness, honesty and straight dealing.”

Finally, on transparency, the BBC says:

“We will be transparent about the nature and provenance of the content we offer online. Where appropriate, we will identify who has created it and will use labelling to help online users make informed decisions about the suitability of content for themselves and their children.”

Those principles have been burning issues at the heart of the BBC for several years. For example, the salaries of the BBC’s highly paid employees were a closely guarded secret for a long time. That was indefensible even if some of those employees were not questioning others who were also paid out of the public purse, but the double standards jumped out at the viewing and listening public when they regularly probed others yet hid behind BBC executive decisions when asked about their own salaries. That position was gradually worn down, and now there is an annual disclosure without the mass exodus of talent that the corporation had used as a defence when it resisted disclosure.

Now that one issue of transparency regarding directly paid salaries has been largely resolved, we have the overlapping issue of payments made by the corporation for the commissioning of contracts, particularly when contracts are awarded to private companies owned or partially owned by several BBC presenters.

There is one player on the Northern Ireland commissioning pitch whose commissions have been paid millions of pounds in revenue for years. It is now nearly 10 years since the company Third Street Studios first received commissions. Third Street Studios was owned entirely by a BBC presenter, Mr Stephen Nolan, until last year, when a leading bookmaker in Northern Ireland became a person with significant influence in the company. According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, Stephen Nolan

“transferred all shares in his production company to a firm solely controlled by bookmaker Paul McLean.”

The director general of the BBC has indicated that he is favour of all the outside interests of employees being made public. Why would money earned by an employee who also has his own company, which bids for and gets numerous commissions for programmes, not also be disclosed?

The issue of fairness is relevant here, as a number of companies from the independent sector make excellent and innovative programmes but find it difficult to compete when, as regularly happens, a highly paid BBC employee

gets commissions and is then able to advertise them on their own BBC radio programmes. That obviously puts someone from the independent sector at a disadvantage when the next round of bidding for commissioned programmes begins. If the BBC insider, due to excessive advertising on their own behalf, can point to good audience figures and claim they are best positioned to get yet another contract, the independent sector is likely to lose out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate. In previous debates I have raised a number of issues that were slightly different but nonetheless important. Does my hon. Friend agree that although there seems to be an unending budget for investigatory programming, the programming for diversity—in the form of Ulster-Scots programming or Christian shows and episodes—has been cut back beyond recognition? A rebalance of interest needs to take place. Does my hon. Friend accept that point, to which I have brought his attention in the past?

Mr Campbell: Yes, indeed. There has to be diversity in the range of directions that the BBC gets involved in. It is equally important that when programmes of the type my hon. Friend mentioned are commissioned, there needs to be transparency in how they are contracted and shown.

I have raised these issues previously, in debates on transparency in 2017 and on commissioning in 2019. In between those debates, I met senior BBC executives in both Belfast and London. I also met senior executives from the Audit Office and Ofcom to try to ensure that matters would be thoroughly investigated. Movement either ground to a halt or went exceptionally slowly. I get the impression that, just like with the salaries escapade, the BBC feels that if it can grind the process down, the issue will eventually go away. It did not manage that with salaries, and I intend to ensure that it does not with the commissioning of contracts. It is important that licence fee payers can see how much has been earned, the process followed, and how it is discharged—with the responsibility of oversight being within the ambit of the BBC.

On transparency, I understand the arguments about the commercial sensitivity of contracts, but what can the commercial sensitivities possibly be many years after a commission is broadcast? Even the Government have moved from a 30-year rule to a 20-year rule on the publication of documentation, but the BBC still seems to live in an age in which it believes we should never know how much it costs the licence fee payer to fund such an outstanding series as “The Fall”, which was filmed in Belfast and funded in part by Invest NI and Northern Ireland Screen. Series three was commissioned by the controller of BBC 2.

“The Fall” was sold in over 200 countries: in the United States via Netflix; in Australia via BBC First; in Canada via Bravo; in Latin America via DirecTV; in Brazil; in the Republic via RTÉ; across Asia via Fox international channels; and with a multi-territory deal in Germany. It had all the hallmarks of a tremendously successful project funded by the licence fee payer and carried out by the BBC. Why, then, are the details not available, as they are for any other publicly funded project? The commission was broadcast seven years ago and we still do not know how it was done.

The simple message I have for the BBC and the Government today is that if public money is used, every effort should be made to ensure that there is integrity in the system for spending it. Secrecy leads to suspicion; if there is nothing to hide, there should be no secrecy.

I come now to employees' declarations of interest. Previously, I raised a case in which a BBC journalist in Northern Ireland was involved in presenting an investigative programme that was critical of elements of policing. After the programme was aired, I discovered that several years earlier the same journalist had been a serving police officer. She had appeared in court, had been bound over to be of good behaviour, and had left the police shortly after. That was an obvious case in which a BBC executive should have taken a prior decision about the suitability of someone like that fronting a programme that was "critical of policing".

Viewers were of course unaware, at the time of the broadcast, of the journalist's previous history. I mention that because similar types of issues could well emerge if commissioned programmes were to deal with, for example, the topical matter of addictive gambling and Premier League football clubs, many of which have huge gambling companies as sponsors on their shirts. How would a conflict of interest be handled if such issues were to be dealt with by a company in which a leading bookmaker had a controlling interest?

I come now to integrity. During the summer recess I was given a large volume of disturbing internal BBC material, including some from human resources and some text messages between production teams. Most seriously, I received a disturbing and alarming piece of information. The public need to have confidence in the commissioning process, because some of the processes are worth hundreds of thousands—indeed, in some cases millions—of pounds. We have to have confidence in the BBC's internal processes when projects are awarded.

I have been given an account of a BBC internal process: an interview for a highly sought-after job in the production team for "The Stephen Nolan Show". For context, this was a widely listened-to radio show in Northern Ireland at the time, and to work on the programme was a highly prized and much sought-after position. Indeed, a number of notable people in the Northern Ireland media sector applied for the role. Only one person was successful, while at least 10 internal and external candidates lost out.

But the process was rigged. It was not fair and lacked integrity, because the unsuccessful applicants did not necessarily lose out because they were unprepared for the interview process. They lost out because, unlike with the winning candidate, the presenter did not ring them up and give them the interview questions in advance, nor were they treated to a nice meal by the presenter before the interview.

A former BBC employee is prepared to come before this House and testify in Committee that Stephen Nolan corrupted a BBC recruitment process by giving one applicant the interview questions in advance and coaching them on how they should answer questions. I can further inform Members that in October 2018 this former employee wrote to the then BBC Northern Ireland director, Mr Peter Johnston, and told him about the corruption of the process. He is unaware of any investigation or action. The alarming thing is that that same Mr Peter Johnston now leads the investigation into the complaints against Russell Brand here in London.

This is appalling. These are not the actions of what was once a proud bastion of truth and integrity, informing, educating and entertaining without fear or favour. Truth and integrity demand a thorough investigation, with Government Ministers telling the director general that he needs to act, and he needs to act now.

11.13 am

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) on securing the debate and on raising what are important matters. I know that he has campaigned on this issue for many years. I have read his previous debates and parliamentary questions on the subject, and he has been assiduous. In a number of areas, I have considerable sympathy with him. I have been overseeing the BBC for a very long time in one capacity or another, and a number of the issues he raised are ones on which I, too, campaigned.

There are three issues on which we have made great progress, and for which I would like to take some credit, but I absolutely recognise the hon. Gentleman's role. All the issues relate to the area of commissioning. The first is the National Audit Office's access to the BBC. The extent to which the NAO was able to examine the BBC's financial accounts was limited for quite a long time. As he knows, the BBC argued strongly that the NAO should not be given full access, with a succession of what I regarded as somewhat spurious excuses, such as that it would somehow interfere with the BBC's independence from the Government. Well, the BBC is independent of the Government, but that does not mean that the BBC should not be held to account for the fact that it spends a very large amount of public money in the form of the licence fee. I am glad that, in the charter, we ensured that the NAO had full access to the BBC accounts.

The second matter is on the commissioning of programming. Previously, the BBC produced 50% of its content in-house. It was subject to a quota for indie productions of 25%, and then there was something known in the trade as the window of creative competition, or WoCC, which was the remaining 25% that could be opened up to either BBC in-house production or the independent sector. We reached the agreement that the BBC should move towards opening up the entirety of its schedule to competition from BBC production and independent production. The BBC is on track to achieve 100%, I think by 2027, which has provided a huge boost to the independent production sector. It was very strongly welcomed at the time by the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television, the body representing independent producers. Opening this up does mean that the BBC's public money, through the licence fee, is being used to commission programmes from private companies. That obviously needs to be done in a transparent and accountable fashion, which is one of the requirements of the charter, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry quoted.

The third area, which we also addressed in the last charter renewal—I, too, have campaigned on this issue and the hon. Gentleman also raised it—is transparency over the payment of public money in the form of salaries to high-earning BBC employees. Initially, the BBC resisted very strongly, believing that it would make it harder for them to recruit and that it would somehow

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

give an unfair advantage to their competitors, but eventually, the BBC agreed to this at a higher threshold than was ultimately introduced. Actually, the Prime Minister who appointed me to oversee the task, David Cameron, agreed to that higher threshold, but when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) became Prime Minister, she insisted on bringing it back down to £150,000. It has risen in line with inflation, so I think the figure for the publication of salaries is now £178,000.

The publication had an unforeseen consequence, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry mentioned. When I insisted on the publication of information about individuals earning high salaries, for the reasons that he gave, I did so on the basis that I thought it right that the licence fee payer should know where large amounts of the money were going. We did not realise that it would also expose the shocking gender pay gap between the salaries of men and women doing essentially the same jobs at the BBC. It had the consequence of making the BBC address that issue as well, and that was a very good demonstration of why transparency is so important.

The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about the way in which the BBC has to publish the names of its employees directly earning money over a certain threshold, but a number of people obtain payment from the Government through the intermediary of a private production company—a number of individuals have set that up. I agree with him that it is not entirely satisfactory that one person who earns a large amount of money from the BBC has their name published, and another does not, just because the way in which the BBC pays them is done through a slightly different route. I hope that is something we will continue to look at. I raised the issue when I was chairing the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, and I have raised it since, and I hope the BBC will continue to look at ways in which it can increase transparency, which is the right way forward.

The charter increased the level of independent oversight of the BBC by bringing in Ofcom as an independent regulator. We have a system whereby complaints about the BBC go first to the BBC, but can then be escalated to Ofcom. The Government does not get involved in that process. I think that is right, and for that reason, I cannot directly respond to some of the hon. Gentleman's specific complaints. Those are for the BBC to examine. I agree that he has raised some important matters that I hope the BBC will look at, and indeed that Ofcom could investigate as well.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware, as is written into the charter, that the Government said there would be a review of the governance arrangements—called the mid-term review—that needs to be completed by 2024. We will publish the outcome of that very soon actually. While I cannot reveal that at this stage, I can say that one of the areas that has been raised with the Government a number of times, and which the hon. Gentleman raised again today, is the way in which the BBC has dealt with complaints and the fact that so few have been upheld. The Government's view is that that process needs to be strengthened. We will have more to say about how we believe it can be strengthened—the BBC has agreed that it should be strengthened—when we publish the mid-term review.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the Minister's attendance and for what he has just shared. A perception arising from some issues that my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) raised is that some people in the BBC are too popular to be criticised, too successful to be touched, and too important in the ratings game to have issues raised about their conduct. Some of the points that my hon. Friend made touch on questionable, if not corruptible, practices around commissioning and around individuals and their behaviour. The Minister is right that Ofcom is there for when the BBC has completed its investigations, but Ofcom looks very particularly at regulatory matters. He mentioned the ongoing review, but can he give us any assurance that there will be a level of stringent and independent oversight in the BBC and through its management structure, so that when such issues are raised, which touch on malpractice or questionable practice around the allocation of financing and the commissioning of resources, the public and we all know there is integrity in the process of investigating them?

Sir John Whittingdale: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I agree that nobody who is in receipt of public money or who holds a senior position in a publicly owned and publicly funded organisation should be exempt from scrutiny to make sure that they are carrying out their functions properly, and that any concerns around that need to be investigated.

As for whether anybody is too popular or too senior to be examined or held to account, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the highest-paid BBC employee is Gary Lineker, and there has been quite a lot of controversy over some of his remarks. That is absolutely right and, as a consequence, the BBC has recently carried out a further consideration of their social media guidelines for highly paid staff and has brought those into play, partially as a result of some of those controversies. That matter is very different from the kind of issues that the hon. Gentleman raised. They relate to allegations that have been received about possible corrupt behaviour, and, obviously, that would also need to be investigated. The particular show that he referred to is presented by the fourth highest-paid person at the BBC. That, again, is another reason why a large amount of public money is spent, and we need to be satisfied.

As I said, this is not a matter that the Government can or should investigate, but there are independent bodies that do so. The first port of call I suggest the Gentleman might talk to is the BBC board member for Northern Ireland, Mr Michael Smyth. He was recently appointed and has taken up his post. Part of his role is to oversee the BBC's activities in Northern Ireland, as well as to act as a member of the board as a whole. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will draw his concerns to Mr Smyth's attention, and also take advantage of the BBC first complaints process.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the individual who runs the editorial standards and guidelines committee, but there are also independent board members who sit on that committee. He could certainly draw his concerns to their attention. Ultimately, as we have discussed, the NAO has full access under the charter. If there are concerns about the way in which public money has been spent, that, too, is a matter that the NAO could investigate.

I do not in any way suggest that the hon. Gentleman has not raised some serious concerns; I hope they will be examined to his satisfaction. I think he is best placed to pursue them through the routes that I have suggested, but I am grateful to him for raising these matters this morning.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Future of the NHS

[MARK PRITCHARD *IN THE CHAIR*]

2.30 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the NHS.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful for having been granted this debate, and I thank Members for attending.

The highly respected professor of epidemiology and public health Sir Michael Marmot said earlier this year:

“If you had the hypothesis that the Government was seeking to destroy the national health service—if that were your hypothesis—all the data that we’re seeing are consistent with that hypothesis.”

When asked if we are stumbling or sleepwalking towards a privatised healthcare system, he added:

“I have no special insight into what motivates Ministers, but they are not behaving as if they want to preserve our NHS”.

A few months ago, Professor Philip Banfield, the British Medical Association’s chair of council, said:

“This government has to demonstrate that it is not setting out to destroy the NHS, which it is failing to do at this point in time...It is a very common comment that I hear, from both doctors and patients, that this government is consciously running the NHS down.”

Professor Banfield also commented that the NHS is in a state of “managed decline” because recent Governments have made “a conscious political decision” to deny it adequate resources and not to tackle staff shortages. I think that he is absolutely right.

Legislative change brought in by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government in 2012, and by the Conservatives in 2022, fragmented the NHS and increased opportunities for privatisation. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 allowed NHS foundation trusts to, in effect, earn 49% of their income from treating private patients, and the Health and Care Act 2022 allows representatives of private companies to sit on integrated care partnerships and so play a part in preparing the integrated care strategy for an area, influencing where huge sums of public money will be spent.

It is underfunding, however, that is proving to be the Conservatives’ greatest tactic when it comes to undermining the NHS. The report “The Rational Policy-Maker’s Guide to the NHS”, published in July by The 99% Organisation, presents statistics based on research by Appleby and Gainsbury on the average annual change in per capita health spending by UK Governments since 1979, adjusted for population and demographic factors. The stark differences in commitment to the NHS along party lines are clear to see.

Under Labour between 1997 and 2010, there was an average annual increase in per capita health spending of 5.67%. Between 2010 and 2015, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government oversaw an average annual reduction of 0.07%. Between 2015 and 2021, under the Conservatives, there was an average annual reduction of 0.03%. This Conservative Government’s committed spend up to 2024 represents an average annual increase of just 2.05%.

Put simply, Labour in government has increased per capita health spending on average significantly more than Conservative Governments. Public satisfaction levels

[Margaret Greenwood]

have reflected the success of that approach. Public satisfaction in the NHS was at its highest, at 70%, in 2010, the year Labour left office. In 2022, after over a decade of Conservative government, it fell to a record low of 29%. It is no coincidence that satisfaction plummeted following more than a decade of the Conservatives' being in power and failing to give the NHS the funding it needs.

"The Rational Policy-Maker's Guide to the NHS" uses respected international data produced by the Commonwealth Fund in 2014 to show that, among the countries studied, the UK's has often been the best-ranked healthcare system for effectiveness, equity and efficiency. The report also demonstrates how the UK's spending on healthcare, which by 2009 had caught up with that of many of our peers, has drifted back far below the average for a developed-world country. For example, we spend less as a percentage of GDP than Canada, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Our spending has not kept pace with the combination of inflation, population growth and population ageing. If we continue to underspend, performance will continue to be poor. Nigel Edwards, the chief executive of the Nuffield Trust, points out in the foreword to the report that

"the inability of too many of those in policy-making circles to recognise that underfunding the NHS—quite apart from any moral arguments against it—is not an economically sustainable strategy. Since 2010, the focus has been containing expenditure; the results of this are now very evident".

The report asserts that

"the fundamental business model of the UK NHS is better than that of any other in a high-income country,"

and it puts forward the view that

"the rational strategy is to recommit to the fundamental model of the NHS, fund it properly and introduce operational improvements over time".

That makes a great deal of sense.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The hon. Lady is saying that more money needs to be put into the NHS. It is receiving record investment this year—more than it has in its history. Where does she anticipate that extra money coming from? Does she want to move money from other Departments into the NHS, or to increase taxation, or to increase borrowing?

Margaret Greenwood: First, in challenging the hon. Gentleman's opening remark, I refer him to the point earlier in my speech when I spoke about the Government's current spending commitment. I also ask him to listen to the rest of my speech, as I will come on to the economy.

It is not the fundamental model of the NHS that is broken; it is the fact that it has been underfunded that has led to us to where we are now. As is clear for all to see, we are at a point of crisis. Waiting lists for routine treatments recently hit a record high of 7.75 million, with more than 9,000 people waiting for more than 18 months. It is truly devastating that last year, more than 120,000 people in England died while on NHS waiting lists for hospital treatment. That is double the number who died in 2017-18. There are over 125,000 staffing vacancies, including more than 43,000 vacancies

in nursing and more than 10,000 medical staff vacancies. Many of the staff who are in post are burned out, with not enough colleagues to work alongside them.

The "Fit for the Future" report published by the Royal College of General Practitioners last autumn revealed that the situation in primary care is dire. It found that 42% of GPs in England are either likely or very likely to leave the profession over the next five years. As of August 2023, there were 27,246 fully qualified full-time equivalent GPs in England, 3.1% less than in 2019 and 7.4% less than in 2015. That downward trend simply cannot go on.

Last week, the Care Quality Commission rated almost two thirds of maternity services in England either "inadequate" or "requires improvement" for the safety of care and said:

"The overarching picture is one of a service and staff under huge pressure."

Cancer Research UK has pointed out that cancer waiting time targets continue to be missed in England, and recent months have seen some of the worst performances on record.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): With regard to cancer waiting lists, the Rutherford Cancer Centre, a specialist proton beam centre in my constituency, has been lying idle for almost two years, since Rutherford centres across the country went into liquidation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the NHS should take control of the Rutherford centres, and that that in itself would help to reduce waiting lists for cancer treatment?

Margaret Greenwood: I am not familiar with the centre that my hon. Friend speaks of, but I do believe that the NHS should control the assets and make sure that the service is there for people when they need it. I would like to hear more about the centre from him at another time.

By deliberately underfunding the NHS, the Conservatives have undermined it as a comprehensive, universal public service. Their desire to privatise the NHS has been evident for a very long time. It is a shocking agenda to essentially destroy our most cherished institution.

This determination to dismantle the NHS, which has been proven to be a world leader in terms of effectiveness, equity and efficiency, is not only immensely damaging to patients and the staff who work in the service, but damaging to the economy. Last year, an estimated 185.6 million working days were lost because of sickness or injury—a record high. Similarly, the Office for Budget Responsibility reported in July that the 15 to 64-year-old economic inactivity rate

"has increased in the UK by 0.5 percentage points"

since the covid pandemic.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Lady is being very disparaging about the private sector. Has she ever worked in the private sector?

Margaret Greenwood: I have not worked in the health service in the private sector—

Daniel Kawczynski: Has she worked in the private sector?

Margaret Greenwood: I did write a book once, and the publisher was a private organisation. I am not disparaging the private sector. The point I am making is that the national health service is a public service.

Daniel Kawczynski: She has never worked in the private sector—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make another intervention, then he can try to do so. If the hon. Lady—

Daniel Kawczynski: The question is simple: has she ever worked in the private sector?

Margaret Greenwood: The answer, clearly, is yes, I have. What I am talking about is the national health service, which was set up as a public service—publicly run and publicly owned. That is what we are talking about here today. I am going to make more progress. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister wants to intervene, he can.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Let me say something for the orderliness of the debate. Understandably, emotions run high around NHS issues, but there is a convention and there are protocols. If people want to make contributions they can make interventions or speeches, but Members may intervene only if the hon. Lady wants to take their intervention. I just caution everybody that I will not have any unruliness in this debate. The debate has been tabled and the hon. Lady's constituents have a right to be heard.

Margaret Greenwood: Thank you, Mr Pritchard.

I was talking about ill health being a big factor behind inactivity in the labour market, and I will repeat a point. The Office for Budget Responsibility reported in July that the economic inactivity rate for 15 to 64-year-olds has increased in the UK by 0.5 percentage points since the covid pandemic, and ill health has consistently been a bigger factor behind inactivity in the UK than in most other advanced economies. The Government must understand that a Government that fails the NHS fails the wider economy.

As well as focusing on the importance of investing in the NHS for the good of the economy, the Government must focus on tackling poverty and inequality, not only as a matter of social justice but because we know that poverty is a key cause of ill health. As the King's Fund has noted, poverty

“drives inequality in health outcomes and increases use of health services.”

In its recent research on the state of child poverty, the charity *Buttle UK* said that it had received some of the most distressing accounts of children in need that it had ever seen. *Buttle* was keen to stress that it was

“talking not just about significant hardship but life-changing and life-limiting deep poverty.”

Today we read that the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* has found that more than 1 million children in the UK experienced destitution last year, meaning that their families could not afford to feed, clothe or clean them adequately, or keep them warm. This extreme hardship will have a profound impact on the individuals concerned and it will lead to greater demands on the NHS. The *King's Fund* points out that

“poverty is...expensive, in direct costs to the state and in lost opportunity and productivity.”

We need to see a virtuous cycle of improvement when it comes to addressing poverty, funding the NHS and supporting economic growth. Sadly, under this Government we are seeing the reverse. Will the Minister take up this issue of the inter-relationship between poverty, NHS provision and the economy with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and with the Chancellor, and impress on them the importance of significantly increasing funding for the NHS and tackling the deep poverty faced by many people in our constituencies? The Chancellor will have the opportunity with his autumn statement to increase spending in the NHS, and to tackle poverty and inequality, and I ask the Minister to urge him to do that.

The impact of the Government's squeeze on funding is being felt throughout the NHS. In May, it was reported that integrated care systems will have to make average efficiency savings of almost 6% to meet their financial requirements. According to the *Health Service Journal*, one integrated care board said of its financial plan for 2023-24:

“We do not have confidence that we can deliver it in full but are committed to trying.”

Sir Julian Hartley, the chief executive of NHS Providers, has described

“the efficiency challenge for 2023-24”

as being

“significantly harder than 2022-23”,

while one ICS director described their system as running out of the non-recurrent savings that made balancing the books last year “vaguely possible”. It is clear that the Government are simply not giving the NHS the necessary funding to meet the needs of patients.

Before I conclude, I want to pay tribute to those who work in the national health service. As I have touched on, many of them are exhausted because of the staffing shortages and many work beyond the end of their shifts because there are not enough staff to take over from them at handover times. They do so because they care deeply about the welfare of their patients.

I will specifically mention clinical support workers in my constituency in Wirral, who are currently on strike over back pay to recognise the years that they have been working above their pay band. I have joined them on the picket line in solidarity and listened to their concerns. They are immensely hard-working people who care deeply about their patients, and they deserve fair back pay that reflects the additional duties that they have been carrying out. I urge their employer, Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, to continue engaging with the union, Unison, and to provide an offer that is acceptable to it and to staff.

What is the future of the NHS? I believe that the NHS faces an existential threat from the Government's privatisation agenda and underfunding of the service. Patients and staff continue to suffer. There are further potential implications for staff as a result of the 2022 Act, not least the provision to remove professions from statutory regulation. The new NHS payment scheme contains rules for payment mechanisms, one of which is “local payment arrangements”, whereby

“providers and commissioners locally agree an appropriate payment approach.”

[Margaret Greenwood]

There are real concerns that that will impact national pay bargaining and the scope of “Agenda for Change”. Can the Minister give a commitment that the NHS payment scheme has not had and will not have any negative impact on the pay rates of “Agenda for Change”, pensions and other terms and conditions of all eligible NHS staff? Can he also commit to protecting national collective bargaining across the NHS? I appreciate that there is a lot of detail here; I would really like it if the Minister wrote to me on this point.

Without such a commitment, I fear that we could see a race to the bottom in the pay, terms and conditions of NHS staff, and so too an erosion of the quality of healthcare that we as patients receive over time. We need a Labour Government that will, among other things, improve GP access, boost mental health support, train thousands of extra staff every year, provide mental health support in every school and hubs in every community, and reform social care with a national care service. The next Government must also significantly increase health spending each year. History tells us that this works. It works in terms of the equity, efficiency and effectiveness of the NHS, and it works in terms of public satisfaction.

The NHS is arguably our country’s greatest achievement. We know that it is there for us, free at the point of use, if we become ill or have an accident—or at least it should be. Under the Conservatives, the service is being decimated, but there is still time for them to change tack, turn the situation around and give the NHS the funding it needs. Will the Minister impress upon the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care the importance of boosting investment in the NHS so that the needs of patients can be met and the economy can draw on a healthy workforce? Will he also call on the Secretary of State to be ambitious in his dealings with the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement?

Finally, I want to thank health campaigners across the country who are fighting to save our NHS from privatisation and obliteration. I thank them for all that they do to fight for an NHS that is a comprehensive, universal, publicly owned and publicly run service that is there for all of us when we need it. People believe in the NHS, and I believe it is vital that we save it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Anna Firth, could hon. Members check that their mobiles are switched off? There is one on at the moment that is receiving messages.

2.47 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important debate. I want to put on record straightaway my thanks to all the hard-working hospital and ambulance staff at Southend Hospital, and to everybody working in the NHS across Southend and Leigh-on-Sea—they do a fantastic job.

I want to start with the question of money. I do not agree at all with the characterisation of this Government as one that does not invest in the NHS. This Government are putting record investment into our NHS. Using the latest figures for which we have comparable international

data—I noticed that the hon. Lady was selective about the years she chose—public spending on healthcare in this country totalled £177 billion in 2018-19, the equivalent of 8% of GDP. That is more than both the OECD and EU14 averages. Healthcare spending has only gone up since then. We are now spending £182 billion, amounting to £3,409 for every man, woman and child in 2022. This is simply not a Government who are not investing in their NHS.

I think we would all accept that reform is always welcome. Any attempts to talk about reform are generally met by the Opposition with accusations of privatisation or of needing to spend yet more money. I cannot help but observe that the hon. Member for Wirral West does not disappoint: we have heard both those accusations this afternoon. Let me give a recent quote from a senior politician:

“The reason I want to reform the health service is...I want to preserve it. I think if we don’t reform the health service we will be in managed decline”.

I hope that the hon. Lady recognises those words, as they are the words of her own party leader.

This is what people get from a Conservative Government. It is a Conservative Government who have funded the NHS more and who promise reform, and that is the way we will get better outcomes for all our constituents. One thing I will say, though, is that that investment must make its way down to our individual hospitals and NHS services.

That brings me to my first point. My hon. Friend the Minister is well aware that £118 million of capital investment was promised to South Essex hospitals in 2017. The lion’s share—£52 million—of that was earmarked for Southend Hospital. The Minister is also aware that I have raised this issue—I have termed it the missing millions—in Parliament 10 times and with Ministers on numerous other occasions. It is utterly incredible that here we are, more than six years later, and that money has still not, finally, made its way down to my local trust.

Daniel Kawczynski: Is my hon. Friend aware that the state-run, socialist model of the NHS has meant that despite my local NHS trust in Shropshire securing more than £312 million for modernisation of A&E services seven years ago, construction has still not started in Shropshire? The socialists believe in state-controlled services, but they are the most inefficient imaginable.

Anna Firth: My hon. Friend makes an extremely valid point. It is how we get the investment through the state bureaucracy that is so important. I thank the Minister very much indeed for his support last year, when I secured an advance payment of £8 million, which is already going towards improvements at Southend’s emergency department in preparation for the winter. But I stress once again, using the famous words of Cuba Gooding Jr that I have already said in the main Chamber but have not yet said in this one: when, please, are the Government going to “show me the money”, because Southend Hospital and Southend residents deserve it?

I want to move on to the future of the NHS. The focus has to be on prevention and on community care. The old adage that prevention is better than cure is clearly the way forward, and I want to focus on some

examples from Southend. I recently visited the fracture clinic at Southend Hospital, which is about to launch a new fracture liaison service next spring. That will be the first FLS in the UK to focus across one area: it will be a consistent service, providing consistent care, across Mid and South Essex. The figures show that, over five years, the FLS will help to prevent 550 fractures, save the trust £472,000 and also save 1,300 bed days every year. Every single pound that the NHS is investing in the FLS will save £3.26 for our NHS. Outstanding, groundbreaking, innovative services like that are the future of our NHS, and I will just remark again that it started in Southend West.

The second thing that I want to talk to the Minister about is community pharmacies, which already save 619,000 GP appointments every week; roughly 32 million appointments are saved per year. We must continue to move services out of secondary care and into the community, and community pharmacies are a perfect example. We have the brilliant Belfairs Pharmacy and French's pharmacy in my constituency. Both are run by an inspirational pharmacist, Mr Mohamed Fayyaz Haji, known to us as Fizz. The Minister will be well aware of everything that community pharmacies can do, but Fizz provides cholesterol and blood pressure checks, health advice, prescribing, ear syringing, community phlebotomy, earlier diagnosis measures such as measuring prostate-specific antigen levels, electrocardiograms, and ultrasound screening for sports injuries and pregnant women. That is a model for community pharmacy around the country, which, again, has to be the future of our NHS.

The final point that I want to talk about is hospice care and care homes. In Southend West we have an average age that is 20% higher than England's as a whole. The triple whammy of people living longer but not necessarily in good health, coupled with more and more people working full time, means that good quality nursing care and end-of-life treatment will increasingly become a necessity for all of us.

Hospices such as Havens Hospices in Southend perform an incredibly compassionate service for our community, which is incredibly good value. They could play a vital role in reducing pressure on the NHS. They are an exemplar, and the NHS should look at the hospice service and learn from it, just as it should look and learn from brilliant care homes such as Cavell Lodge, which is managed by Michael Daley.

Regrettably, awareness of the role and value of our hospices and care homes often does not come until the point that it is needed. Hospices in particular are funded primarily, as the Minister knows, through charitable giving. Havens Hospices need £124,000 each week to provide their services. Overall, UK hospices are budgeting for a deficit of £186 million per year. Hospices save the NHS money in the long term by reducing pressures on hospital beds, ensuring our hospice sector—I would also add our care sector—not only survives but thrives. It is a win-win for all us.

I do not believe that more money is the answer or has to be the future of the NHS. A focus on prevention, on more care in the community and on an integrated health service that takes full advantage of the learnings available in the charitable and sometimes private sector can provide solutions to reduce pressure on the frontline services. All of that is deliverable, but only a Conservative Government will deliver it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Given the interest in this debate, I will impose a six-minute time limit. I call Marie Rimmer.

2.57 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing this vital debate today. I also wish to pay tribute to all those who work in St Helens South and Whiston hospitals and those who work in social care for St Helens Borough Council, as well as all the other agencies—police, housing—involved in our health and social care integrated service.

Our NHS is struggling: waiting lists are far too long; cancer survival rates are too low; and too many patients are kept in hospital when they could be, and want to be, at home. None of that can be fixed unless the NHS and social care is staffed to adequate levels. Right now that is not the case. Far too many medical professionals who are trained here are leaving the service. Not enough doctors and nurses are being trained here at home. That is a problem not just for recruitment but for retention.

Recruiting new staff is not good enough if the experienced are leaving. That is true of most professions, yet for some reason the Government are not doing more to retain the skills and expertise we so badly need. It takes years to train a doctor. Once they leave the NHS, they take their years of training and expertise with them. Instead, the Government try to plug the gaps by spending £3 billion a year on temporary or agency staff. A short-term solution to a long-term problem does not work. The UK is left with fewer practising physicians and nurses per person than the EU average.

One way the Government are attempting to fill the gap is by hiring physician associates, who are expected to perform duties similar to a doctor's without the required training. Physician associates are not empowered to prescribe, so doctors are charged with the duty of prescribing for the patients. That is one of the many problems that our NHS faces caused by the workforce crisis. The remedy to the crisis is a two-pronged approach. First and foremost, the number of medical school places needs to be dramatically increased. The same needs to be done for nursing and midwifery clinical placements. The only sensible and viable long-term solution to the NHS staffing crisis is to train more homegrown professionals and to value them. Medical school placements need to be prioritised in current understaffed areas to help reduce the health inequality that exists across our country, which covid tragically put a spotlight on. Any long-term NHS workforce strategy needs to address that issue.

The second part of the approach needs to be retention. There is no better short-term solution than to keep as many trained medical professionals in the NHS as possible, yet this is more than just a short-term solution. Keeping experienced and skilled staff in the NHS helps us both now and in the future, and is about more than simply money. The general working terms and conditions, whether that is work-life balance, job flexibility or pension allowance, need looking at.

Yes, it costs money to improve the living standards and working lives of our medical professionals. What costs more money is having to recruit temporary or

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

agency staff to plug the staffing gaps and losing the existing expertise in the workforce. What costs more money is having to send patients to private appointments due to lack of NHS staff.

Our doctors deserve respect. The title “junior doctor” can be misleading to the public. Junior doctors are trained professionals who could have 10 years, or up to 20 years, under their belts. The term “junior doctor” does not give doctors the respect they deserve with their skills and experience. Adopting the use of “postgraduate doctor” or another term would be more befitting and give doctors more of the respect they rightly deserve. The Government should be speaking to those doctors to find out how to improve their working conditions.

Believe me, I was horrified when I learned of the working conditions, and I thought I knew quite a bit about health. In some hospitals, the NHS staff—doctors—are lucky if they have a mess like a sixth form might have. Surely our doctors are worth more than that. Solving the NHS workforce crisis cannot just be a one-off solution. There needs to be continuous assessment of our future needs as a country, so we do not find ourselves in this situation again.

It takes years to train medical professionals, so the Government must plan continuously and years in advance. That is what a Labour Government will do; Labour will provide the short-term solutions along with a long-term strategy to ensure our NHS is never in the state that the current Government have driven it to. Looking after the health of the nation must be the top priority of any Government; looking after the health and wellbeing of all NHS staff is simply a must.

3.2 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I pay tribute to the doctors, nurses, porters, kitchen staff and many other hard-working people at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, who do an outstanding job for my constituency of Shrewsbury and Atcham. My concerns are with management of the NHS trust and the chief executive. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) and I, with others, secured £312 million seven years ago—the biggest investment in the NHS in Shropshire for decades—for the modernisation and reconfiguration of A&E services.

All Members of Parliament will recognise that there is nothing more important for their constituents than the safety and care of their families when they go to A&E. Imagine: we secured £312 million for that modernisation of our local hospital trust seven years ago, and still not a single brick has been laid. Those were not proposals envisaged by politicians or Ministers, but by 300 local surgeons, who were at the forefront of championing this modernisation and reconfiguration. Those 300 local surgeons are at the coalface of providing those services every day to our constituents. Yet, the NHS trust has allowed itself to be bullied by the Labour leader of Telford and Wrekin Council to prevent the changes taking place.

The Labour leader of the council does not have a single medical qualification, yet under the society we live in he can prevent those changes, which are propagated as being absolutely essential by local surgeons at the

coalface of providing those services. There is no comprehension of the interdependence between these two hospitals for citizens across the whole of Shropshire and mid-Wales. Let us not forget that in Shropshire—you are a Shropshire MP and will know this, Mr Pritchard—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. For the record, while I am chairing, I am completely neutral. I take the hon. Member’s point, but this is a generic debate. He is talking about specifics, and the Chair is completely neutral.

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes. These two hospitals, 12 miles apart, cover the whole of Shropshire and mid-Wales, yet the Labour leader of Telford and Wrekin Council refuses to recognise their interdependence. No decision has been taken by the trust for seven years. I have attended hundreds of meetings with the local trust over that time to find out when it will finally take the decision to start construction. “It’s coming”, “It’s just around the corner” and “It’s nearly there”—that is what we have heard for the past seven years. That lack of accountability and transparency would never be tolerated in the private sector, and I speak as somebody who spent 13 years working in the private sector before becoming a Member of Parliament.

There is a massive turnaround of staff at the local NHS trust. I think I am on my seventh or eighth chief executive; there is no accountability, transparency or sense of urgency. Meanwhile, A&E services continue to deteriorate in our local hospital trust. Shropshire Community Health NHS Trust and Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust are the worst performing A&E trusts in the whole United Kingdom. As a Member of Parliament, I get heartbreaking letters from constituents about the difficulties that their family members have experienced in our local A&E services, because that £312 million has not been spent and implemented.

I speak as the only Conservative Member of Parliament to have been born in a communist country, where the state controlled everything. That is what my antipathy to this state control is rooted in. The socialist model created in the 1940s leads to inefficiency, poor value for money and corruption. We need to create the right regulatory and taxation framework to allow the private sector to thrive in this country. I completely disagree with the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood); we need to allow private sector hospitals to thrive and to take on the NHS, and ultimately say to citizens, “If you need an operation, we will send you to a private hospital and pay for your operation there.” We cannot continue to allow this level of negligence, corruption and inefficiency, with £130 billion into the NHS just this year alone and horrendous outcomes. We need privatisation and competition for the NHS.

3.8 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing this important debate and for her tireless defence of the NHS. This year we celebrate 75 years of the NHS. It is the greatest achievement of this country and of the Labour party: delivering a universal healthcare system based on need, not profit. We know the fight for this system is now existential.

Thirteen years of austerity and the systematic defunding of public services have left our communities facing abject poverty and inequalities—conditions not dissimilar to those of the 1940s when the NHS was first introduced. Health inequalities are rampant and growing: children living in poverty are now diagnosed with Victorian diseases, life expectancy is falling for the first time in recent memory, children's height is now reducing year on year, and chronic ill health, both physical and mental, is increasing. Systematic underfunding, private sector plundering, decades of privatisation via the back door and the fragmentation of diagnostics and treatment services have brought the NHS to its knees.

Before the NHS existed, there was a complex, fragmented and chaotic patchwork of services. This led to poor and inconsistent practices motivated by profit, rather than best practice. This is the direction in which many on the Government Benches are now pushing, with demands for a public-private partnership and insurance-based funding models—the privatisation of sections of the health service being touted under the guise of reform. It did not work then, and it will not work now. The evidence is clear: health services are of a better quality, more equitable and more cost-effective when nationally planned and provided by democratically accountable public bodies with expertise.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) has talked about the benefits of the private sector. I want to point out that Carillion, which was building an NHS hospital in Liverpool, went bust. This had a significant impact on the delivery of services to my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside.

We must repeal the Health and Care Act 2022 and reverse and eliminate the US-style integrated care systems which enable corporate influence over policy and profiteering, at the expense of patient care and workers' pay. We must tackle health inequalities head on and push back attempts to establish a two-tier health system, which would only entrench these inequalities yet further. We must completely abolish the private sector in the delivery of NHS services and instead restore much needed funding levels, with a serious programme to recruit and retain the staff needed to end the exodus of NHS staff.

Only with this bold action to restore the fundamental model of the NHS—universal provision free at the point of need—can we once again make the NHS a world-leading institution. I will end by thanking all the hard-working staff across the NHS services in my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside.

3.12 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is an honour to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing such an important debate.

The NHS was set up in 1948. It was the first of its kind in the western world, leading the way for free medical care—what a great achievement. So many societies still wish that they had what we have.

As has been said by other hon. Members, we have already had 13 years of the Conservatives leading the way—unfortunately with much failure and neglect. We do not have enough doctors or nurses, there are long waiting lists for appointments, and primary care is also

not what it should be. People are finding it very difficult to get a GP appointment, there are no NHS dentists, and even pharmacies are really struggling to ensure they have enough medicines to give to people. In addition, mental health services remain the poor relative to the NHS. Under this Government, there has never been enough investment in NHS mental health services.

I will focus my remarks, conversations and questions on the future of the NHS for sickle cell patients. Sickle cell disease is a serious condition which predominantly occurs in people with African and Caribbean backgrounds, and approximately 15,000 to 18,000 people live with it. It has been two years since the “No One's Listening” report was published by the Sickle Cell Society, which found evidence of serious failings. Failings were found in acute services, and there was evidence of attitudes “underpinned by racism”, meaning that patients were not treated with care. They were ignored, often not believed, and not given the pain relief and oxygen they needed. Unfortunately, we have seen many fatalities because of this.

In January, the NHS Race and Health Observatory found that sickle cell patients undergoing a crisis were deprioritised and undermined. This is in keeping with the “No One's Listening” report, which presented evidence regarding the death of Evan Nathan Smith in North Middlesex University Hospital in April 2019. The inquest found that Evan's death would not have happened if it were not for failings in the care that he received. It is shocking every time I say that and every time I mention that.

I have worked with Government Ministers, the NHS and other important bodies to get implemented in full the recommendations that have come out of the “No One's Listening” report. I ask the Minister to go further and to focus more on those recommendations. If we are looking at the public purse, which has been mentioned a few times in this Chamber, we see that it is more cost-effective to put in preventative measures that help and support people to not get into a crisis where they need to be in hospital.

I therefore ask the Minister: will the NHS develop individual care plans in partnership with the sickle cell patient? Will all NHS trusts require haematology teams to be told when a sickle cell patient accesses outpatient or inpatient care? Will the Minister instruct all integrated care systems to develop plans to provide community care in this area? Will the Minister ensure specialist training opportunities for nurses? Will the Department co-ordinate work between organisations and senior sickle cell service representatives to engage in effective workforce planning for sickle cell services?

If the Minister cannot answer all of those questions towards the end of this debate, I ask him to put it in writing, to do his best, and to also attend the all-party parliamentary group on sickle cell and thalassaemia, which I chair.

Will Quince *indicated assent.*

Janet Daby: The Minister is nodding, so I take that as an indication that he is willing to do that, which is really good. I also implore him to consider that sickle cell is a long-life disease, a hidden disease, a disability, and very serious.

[Janet Daby]

The disease, however, has not had the research funding that it really needs. Looking at people with cystic fibrosis and haemophilia, we that they have had so much more funding invested into medicines to improve the treatment of those illnesses. The National Institute for Health and Care Research funds research programmes, but sickle cell research is woefully inadequate compared with the diseases that I have already mentioned. According to the data produced by that organisation, approximately 18,000 people are living with sickle cell, compared with the 10,000 that are living with cystic fibrosis, but in 2017-18 over a million pounds more was spent on research for cystic fibrosis. In the present day, 2022-23, still over a million pounds more is being spent on research for cystic fibrosis compared with sickle cell. That is entirely unacceptable, especially when there are more people living with sickle cell. I do not wish to take away funding from other research, but I do want equality of funding. I am sure the Minister also wants this as well.

As I draw to a close, I have already mentioned that prevention has to be the ultimate way to help people live a good quality of life and to keep them out of hospital, and it also helps to take of care of the public purse. In conclusion, the NHS is a wonderful creation that has helped every single person in this Chamber, and indeed every single person in our country.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I am afraid that we are going to have to restrict the last two Back Bench contributions to five minutes each.

3.19 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. The NHS is one of our country's defining achievements. From the ashes of the second world war, we built a world-leading health service, delivering free care at the point of use for everyone in the country. My points today are going to focus on waiting times, dentistry and the link to social care.

In recent years, this grand vision has been steadily eroded. More and more people are struggling to get the care they need, and waiting lists continue to spiral. As of two weeks ago, 7.75 million people were on NHS waiting lists. Nearly 9,000 people in England are estimated to have been waiting more than 18 months to start their treatment, while the number of people waiting for more than a year was just under 400,000. I can think of specific examples. I represent over 75,000 people in my part of Devon, one of whom is David Crompton from near Bampton. David is a deer farmer, and he needs to be mobile to do his job. He needs a knee replacement. He wants to be useful to the economy and to society, but he has been told that it will probably be two years before he gets a knee replacement.

With cancer waiting times, the situation is little better. Every single cancer waiting time target was missed, and ambulance and A&E waiting times increased. This is a shocking situation, which will only lead to more long-term problems. We know that every day that someone waits to start treatment, or every time that someone is stuck in the back of an ambulance or an A&E department, it is because there is not a bed for them to be transferred to, which leads to worse outcomes. Then, of course, long-term health conditions can develop.

Obviously, this is not just a problem in hospitals; it is also a problem in other areas, such as primary care and social care. On primary care, the Liberal Democrats are calling for 8,000 more GPs. A very astute constituent of mine, a medicine student called Jonty Eaton-Hart, wrote to me recently. He has written a lot on rural and remote health. He pointed out that at the moment in general practice, the situation is almost similar to that of a frog being boiled in a pot, whereby there is so much pressure now on people working in general practice that at some point the frog is going to hop out of the boiling water. Retention of staff is absolutely key.

As I say, Jonty has written a lot about rural areas. In rural areas such as my corner of Devon, the very notion of NHS dentistry is another area of health that feels like some sort of vaguely recalled legend from years gone by, with people being left in agony because they cannot get an appointment. So many constituents have written to me complaining that they have to pay huge sums to travel long distances. But if people cannot travel long distances or cannot pay the large sums required for private treatment, then they have to suffer in agony.

This Conservative Government simply cannot go on as if nothing is wrong. It is plain that the dental contract needs reform, but the fact that they are not reforming it properly suggests that they simply do not care. They cannot go on pretending that somehow dentistry is available everywhere on the NHS; that is simply not the case in rural areas.

Another area that needs a major rethink is the way in which social care is integrated into our national health service. Of course, such integration has notionally happened now that we have a Department called the Department of Health and Social Care, but actually that is just rhetorical; we are not seeing proper integration of health and social care.

The Government have repeatedly shelved plans to overhaul social care and instead are content to tinker round the edges while people are unable to get the care they need. We have seen chronic workplace shortages; there are over 150,000 vacancies in adult social care. Yet the Government have repeatedly rejected Liberal Democrat proposals for a carer's minimum wage, which would see an uplift of £2 per hour in the minimum wage paid in these crucial social care jobs.

The Liberal Democrats reckon that investing an extra £5 billion in social care will lead to savings in the NHS—not to the same level, of course, but we reckon that that would bring £3 billion in savings for the NHS. Therefore, a £5 billion investment in social care would actually involve only a net cost of £2 billion. At present, publicly funded social care is mainly financed through local government. We know that local government finances have been squeezed really hard in recent years, so we have to shift some of this burden of taxation back to Westminster.

The Liberal Democrats are also calling for cancer patient treatment to start within two months of an urgent referral. That ought to be the case now. We are calling for an extra £4 billion to be spent over five years in this area. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) was exactly right when he said:

“Voting Conservative is bad for your health.”

3.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for leading this debate and for setting the scene so very well. It is great to have such debates to remind us of the importance of our NHS to society across the United Kingdom as a whole. This really gives us a wee chance to say thank you. I strongly concur with the comments of others, and as health spokesperson for my party, these issues mean so much to me. It is great to be here to give all our NHS staff across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland the recognition that they deserve. I thank them.

I commend the NHS staff who work day in, day out to provide for local people. It is fair to say that we have had a tough four years in terms of healthcare, with the pandemic having a devastating impact on day-to-day treatment. More recently, the impacts of covid are ongoing in terms of delays and waiting lists. We will never be able to truly understand the feeling of working in that environment, as Members were able to partake in debates from home. Recognising the sacrifices that our NHS workers made at times, which were unknown and dangerous, is an important reminder of the covid pandemic.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution. He will know all too well that in Northern Ireland our healthcare workers and nurses are the very backbone of our NHS. Does he agree that it is time for the Government to step up and award our healthcare workers and nurses with the pay they deserve, and to stop hiding behind the cloak of there being no Stormont? We know that if Stormont was back up and running in the morning there is not the money to do it. Will he encourage the Minister to take that back to the Government?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend and will go on to comment on that shortly. Given the circumstances of our NHS right now, on paper the future does not seem too bright. We have people waiting years for surgery and consulting appointments, people struggling to get appointments with their GPs and, in some cases, people waiting for 12 hours to be seen by a doctor at A&E.

However, we will always remain hopeful for the future of the NHS because of the people who work in it and who truly make it what it is: those who work the extra hour, in many cases without pay, after their shift ends to ensure everything is up to date; those who come into their work on their days off due to short staffing; and those who do not have lunch breaks either, as they are too run off their feet. They are the NHS staff who I know, and they are the NHS staff that my words speak to.

The key to fixing those issues lies within this very building. It is for our Government to make the decision to fund the NHS properly. I have constituents, friends and family members who contact me all the time about the condition of the NHS, especially in terms of funding. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) is right to make that comment on behalf of the doctors, nurses and NHS staff who do so much.

Only this time last year I went to the picket line in Newtownards, one of the towns in my constituency, as the hon. Member for Wirral West said she did in her

introduction to the debate. I joined the picket line because I felt that their request for pay was right, and that we should support them to the utmost of our ability. I hoped that would be the case—again, I look to the Minister for that. It is important that those issues are relayed to parliamentarians so that we can get the full scope of just how much people are struggling with the current rate of pay.

With sufficient funding and recognition of the issues, we can improve and build on our NHS. If we reflect on the NHS from 1948 to now, the enhancements are incredible. Medical technology is always being improved and new medicines are being discovered. Queen's University Belfast is key to that, through the partnerships it has with business. We are finding more efficient ways of diagnosing diseases. As we look ahead to the next decade, we can expect to see more of those medical advancements as technology is always improving. It is incredible to see how far we have come. This week, Queen's University Belfast has come forward with a new prostate cancer centre in Northern Ireland, which will be to the fore of finding treatments and the cure for that disease.

The next generations of nurses and doctors are going to feel the impact of our decisions today, so let us make the right ones, right now. We must build bridges and remind ourselves of the compassion that the NHS provides. We have a duty to deliver for the people we represent right across this great nation. They are telling us that currently things are just not good enough. I strongly encourage a regional discussion on the improvement of funding for the NHS so that no nation is left behind, and that, more importantly, all the NHS staff of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland get paid suitable wages to help them make ends meet. We must ensure that the services are up to scratch to allow them to do their jobs to the best of their ability, as they all wish to do. We wish to support them in that.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): We move on to the Front Benchers, who have 10 minutes each.

3.29 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on bringing forward this important debate. She made an insightful opening speech, and I thank her for this opportunity to highlight the incredible work of the Scottish Government despite real-terms cuts to funding. It is a privilege to contribute to the debate as the SNP health spokesperson and as someone who understands the true value of our NHS. I will break down my contribution into two core components—funding and staffing—and explain why British Governments of any colour are causing real and lasting damage to both of them.

I turn first to funding. With more and more privatisation creeping in through the back door in NHS England, there are dire consequences for our NHS in Scotland through Barnett consequentials. The reality is that how much is spent by the British Government on England's NHS dictates how much the Scottish Government have to spend on our NHS up the road. Despite cuts to Barnett consequentials, our NHS, run by the Scottish Government, is continuing to invest in new and innovative ways to reduce health inequalities and protect our NHS

[Amy Callaghan]

for future generations; the young patients family fund comes to mind. We are leading the way in Scotland, supporting young patients and their families to get through ill health without suffering financial detriment, too. The other nations across these isles should take note and replicate the young patients family fund to improve health outcomes. The First Minister's pledge of £300 million to cut NHS waiting times is another example. There will be 100,000 fewer patients on NHS waiting lists come 2026 because of that investment.

What happens down here is that the Treasury gives money to private companies to provide a service for NHS England. That means less capital investment in NHS England, which means less money for the Scottish Government to spend on NHS Scotland. Despite the year-on-year reduction in Barnett consequential for health, NHS Scotland staff remain the best paid across these isles. What does that look like in practice? A band 2 porter in Scotland earns £2,980 more a year than their counterpart in England, and a band 5 nurse in Scotland earns £3,080 more a year than their counterpart in England. That is all despite the increased privatisation in NHS England.

I have two questions for the Minister on funding. What representations has he made to the Treasury ahead of the autumn statement? And will there be a change or, indeed, an increase to the money given to private enterprises to provide services to NHS England?

I will move on to staffing. Our staff are our NHS—past, present and future. The staffing issue we face because of being dragged out of the European Union is the single biggest issue for our NHS in Scotland. The future of our NHS hinges on staff recruitment and retention. As I said, our NHS in Scotland pays comparatively higher wages than the rest of these isles. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) rightly pointed out the urgency of ending the exodus of NHS staff. Despite that, attracting and retaining top talent remains our biggest concern, indicative of broken Brexit Britain.

The British Government's shift to being increasingly insular has significant consequences for our NHS in Scotland. That is why the SNP has repeatedly called for the devolution of powers over migration, because we in Scotland are committed to expanding our workforce. The toxic, hostile atmosphere created by the British Government is a barrier to that recruitment. What representations has the Minister made to Cabinet colleagues about the devolution of migration powers to the Scottish Government?

The hon. Member for Wirral West rightly pointed out that underfunding the NHS, quite apart from the harm it does to our constituents, is not a viable economic strategy. Poverty is expensive, as are health inequalities. Cuts to NHS funding are totally false economies that have real costs in the form of longer waiting lists, lost productivity and pain. As the hon. Member pointed out, it is not the model of the NHS that is broken, but the chronic underfunding that has led us here.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) made the point that NHS England is receiving higher funding than ever before. However, he failed to mention the capital given to private companies to provide services, instead of that funding going directly into NHS England.

Daniel Kawczynski: I will repeat the question that I posed to the hon. Member for Wirral West, who instigated the debate. We are putting record levels of investment into the NHS. Where will the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) get the extra money that she wants to put into the NHS?

Amy Callaghan: We look at progressive taxation measures in Scotland to generate income and revenue to put into our NHS, but we are experiencing cuts to Barnett consequential because of how the British Government down here are spending money on the NHS, with investment in private enterprises as opposed to capital going directly into the NHS. We are experiencing real-term cuts to our funding despite our generating money through other means.

It will come as no surprise that the financial and staffing issues facing our NHS in Scotland are a result of being tied to this broken Union. We cannot afford to be in this financial Union. Our NHS cannot afford for us to be in this financial Union. I look forward to the day when Scotland is an independent nation within the European Union, with a fully funded NHS and no recruitment or staff retention issues because we have created an inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

Before I conclude, I will say that it is fitting, with World Stroke Day just around the corner, that I am standing here talking about the future of our NHS. I have a future because of our NHS. We must provide proper funding and staffing to ensure that there is a future for the NHS and the millions who will need it for generations to come.

3.36 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing the national health service, and she set out clearly how the NHS faces an unprecedented challenge. We have heard powerful cases put forward about the need for reform, including from the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth). My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) focused on the workforce strategy for the NHS. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who talked about sickle cell disease and equality in the NHS, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

This debate on the future of the NHS is timely as it is our first opportunity to put to the test the Government's new slogan, which was unveiled at their conference:

“Long-term decisions for a brighter future”.

Personally, I would say that 13 years is long enough. What has been the result of that? Where we once spoke of winter crises, we now face crisis in the NHS all year round. Patient outcomes are declining, public satisfaction is at a 40-year low and improvements in healthy life expectancy have stalled.

One in seven of us are now stuck on waiting lists. Some 2.6 million people of working age are out of work and long-term sick—a record high. Across swathes of the country, dental deserts mean that patients are pulling

their own teeth out because they cannot get the care they need. This Government was the future once, and their record is historically bad.

As the CQC warned last week in its “State of Care” report, the risk is that healthcare in this country becomes a two-tier system, where those who can pay get treated and those who cannot have to wait. My party will never accept that. We will always defend the principle of an NHS that is there for everybody when they need it, free at the point of use.

As we have heard, we need a serious plan for investment and reform if the NHS is to realise that promise. If the Government cannot deliver, we will. We will train thousands more doctors and nurses so that the NHS has the staff it needs, armed with cutting-edge technology to treat patients sooner and faster. We will get doctors and nurses to help to address the backlogs and pull the NHS out of permacrisis. We will reform the system to shift more care to the community, fix the front door to the NHS, and deliver a prevention-first revolution to shift focus from the NHS as a sickness service to it being a genuine, holistic health and care service.

One thing that will define the future of the NHS is the disease burden of the country. Children in school today will live into the next century. Our NHS has been there for us for 75 years and will need to be there for 75 more, but it will not be there if we carry on as we are. The change we need to make is the shift to prevention. Right now the situation is scandalous, given the clinical time and need that is taken up with treating illnesses that could have been avoided in the first place. Many of the biggest killers, from cancer to heart disease, could be drastically reduced through healthier lifestyles and environments, yet as we saw with the latest child measurement programme statistics released last week, primary schoolchildren are some of the least healthy there have ever been. Nearly one in four children are now obese by the time they leave primary school, which is absolutely shocking. Some prevalence studies show that four in 10 obese children have evidence of fatty liver disease.

Yet more shocking is the fact that, while these children are bombarded with adverts for junk food, such as KitKat cereal, or are begging their parents to fork out more than £10 for a bottle of Prime energy drink, the Government have seemingly abandoned their plan to tackle junk food promotions and adverts targeting children. I ask the Minister: when will the Government publish the consultation into the pre-watershed junk food ads ban? Where is the secondary legislation that they promised? They said that the delay was to allow time to consult, yet the consultation has been done and is probably sitting in a drawer in Whitehall somewhere. What is the hold-up? Will the Minister back Labour’s plan to ban junk food ads before the watershed and to introduce free breakfast clubs serving healthy food at school, so that every child gets the best start?

The future of NHS dentistry is also hanging by a thread. Dentists are leaving the NHS every year. Huge parts of the country are dental deserts, where practices are not even taking on NHS patients. The No. 1 reason that children end up in hospital is to remove rotting teeth. It has been six months since the Government announced their dental recovery plan, but where is it?

Their response to the excellent Health and Social Care Committee report into NHS dentistry is also overdue; when can we expect that?

In the meantime, Labour has set out our rescue plan. We will have 700,000 more urgent appointments a year to bring down the backlogs. We will target funding to train up dentists in left-behind areas, and, of course, we will have a national supervised toothbrushing scheme for schoolchildren, because we know that the cheapest intervention means not needing to see a dentist at all.

Securing the future of general practice is also integral to the future of the NHS as a whole. People trust their GPs, and the relationships that they build with their patients are irreplaceable, but despite the Government’s much-vaunted primary care recovery plan, record numbers of GPs are still leaving the profession. In 2019, the Government promised to deliver 6,000 extra NHS GPs. Will the Minister explain why that promise has been broken? How does he expect to move more care from acute settings to the community if general practice continues to decline at this rate? Where is his equivalent to Labour’s fully costed plan to recruit 8,500 mental health professionals, with support in every community and every school, to relieve the pressure on frontline GPs? And will the Minister say what proportion of the community diagnostic centres that have been set up in recent years are actually in the community, rather than in an existing healthcare site?

The Minister will surely acknowledge the point that there will be no sustainable future for the NHS without tackling the crisis in social care. Thousands of people are stuck in hospital beds who are medically fit to leave but are unable to do so, because the care that they need in the community is not there to support them. Can he explain how he expects to find a sustainable solution to that persistent problem without getting serious about pay and standards and addressing the chronic workforce shortage in the sector?

It is also a poor reflection of this Government’s long-term planning that the NHS is still stuck using creaking, outdated equipment, and has fewer scanners per person than Greece. Freedom of information responses from NHS trusts have revealed that half—48%—still have an MRI or CT scanner in operation past the recommended lifespan of 10 years. One in five trusts are using the same scanners that they had when the last Labour Government left office in 2010.

Does the Minister not agree that it is time for an upgrade? There are currently 1.6 million people waiting for diagnostic scans and tests in England—three times as many as when the last Labour Government left office in 2010. Slow, outdated equipment is part of the problem, so will the Minister follow Labour’s lead, with our “Fit for the Future” fund to double the number of CT and MRI scanners?

To really make the NHS fighting fit for the future, we should grasp the opportunities in the explosion of innovation in health technologies, too. Right now, a revolution is taking place in medical science, technology and data that has the potential to transform our healthcare. By using Britain’s strengths in life sciences and NHS data, we could transform the model of healthcare in this country using prediction, prevention and highly targeted precision medicine.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

Today, genomic screening can spot predisposition to big killers such as cancer or heart disease. Let us imagine: if every family could choose to screen their baby's genetic information, they would be empowered to give their child the healthiest start in life. Last month, I visited the Precision Health Technologies Accelerator at the University of Birmingham, part of the life sciences park that it is building there. Over time, it hopes that the campus will grow into a leading life sciences hub, bringing together the best of our university, business and the NHS, and creating more than 10,000 jobs in the process. That is really exciting.

The next Labour Government will build on the strength of our life sciences sector. The development of coronavirus vaccines shows us how industrial policy can work, with the state playing a crucial role in partnership with the private sector. Yet the Government scrapped the Industrial Strategy Council and, since 2019, the UK has dropped from second to ninth in global life sciences league tables for inward foreign direct investment. Where is the Government's strategy to put the NHS at the front of the queue for cutting-edge innovations in the health sector and end the postcode lottery in the adoption of new treatments and diagnostics?

Daniel Kawczynski: Bearing in mind that the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust is the worst-performing for A&E in the United Kingdom, will the hon. Lady commit, if there is a Labour Government, to backing the £312 million investment in our local trust—yes or no?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I do not have the level of detail to be able to make any such commitment. He needs to speak to the Minister to ensure that the valuable investment they have been able to obtain for people in Shrewsbury is actually realised. That is really a conversation for him to have with the Minister.

There is no doubt that the NHS needs serious reform if it is to serve for the next 75 years. Since the Prime Minister and Health Secretary made a pledge in January for 5,000 more beds in time for winter, the number of hospital beds in England has fallen by almost 3,000. After a promise to clear all patients waiting 78 weeks or more for treatment by April this year, which was a shockingly low bar, the number rose last month from 7,300 to 9,000 patients. Despite making it one of their flagship five pledges to cut waiting lists, the Government have again broken their own record this month, with the number of patients waiting now at 7.8 million.

This Government cannot be trusted with the future of the NHS. Whether it is the social care crisis or the RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—scandal, the Government have literally failed to fix the roof while the sun was shining. The NHS will not survive another five years of this. Labour's 10-year plan of change and modernisation will build an NHS fit for the future, shifting the focus of healthcare from the acute sector into the community to boost prevention, diagnose conditions earlier and provide treatment closer to people's homes.

In closing, I want to put on the record my deep thanks to all our NHS staff for going above and beyond for patients, and especially everyone at the University Hospitals Birmingham trust in my constituency, which is the largest trust in the country.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): The Minister of State may speak for 10 minutes, but there are a couple of extra minutes as well. In addition, the convention is to allow the mover of the motion a couple of minutes to wind up, so he has a lot more latitude than usual.

3.46 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for securing a debate on this important matter. A debate of this nature is almost impossible to respond to in a relatively short period of time—although it is slightly longer now. I could easily fill the 90 minutes on the future of the NHS, as I know could all hon. Members across the Chamber today. I will endeavour to respond to as many of the issues and themes raised as possible in the time left available to me and, if I can, before the Front Benchers in the main Chamber conclude and we are all summoned over to vote.

While we will not always agree on the best approach—in fact, I strongly disagree with so much of what the hon. Lady said in her opening speech—I can assure her and Members across the House that I share her passionate desire to see an NHS that delivers and continues to deliver excellent care to all its patients, both now and in the future. Similarly to the Opposition Front-Bench team, the Government believe that the NHS should be free at the point of delivery and that its offer should be comprehensive, with services provided based solely on need. Let me absolutely clear: that will never change. In response to the themes raised in the debate, I will start by focusing on three broad areas: funding, workforce, and finally transformation and innovation.

Turning first to funding, as my hon. Friends the Members for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) and for Southend West (Anna Firth) set out, we have invested record amounts in the future of our healthcare system. By the end of this Parliament, core spending will have increased from £140.5 billion in 2019-20 to £193 billion in 2024-25. For those good at maths, that is a cash increase of £52.6 billion or 37%. At the beginning of this debate, several of us got a little excitable when the issue of privatisation was raised, and you rightly shut us down, Mr Pritchard. People have managed to make their contributions, but this is perennial accusation levelled at the Government, so let me absolutely clear: it is not our policy and it is not our plan. The NHS is not, and never will be, for sale.

Look at the actual facts on this. In 2013-14, around 6.1% of NHS funding was spent on the independent sector. Now let us jump to 2021-22, when it was 5.9%. What we are doing, however, is using the independent sector to enable us to fully realise our healthcare system's capacity, and of course to improve performance. This is an approach that I understand is supported by the shadow Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). It is an approach that

is better for patients and for our NHS. We are giving our patients greater choice and control, and empowering them to shape and manage their own healthcare.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the extraordinary increases in Government funding for the NHS, but has he recognised during the course of this debate my concern that, seven years after securing the £312 million for modernisation of A&E services in Shropshire, not a single brick has been laid? How sustainable is this NHS model when the managers of our local trusts are so incapable of delivering the construction with what we have secured for them?

Will Quince: I hear my hon. Friend's concern. I have met with him and other Shropshire MPs on this issue and committed to meet with him to discuss it again. We are very keen to resolve the situation.

Before I move on from privatisation, let me gently say to Opposition Members—some of whom raised it and some of whom did not—that patient choice and the ability to use the private sector has been part of the NHS since its formation. It is a fundamental part of the NHS constitution. Let us be clear what those who call for private sector involvement to be entirely removed from the NHS are calling for: they are calling for charities, independent sector providers, GPs, dentists and community pharmacies to be removed. So let us be very careful, and very clear about exactly what we are calling for, because the independent sector plays an important role.

Margaret Greenwood: While the Minister is on the subject of privatisation, I would like him to respond to two points. First, the Health and Social Care Act 2012 allowed NHS foundation trusts to earn 49% of their money from private patients. Can he explain how that benefits ordinary patients? Clearly, if half a hospital is given over to private patients, the waiting time doubles. Secondly, representatives of private companies sit on integrated care partnerships, which are responsible for preparing the integrated care strategy for an area. How can it be right that a private company can influence how a huge amount of public money is spent?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have already committed to write to her on some of the points relating to the 2012 Act, because she raised a number of questions. On the broader point about whether the independent sector should be part of integrated care boards and partnerships, I think it is helpful if it is, because individual systems need to know the full capacity available to them, and that includes the independent sector, which plays an important role because it is part of the health ecosystem in an area.

Margaret Greenwood *rose—*

Will Quince: I will come back to the hon. Lady, but I am conscious of time.

The second area widely covered today was workforce. I echo the hon. Lady's thanks to our NHS staff. I want to put on record my personal thanks to all those working in our health and care system: doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, managers, carers—all those who work in our NHS—for their hard work and dedication. We remain deeply grateful to them for all their work

during the pandemic, in facing the new challenges of tackling the backlog, and of course the routinely excellent care they provide day in, day out. Our long-term workforce plan embodies the Government's commitment to NHS sustainability: we are funding more doctors, more nurses and healthcare workers employed on NHS terms and conditions by NHS providers. That is backed by an additional £2.4 billion over the next five years, and at the heart of it is a significant increase in training places.

The third theme I want to focus on is transformation and innovation, which has also been touched on. We are committed to making our NHS more integrated, more strategic and better able to tackle the challenges it faces. The hon. Lady referenced the Health and Care Act 2022 numerous times—I hear her questions and points, and I will write to her on them. We put those issues on a statutory footing. We know that an increasing number of people are living with chronic medical conditions and complex care needs, which is where more integrated services can and will make an enormous difference. We want partners focusing on improving services rather than competing with each other when it is not in the interest of patients. I believe—we believe—that is the right approach because local areas know best, and certainly know far better than Ministers in Whitehall how best to organise themselves and design and deliver the best possible care for patients.

Ian Lavery: Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: I have to make some progress—I am conscious of time.

In addition, we have digital transformation and technology, which are critical to the future of the health and social care system. Embracing digital provides a significant opportunity for us to improve clinical service to deliver better care for patients and reduce pressures on the NHS. That is why we are investing around £1.5 billion a year in digital transformation to run live services and drive those transformation ambitions. That also includes plans to improve our NHS app, digitise the frontline and improve services. We are also working with trusts to deliver things such as electronic discharge and electronic bed management systems, which also improve efficiency within the NHS.

The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) mentioned NIHR research, which I want to touch on briefly. We spend around £1 billion a year on that, but the Government do not commission research directly; indeed, it would be totally wrong for any Minister or shadow Minister to direct our clinicians and researchers to look into a particular area. However, we encourage and rely on organisations to come forward with bids for research, which clinicians then look at. That is rightly independent from Government, and I will be happy to work with the hon. Member to see how we can get more research into that area.

I wanted to say so much more, but time is short and I want to ensure that the hon. Member for Wirral West has time to respond. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) touched on the life sciences space. We are putting a huge amount of work into life sciences with the Life Sciences Council and the life sciences vision, and we have launched the dementia, mental health, cancer, obesity and addiction missions, with more than £210 million in Government investment

[Will Quince]

and world-leading chairs to support them. There is also our additional investment in genomic medicine, which the hon. Member rightly touched on and which is a hugely exciting field. The ability to screen for and identify the prevalence of future disease and the ability to screen babies in future will be hugely exciting. This is definitely the future of medicine.

This is a hugely important debate and I have far more to say, as you can tell, Mr Pritchard. The NHS is a vital part of the fabric of our public life. It is beloved by the public and rightly held in the highest esteem. The Government believes in the NHS; I believe in the NHS. That is why we are taking the right long-term decisions to protect its future.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Margaret Greenwood to wind up. The Minister has very generously given the hon. Member three rather than two minutes.

3.57 pm

Margaret Greenwood: I thank all Members who have spoken in what has been a worthwhile debate this afternoon. We have heard from speakers across the Benches, and it is clear that the NHS is in crisis. With waiting lists for routine treatment of more than 7 million and more than 125,000 staffing vacancies, it is clear that patients' needs are not being met. Patients are suffering as a result and existing staff members are being put under incredible pressure.

The fundamental model of the NHS is not broken; we need to see the Government recommit to the service through a significant increase in funding. We must see an end to the privatisation agenda and rebuild the service as comprehensive, universal, publicly owned and publicly run, there for anyone of us should we need it. I want to end by reiterating my thanks to NHS staff for their work and for their commitment to the NHS as a public service.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the NHS.

Importation and Sale of Foie Gras

3.58 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the importation and sale of foie gras.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to have secured this important debate about the dreadful and totally unnecessary cruelty to animals in creating a so-called delicacy. I wish to make it clear that, while today's debate is about the importation and sale of foie gras, I understand that we cannot ban a product. Instead, we can deal with the process through which it is made. In this case, the product, foie gras, is produced by forced feeding.

I wish to offer my thanks to Abigail Penny from Animal Equality UK, who should be shortly joining us in the Public Gallery. I can proudly say that she hails from the sunshine coast and resides in Clacton, which is a place of animal lovers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. There was an Adjournment debate on this matter in the Chamber some time ago. I supported the principle referred to by the hon. Gentleman. He probably shares my frustration that, although Government have made it clear that the production of force-fed foie gras raises serious welfare concerns, unfortunately no steps have been taken. What does he feel that the Minister and the Government need to do to make that happen?

Giles Watling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I raise the matter here today precisely because I do not think enough action has taken place since that previous debate.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. We will suspend for 15 minutes for the first vote. If there are subsequent votes, it will be 10 minutes. Then, as soon as the mover of the motion and the Minister are here, we can proceed, so I ask hon. Members to go quickly as possible, please.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.24 pm

On resuming—

Giles Watling: After the interruption, I am pleased to say that we now have a full house in the Public Gallery. I pay tribute to and thank Abigail Penny from Animal Equality UK for her hard work on this cause. I can proudly say that she comes from Clacton, the sunshine coast, and Clacton is a place of animal lovers, which is probably why I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare. Her charity has provided a brochure, which colleagues are welcome to take back with them, highlighting the issue in further detail.

Foie gras results from the process of forcibly putting a tube down a goose's throat into their stomach and pumping food until their liver swells. The liver is then cut out and sold to the markets. I am sure that many meat eaters are present. One of my twin daughters

champions the vegan cause, and I have to admit that I am not quite there. The point I wish to make is that the normal kinds of meat that the average consumer buys are not created in this barbaric and cruel fashion. We have strict laws in this country on how our industry produces meat and other animal products, avoiding unnecessary suffering where at all possible. Sadly, that is not the case with the production of foie gras.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Labour attempted to ban the importation of foie gras during the passage of the Agriculture Act 2020. The Conservative Government voted our proposals down, but Labour is committed to introducing a ban on these imports as soon as we can. Can we count on the hon. Member's support?

Giles Watling: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention; I am not sure whether she was here earlier when I answered another point of a similar nature. One of the reasons why I am bringing the debate today is that there has been inaction. I would like to see action on this issue, and very soon.

I could quite easily go on regarding the emotional argument against foie gras and for animal welfare standards to be improved, but it seems impossible to have a reasonable method of producing foie gras. Instead, I shall raise a more practical argument. There have been many recorded incidents of disease outbreak in France. As we have seen with the growing bedbug issue, we are not safe from disease and pests just because we have the English channel. The crowded conditions of the farms act as a breeding ground for disease, much like any other form of intensive farming. As a representative of a constituency that has vast areas of rural land, I would not want to endanger my local farmers. We must be especially alert to that risk and not accelerate another potential pandemic given the serious consequences of covid-19. Although bird flu has not yet jumped to humans, I understand that scientists are concerned that it could mutate.

Foie gras is an expensive luxury item. By defending foie gras sales or not acting on the trade during times of spiralling financial hardship across the country, I fear that we risk appearing to be totally out of touch with the British people. If I were to stand on Christmas Tree Island in Clacton and take a poll of constituents who have ever purchased foie gras, I can only imagine the response. This is especially important to keep in mind with the looming general election ahead. It is a low-hanging fruit for the Government, so we should move on it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate; I had a similar debate on the banning of the importation of foie gras on the Floor of the House of Commons a while ago. Does he agree that if we deem foie gras too cruel to be produced in this country, we should also agree that, by definition, it is too cruel to be imported?

Giles Watling: I absolutely agree that it is too cruel. As with the much-desired ban on trophy hunting, which is a ridiculous sport, we should ban such imports. From Abigail and Animal Equality UK, I understand that the petition to ban foie gras by force-feeding was signed by no fewer than 280,000 people. That is an enormous amount of people concerned for the lives of these birds and the way they live them, and it is impressive to see.

I can confirm that e-petition 608288 to ban the importation and sale of foie gras has been signed by 6,878 people, including six of my constituents in Clacton, and e-petition 609129 to ban fur and foie gras imports has been signed by 528 people. There is a case to be made that public opinion is now moving in a very clear direction.

However, colleagues and viewers of this debate alike might ask why it is focused on the importation and sale of foie gras produced by force feeding. It is because, as we have just heard, producing foie gras by force feeding is already outlawed in the UK. Nevertheless, despite the cruelty that goes into the production of foie gras, we still allow it to be imported. When applying the law, judges consider how consistent it is; in this case, in my view, the law is not very consistent at all.

As my hon. Friend the Minister might mention—I do not wish to take away any of her thunder—the Government have successfully ended the imports of whale meat, seal fur, elephant ivory, and cat and dog meat; I personally ran a campaign against cat and dog meat, to end its production globally. If personal choice is a valid reason for failing to ban the import of foie gras, why have other bans been introduced?

I also think it is prudent to note the Government's support for the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on the importation of hunting trophies, which I mentioned earlier. If you will excuse the pun, Mr Pritchard, there is clearly an appetite in the Government to go down the route of banning cruel imports.

Lastly, foie gras has been banned in royal residences since last year. I will not break any protocol by speaking here, but I think it prudent to mention that this place is a royal residence and still belongs to the Crown as a royal palace. Like all colleagues, I am a humble and obedient servant of the Crown, and I have sworn an oath of allegiance. Although it is my understanding that foie gras is not on any menus on the parliamentary estate, a strong act of symbolism would be to ban the product here, too—something that I will raise with Mr Speaker.

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for securing this debate today. As he pointed out, he is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare, a role he takes really seriously—as did I when I chaired the same group as a Back Bencher. Some really great work has been done by that APPG.

My hon. Friend said that many of his constituents who are also great animal lovers are here today, because they take animal welfare very seriously. I was very pleased to hear that. However, I believe that we are an entire nation of animal lovers, and animal welfare has been an absolute top priority for the Government since 2010. Our standards of animal welfare are already world-leading. According to World Animal Protection's animal protection index, the UK has the highest animal welfare score in the G7 and some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, which we should all genuinely be proud of.

Ruth Jones: The Minister says that we have the highest animal welfare standards. May I ask her, very gently: why has the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill gone, why has the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill gone and why did we not take the chance to ban foie gras in 2020?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. If she will bear with me and listen to my speech, I think she will see that so much proposed in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill has either already been brought forward in legislation or is in the process of being brought forward, so great is our commitment to animal welfare. I will list some of those things.

Since 2010, we have raised animal welfare standards for farm animals, companion animals and wild animals. We have banned the traditional battery cages for laying hens and we have raised standards for chickens reared for meat. We have implemented and upgraded welfare within our slaughter regime, including introducing CCTV cameras in slaughterhouses. We have revamped the local authority licensing regime for commercial pet services, including selling, dog breeding, boarding and animal displays, and we have banned third-party puppy and kitten sales through Lucy's law, which we particularly worked on all those years ago in the APPG on animal welfare. We have also introduced protections for service animals through Finn's law and we have introduced offences of horse fly-grazing and abandonment. Some colleagues in Westminster Hall now were involved in those pieces of legislation. We have also banned wild animals in travelling circuses.

Our manifesto commitments demonstrate our ambition to go further on animal welfare. In 2019, we committed to bringing in new laws on animal sentience; to introducing tougher sentences for animal cruelty; to implementing the Ivory Act 2018 and extending it to other species; to ensuring that animal welfare standards are not compromised in trade deals; to cracking down on the illegal smuggling of dogs and puppies; to bringing forward cat microchipping; to banning the keeping of primates as pets; to banning live shipments of animals; and to ensuring that farmers, in return for funding, safeguard high standards of animal welfare.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Ducks and geese are sentient animals; they have feelings. Imagine all of us stuck in a cage with someone opening our mouths and stuffing stuff down our throats—God, how awful that would be! We have to get rid of this stuff.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and I am not going to disagree about the horrible cruelty—that is why we have banned the practice in this country. I think he makes the point exactly.

Those are the manifesto commitments but I would like to list the things that we have already delivered, to make it clear how seriously we take animal welfare: we have increased the penalties for those convicted of animal cruelty from six months to five years; we have passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, which has just been referred to, and we have launched the dedicated Committee to work on it; we have made microchipping compulsory for cats as well as dogs; and we have announced the extension to the Ivory Act 2018, which came into

force last year, to cover five more endangered species—hippopotamus, narwhal, killer whale, sperm whale and walrus.

On top of our manifesto commitments, we published our ambitious and comprehensive action plan for animal welfare in 2021. The plan set out the work that we are focused on pursuing, to deliver a better life for animals in this country and abroad. The commitments in the action plan last through this Parliament and beyond it. Our action plan relates to farmed animals, wild animals, pets and sporting animals, and it includes legislative and non-legislative reforms. In addition, we have provided for penalty notices to apply to animal welfare offences; introduced new police powers to tackle hare coursing—that needed tackling and we have worked hard to bring forward a better crackdown on hare coursing; we banned glue traps; and we have supported the private Members' Bills to ban the trade in detached shark fins and to ban the advertising here of low-welfare animal experiences abroad.

This debate, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton, deals specifically with foie gras. As hon. Members will know, the production of foie gras by force-feeding is banned in the UK because it is incompatible with domestic legislation. Foie gras production is covered by the general provisions in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which make it a criminal offence to allow an animal to suffer unnecessarily and place a duty on people responsible for animals that requires them to do all that is reasonable to ensure the welfare of their animals. That includes an animal's need for a suitable diet and to be protected from pain, suffering, injury, and disease.

While we have domestic restrictions on the production of force-fed foie gras, it is of course possible to import foie gras from abroad—clearly, there is a market trading in that. It is absolutely vital that we develop any future policies on the basis of robust evidence in line with the Government's commitment to improving animal welfare standards as set out in the action plan for animal welfare. We are committed to building a clear evidence base on foie gras to inform our future decisions, and we are looking at what other countries that have banned it do. As my hon. Friend will know, a certain number of countries have banned the production of foie gras just as we have—Germany, Italy and Luxembourg. As he will also know, the EU does not have an overall ban. We are also looking at how the World Trade Organisation operates if a ban is introduced.

All those things need to be considered carefully. One of our strongest levers is the work that we do on the international stage to influence the strengthening of animal welfare standards across the globe recommended by the World Organisation for Animal Health and other global organisations and applied to different countries. As my hon. Friend will know from his work on dog meat—we did some work on that jointly as Back Benchers—that is a strong way to influence and encourage other countries not to use these methods. All that will be looked at in the evidence base, and we will work with relevant Departments on disease—he mentioned disease and avian flu—as part of the evidence building.

I am standing in for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, and I will make sure that comments made in the debate are passed on to him, as he was unable to attend. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton will know that some supermarkets have

banned foie gras and, as he said, King Charles does not allow it to be served. Customers already have a choice not to buy it and certainly not to eat it—I would certainly never buy it.

Giles Watling: On that very point about banning the product and its import, many businesses in the private sector have banned the product and refuse to sell it. Fortnum & Mason—a short walk from Parliament—banned it from its shelves in 2021. By allowing restaurants and retailers to sell foie gras the United Kingdom, we are permitting animal torture and suffering. It is time to take an ethical stance, because those who still sell foie gras have a business advantage, as it is still legal and possible to do so.

Rebecca Pow: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I will certainly pass on his comments. I have made the point that we have a choice as to whether or not to buy the product if we do not support those methods of production. The evidence base is being established to inform future decisions, and I want to conclude by reiterating that animal welfare is a huge Government priority. We recognise the massive contribution that animals make to our planet. We are proud of what we have achieved on animal welfare.

Ruth Jones *rose—*

Rebecca Pow: Am I allowed to take an intervention, Mr Pritchard? I am not sure whether I have time.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Yes, you have time.

Rebecca Pow: I will be generous and take another intervention.

Ruth Jones: I thank the Minister, as she has been generous with her time. On animal welfare, a senior Tory MP has stated that hormone-injected beef is “delicious” and that

“you’ll be absolutely fine with chlorinated chicken”.

Why should we believe the Minister when she says that our animal welfare is the best in the world?

Rebecca Pow: Actually, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs dismissed those comments completely and said, “Absolutely not”. I reiterate that very strongly.

To conclude, we are really proud of what we have achieved on animal welfare. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber could disagree with the long list of things that we have achieved between us. We have made a huge step forward, but there is more to do and we keep prioritising caring for, protecting and respecting the animals with whom we share the planet.

Question put and agreed to.

4.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Funding for Parks

4.49 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for parks.

It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber with you, Mr Pritchard, a fellow Shropshire person and product of the open spaces of Shropshire. I will speak generally about parks and then in more detail about the problems faced by our parks and open spaces.

Parks are a major feature of our lives, providing opportunities to recreate, play games and observe nature, and for children to grow up. They are wonderful spaces. The oldest public park in Britain is in Birkenhead. Conceived in 1843 by Joseph Paxton, it developed into a wonderful open space—it is one of the largest parks in the country—and became iconic. It inspired Central Park in New York, which then inspired Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. So from Birkenhead we get San Francisco and the whole process of developing parks and open spaces. The park was an amazing achievement, and Paxton was, of course, the one who designed the Crystal Palace, which was built in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition.

Throughout the 19th century there was big development of parks, as benefactors provided money for them. There were redoubtable fighters for public open space in every city who were concerned about growing industrialisation and people’s loss of amenity and contact with nature. Hampstead Heath came from that process. In some cases, parks were developed from what had previously been common land. Sadly, in many other places, they were not, and we became a country of very densely populated urban areas. The demand for parks grew. In some cases they were developed. In some cases there are more parks in suburban parts of our cities than in the centre because of the way industrial development happened.

In a sense, the parks came into their own in this country during the covid pandemic. When we were locked down, people could recreate in parks. I have a bizarre memory of a man riding around Finsbury Park on a bicycle with a loudspeaker telling people to go home because it was too full. I could, of course, see his point, but I could feel the sadness of people who wanted to be outside enjoying a bit of urban space.

It is inner urban open space that I want to say the most about. My borough, Islington, is geographically quite small. It is one of the most densely populated boroughs in the country, if not the most densely populated. Until the end of the second world war in 1945, the only real open space in my constituency was Highbury Fields—there was Arsenal football ground as well, if we want to call that a public open space—in the south of the borough, on the edge of the City of London.

In 1945, something interesting happened across London and the other cities. The Abercrombie report, which was written during the war and was a planning idea for how London would develop after the war, was an incredibly far-sighted document. I might disagree with some of it—it was too keen on road building and not keen enough on other forms of transport—but it had a real vision for greening cities and enabling people to live with nature and have public open space near them.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

At that time, in some parts of London there was less than 0.1 acres of open space per 1,000 people. In other words, there was no open space for many people in many parts of London. Abercrombie's proposal, which has not totally been realised, was that London should aspire to have 4 acres of open space per 1,000 population. He realised that that would be very difficult, so he proposed a series of green routes that would link large open spaces in different parts of the city.

Most of the parks in my borough have been developed since 1945; some have been developed very recently. I have an aerial photograph in my office of a place called Wray Crescent, which, as the name indicates, is a crescent of housing; the picture shows the houses and gardens and so on. It is not there any more. The houses were all bought by the local authority and demolished, and a park was created in that space. There is a school next to my office that once had houses in what is now the school's garden. Those houses were bought by the Inner London Education Authority and demolished to make a garden for the school. That is an incredibly brave thing for any public authority to do. Now, we would not even think about buying houses in order to create a park or open space because of the costs involved. We have to remember that some of this work was done by very far-sighted people.

We have nearly always achieved parks through a combination of wealthy benefactors—in some cases big charities, or even big landowners—and campaigns by ordinary people who just want something decent and to create more open space. One of my favourite parks in my constituency is Gillespie Park. I even led an Adjournment debate on it in the 1980s—[*Laughter.*] I have been here a long time, you see. At the time, Gillespie Park was a disused railway sidings. British Rail wanted to sell it, and there was a huge debate and campaign locally. Eventually, it won recognition as an open space, partly because British Rail made the fundamental public relations error of allowing people to use it on a temporary basis. Once people have been allowed to use a public open space temporarily, they are not going to give it up—and they did not give up Gillespie Park.

I was at the park on Sunday. It is beautiful: it is heavily wooded, with an amazing variety of bird and plant life, as well as fish life in the pond. We are very proud of it. There was an "apple day" on Sunday; hundreds of people came to enjoy different varieties of apple. I spoke to many of them, and I would guess that more than half of them have no open space of their own. They have no gardens or balconies—no open space whatsoever. The park is their lung. We have to remember that parks are there for everybody. We in this Chamber may have our own gardens at home, which we probably enjoy and love, but the vast majority of my constituents do not. Their only open space is the street or the park. They have no open space of their own. We should think very hard about that.

I was encouraged to seek this debate by the issues surrounding Finsbury Park, which is in the Tottenham constituency, just outside mine; I let the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) know that I would be raising it. Finsbury Park, which was established 150 years ago by the Metropolitan Board of Works, was

designed to be very much bigger, but the board gave up on its expansion and sold some of the land for housing. It is still a substantial park, and a vital open space. After its development by the Metropolitan Board of Works, the park was taken over by the London County Council, and then by the Greater London Council, which actually ran it very well. The history of the park shows all kinds of things, from balloons taking off to anti-aircraft guns during the second world war and peace demonstrations in 1914. It has been a place for people all that time.

Like every other council, Haringey has funding problems, and it frequently lets out large parts of the park for concerts and entertainment and so on. The most recent figure I could find on the council's income from concerts was £1.2 million for one year, which is a great deal of money. That involves a very substantial part of the park being taken over for several weeks on end, which causes a great deal of resentment. I am a patron of the Friends of Finsbury Park. Some time ago, a legal action was taken against Haringey Council to require it to spend the benefits of the concerts on the park, rather than on the generality of council expenditure. Although that action was successful, the park is still denied to a lot of people for quite a long time.

Managing the use of parks is always complicated and difficult; there are many demands, and it means trying to work out everybody's life in a park. There are those who want to play football, cricket or baseball; those who want to just sit around doing nothing and playing music; those who want to play informal games; those who want to have birthday parties, and all the other things. There are also those who are keen on protecting trees and improving the biodiversity and natural life of parks. Managing parks is not simple. If we throw into the mix underfunding of the park, and pressure on the relevant local authority to raise more and more money from it in order to maintain it, we end up in a self-defeating circle where we lose the use of the park in order to make money to keep the park, which we cannot use. We have lost the use of it because of the many concerts that go on.

I am not against having concerts, festivals and parties in parks—absolutely not. I just think there has to be a balance and a limit on the numbers of them. They are not cheap and therefore not necessarily completely available to everybody. For example, the lowest priced Live Nation tickets last year in Finsbury Park were £190, way beyond the likely spending power of young people in the immediate area.

The problem affects my favourite local park, which I often use. It is a wonderful place and I am worried for its future, as I am worried for every other park's future, unless we have some degree of guaranteed funding and protection of them. I can see the Minister becoming anxious, because I told him that I would say nothing he could possibly disagree with. I look forward to an intervention from him agreeing with my view.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): The right hon. Gentleman is giving a great speech and articulating the value of parks to our many local communities, including those across north London. Many parks are under unprecedented threat, whether from financial interests or from development—not least Stanley Park in my constituency, which was voted England's best park last year.

A local authority-led plan to develop part of the park has caused enormous disquiet in my constituency. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in urging local authorities to be mindful of the health and wellbeing benefits of parks and to be conscious about protecting their status?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Stanley park is a wonderful park and a great place. Many other parks around the country are iconic and beautiful and all are at risk because of the danger of local authorities agreeing to a planning rule change that would allow parts of parks to be sold off.

It all seems very attractive at the time. Somebody in the council says, “Okay, we will sell off this bit of the park and get x million for this piece of land, and that will enable us to plug a spending gap somewhere else.” It is always a very attractive option. The problem is we will never, ever get the park back. Once it is gone, it is gone. It will not return. That is why I look forward to the Minister’s response and to the response to the Select Committee report.

We need to look again at the strength of legislation protecting public open spaces from development and from sale by local authorities so that that option is simply not available to local authorities. I am not saying that most local authorities want to sell parks—they do not—but we have to make sure parks are protected for all time. Fields in Trust has produced some interesting information. Between 2010 and 2021, there was a loss of £690 million in park funding across the whole country. Some 32% of parks have recorded a loss of frontline staff and 41% a loss of management; 23% have cut their development plans for any park; and 62% of local authorities—this is the saddest figure of all—expect to see the quality and appearance of their parks decline in the coming years.

The Government have said that they want money to be put aside for the development of new parks, and they have done that through the levelling-up fund. The number of new parks proposed is not very many—I think it was 100. Unless I have misunderstood the information that I have read in the various reports, only £9 million has been set aside for them. Well, we cannot develop even one park with £9 million, so I think that needs to be looked at carefully. If we want new parks, they have to be funded from somewhere, which I will come on to in a moment.

The Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry in 2016-17 was an important one, and it was revisited by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and by the Government in 2022. Clearly, a lot had changed in those five years. Covid had come, which enhanced the importance of parks but also led to a new round of funding problems for local authorities—£330 million less than in 2010 is now being spent on parks. The cuts in park expenditure have gone on and on. It is not clear what level of urban uplift is going to go on parks.

In a reply to a request from the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Minister said that he thought local authorities were best placed to decide how money is spent. Yes, that is absolutely true, but unless there is overall protection for the level of expenditure on parks they will obviously be a place where cuts are made. If a councillor is faced with a massive bill on social care, or

other aspects of key services, people will say that the parks do not matter, so they can be cut a bit more. What people forget in that short-sighted view of things is that we can help to alleviate the mental health crisis with the provision of open spaces.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I welcome this point being made, because parks have a clear benefit for our communities. They are an important cultural asset, but also improve people’s health and have an important role to play in maintaining our natural environment. Public Health England recognises the value of parks for people’s physical and mental health. It is understood that people who are living in areas with higher amounts of green space have a reduced likelihood of cardiovascular disease, for example. We must protect the funding of parks and ensure that these important cultural assets are maintained.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member is quite correct. There are numbers of people who are going through a mental health crisis who feel that it is alleviated to some extent by going to a park. I have met people with mental health conditions who are going through group therapy who meet and walk around a park together; they feel that that is a way of coming together in a calm atmosphere. We should never underestimate the value of parks to all of us, in every way. They are a place for nature, recreation, sport, and a place to give us a sense of calm in our lives.

There is an inequality of park provision, however, around the country. We need to look at that. We need to look at protecting funding by central Government to local government so that it can be ringfenced for parks. One suggestion in the Committee report was that every local authority should be required to try and achieve the green flag standard in their parks. Many councils try and do that anyway because they want to—which is good—but they need to do it more.

The funding of parks improved a bit when the lottery was introduced, which put quite a lot of money into the improvement of some parks. Lottery funding, like charity funding and donations for parks, is welcome, as that it can be used to improve sports facilities, planting and maybe bring in allotments and growing spaces. What gifts never do, however, is take into account the longer-term requirements of funding, such as the need for staff and the need to keep the thing going. That is where central Government expenditure and their relationship with local authorities is so important.

My fundamental point is that the lesson from my lovely local park, Finsbury Park, is that, while we love that park, it needs to be properly funded so that it does not have to give up so much space every year for expensive concerts. The same thing applies elsewhere. Hyde Park is taken over by Winter Wonderland for several weeks. It is fine that people enjoy Winter Wonderland, but what about people who just want to go to Hyde park to walk about? They cannot do it because of that. The same applies in many other places, so we need balance.

I hope the Government will look again at the two Committee interventions on this issue, which were helpful and designed to improve parks and open spaces, and realise their value. I hope the Government will say that they are prepared to ensure there is guaranteed funding. When dealing with overall planning, it is important to

[Jeremy Corbyn]

protect our green belt but also to protect our public open spaces and parks. We should also ensure that, with every major planning operation, there is improvement in the amount of open space and the creation of allotments and community growing spaces.

Our children need to be brought up to understand that we have to live with nature, not on top of nature. That creates a better understanding and more support for progressive environmental policies in future. I put this forward today because I hope it will provide an opportunity for the Opposition and the Government to give their proposals for the funding of our beautiful parks all over the country.

5.10 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for introducing this important debate, and for the opportunity to speak on it. As I said in my intervention, parks have a clear benefit for our communities, even in very rural areas such as Somerton and Frome, which I am proud to represent. Victoria Park, the oldest park in Frome, which opened in 1887, continues to hold many events throughout the calendar year.

It is therefore concerning to read that something approaching one in 10 of the UK's parks are classified as in poor condition. A gradual decline in funding has seen hundreds of thousands—millions—taken away from park budgets, as local authorities have had a reduction in finances as a result of austerity measures. That decline in funding results in cuts to the hard-working, talented staff who take care of and love our public parks, and who ensure that they are an asset to our communities.

As many as 32% of our local authorities have had to cut frontline staff such as park rangers and litter-pickers, while 41% have had to cut management staff as well. The loss of staff inevitably leads to a reduction in the quality of the parks. Somerset Council, of which I was proud to be a member, and South Somerset District Council before that, have demonstrated the benefits of securing good funding for parks and rangers. I invite everybody to come to the parks in my part of my world. They have offered apprenticeship schemes to employ young people, training them in a variety of skills that are needed to maintain our public parks. That work is important on so many levels.

The Association for Public Service Excellence has tracked the age profiles of park staff over 10 years. The over-50 age range makes up 50% of the workforce, with most other age groups falling. With already stretched staffing, and as park staff reach retirement age, that could cause a significant issue in coming years. Initiatives such as those by Somerset Council demonstrate the importance of tackling this problem head on, although more funding is needed to continue programmes in Somerset and extend them around the country.

Local authorities such as Somerset Council have used the importance of parks to build up and emphasise important local cultural events, such as those mentioned by the right hon. Member for Islington North. There has been a focus on providing top-class facilities for visitors and improving people's access to nature by

putting on local events. Somerset's parks offer a variety of events from dog shows to astronomy evenings to bring people in and experience what is on offer.

Work has also been undertaken to ensure that our parks are accessible. For example, there are mobility walking areas for people to access the spectacular nature of Somerset. That showcases how important parks are to Somerset. The county has around 95.4 square metres per person of public park and green space, well above the national average of 30 square metres. We are extremely lucky in my county. In order to protect our important green space, Somerset Council has worked with Fields in Trust to protect our parks. I welcome the clear steps taken by the council to safeguard those spaces. It is important that we do that to protect the natural biodiversity of the parks and green spaces that we love.

We live in one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. More than 40% of native species are in decline. To arrest those changes, we must protect park funding. Our parks are also valuable for the health and welfare benefits they provide to us all. Public Health England has recognised the value of parks for people's physical and mental health and, as I have already mentioned, it is understood that people living in areas with higher amounts of green space have shown reduced mortality and a reduction in the likelihood of cardiovascular disease.

Public parks are important cultural, environmental and public health assets. We must safeguard them for future generations. We must do that by protecting their funding and allowing local authorities the opportunity to maintain their parks.

5.16 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. I shall begin by welcoming the Minister. This is our first outing together. Maybe we will have a few more before we go our separate ways again, but I do not think this is something we will fall out about.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on his excellent speech about the importance of parks. He articulated very well how important they are and how, during the pandemic, we all came to a greater understanding of their importance. He set out the historical context as well, with many wealthy benefactors often the progenitors of local parks. Local communities have worked together and, indeed, local authorities have also done a great deal of work over many years to secure and preserve those open spaces that otherwise might well have been concreted over.

I thank the right hon. Member for mentioning Birkenhead Park. It is not quite in my constituency, but it is not that far away. It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the excellent parks in Ellesmere Port and Neston. We have Whitby Park, Rivacre Valley, Stanney Wood and Lees Lane, which are all important open spaces. They are often kept going by friends groups and volunteers, who do a really important job in covering the sometimes difficult job of local authorities in maintaining those spaces to the levels we would like to see. The right hon. Member for Islington North has referred to that and I will come back to it shortly.

The right hon. Member referred to the Select Committee reports, and the 2017 report in particular clearly spells out the health and economic benefits that parks and open spaces can have. The report quoted studies that found that, every year,

“green spaces in England contribute £2.2 billion to public health.”

It was also mentioned that the UK Natural Environment Assessment found that caring for ecosystems had the potential—I use the word “potential” advisedly—to add £30 billion a year to the UK’s economy. The Select Committee also noted the benefits that accrued to local areas in terms of attracting investment and securing jobs, referring particularly to Edinburgh City Council’s social return investment model as proof of the basis for economic benefits and how it was concluded from that scheme in particular that every £1 invested in parks resulted in a £12 return in benefits delivered. That is not something that any of us can ignore.

Both the right hon. Member for Islington North and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) have spelled out clearly that there are many positive impacts in our communities from parks and green spaces. It is perhaps counterintuitive, possibly disappointing and almost certainly frustrating that our general impression is that parks have been undervalued in the past decade.

The Association for Public Service Excellence noted in its “State of UK Public Parks 2021” report that in the past decade, funding for parks from local government has collapsed. It estimated that since 2010, parks have lost £690 million-worth of funding, with parks now making up less than 3% of local authority budgets on average. With constricted budgets, staff maintaining parks have also had to be cut, which is where the important work of friends groups comes in. The APSE survey found that 32% of local authorities have had to make frontline cuts to staff during this period. Sadly, those cuts were not even distributed evenly across the UK. We know that 87% of the UK’s most deprived councils have had their spending cut since 2010, compared with only 58% of those in the most affluent areas. Given what we know about the importance of parks in driving down health inequalities, the fact that that funding cut has disproportionately affected those areas with less economic power is a cause for double concern. We all know that the austerity enforced on local authorities since 2010 has had a huge impact on their ability to deliver. We know that their spending power fell by almost 20% between 2009-10 and 2019-20. Despite a partial recovery in recent times, spending power is still more than 10% below what it was before. That has resulted in many local authorities really struggling.

We know that there are huge, increased pressures on local authorities, particularly in children’s services and social care, and more pressure is on the way. It is not surprising, with the financial pressures faced by local authorities, that there is a temptation for them to monetise some of these assets a little more. I do not criticise them for that—we know that they are in a difficult position—but we must be alive to the risks that brings: restricting access to all, reducing the quality of the environment and ultimately undermining the very essence of what parks are meant to be there for. The right hon. Member for Islington North talked about how Finsbury Park can be out of action for several weeks at a time. I agree with him that there is no problem with using parks for these events if they raise funds, but a balance must be

struck between the local authority’s ability to use the park for those events and the rights of other users to enjoy the benefits of the park.

One other way that the pressure on local authorities and open spaces has manifested itself is through the introduction of estate management fees, whereby management companies simply adopt the work that the local authorities used to undertake, leaving homeowners having to pay twice for exactly the same services. I have said before that unless we get a proper grip on estate management fees, they will become a new payment protection insurance scandal. What do we say to residents who pay additional fees but then see non-residents, who have not paid the fees to clean up and maintain the park, using their facilities? How long before residents demand that open spaces are open only to those who have paid management fees? Be in no doubt: this issue will continue to corrode community cohesion unless we find a compelling answer to these questions. The Minister knows that I will come back to this repeatedly, because I do not think that we have really understood the scale of the issue just yet.

The concerns articulated by the right hon. Member for Islington North about the need to protect and preserve our parks and open spaces are very much a live issue. I look forward to hearing the Government’s response from the Minister, particularly to the Select Committee recommendations that we have heard about.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for calling this important debate and articulating so clearly the value of our parks estate and the challenges that it faces. I also thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) for her remarks. I recently visited her constituency a number of times, and I can fully attest to the beauty of Somerset and its parks. Like the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), I will shamelessly plug some of my local parks, such as Locke Park, Lily Park, the Saltburn Valley gardens and Smiths Dock Park. Like him, I commend the friends groups who care for our parks and cemeteries too, such as the Friends of Redcar Cemetery and the Friends of Eston cemetery.

The UK’s 27,000 public parks are treasured assets that have been enriching the lives of our communities for more than 150 years. They provide opportunities for leisure, relaxation, exercise and connection to nature. However, parks are also fundamental to community cohesion, physical and mental health and wellbeing, biodiversity, climate change mitigation and civic pride. As the right hon. Member for Islington North said, during covid they were also a lifeline, providing a breathing space where people could relax, exercise and enjoy the outdoors, even in the most difficult of times.

The Government are fully committed to creating better access to parks and green spaces for all our communities. Although the main responsibility for urban parks lies with local authorities, the Government have made a number of targeted investments to support the sector. In 2022, as the right hon. Member mentioned, we launched the £9 million levelling-up parks fund to

[Jacob Young]

improve access to green spaces in disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the UK. I am pleased to share with the House today the fact that 90% of funded local authorities reported increased access to green spaces in disadvantaged urban areas, such as those that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned.

The levelling-up parks fund is an immediate example of the Government's commitment to levelling up communities across the country. However, as has also been touched on, there is also lottery funding. Since 2019, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has invested over £36 million in parks and green spaces. Since that fund began in 1996, it has awarded over £950 million to create and restore more than 900 individual parks. As the right hon. Member may know, Caledonian Park in Islington received a grant of almost £2 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2016 to restore the historic clock tower and market railings.

Furthermore, in two rounds of pocket park funding in 2018 and 2019, the Government awarded grants of over £5 million to 266 community groups working in partnership with local authorities to create new community green spaces or to transform existing parks. Also, through the community ownership fund, the Government are awarding funding to a range of assets that are important to local communities. The fund has already invested over £500,000 to support five parks and green spaces. I should also mention the £2.6 billion UK shared prosperity fund, which is providing new funding for local investment. Local authorities will decide how to use that funding to best serve their communities, including by investing in improving and developing their parks.

The Government have always been clear that local authorities must have the freedom to choose how to use their budgets to best serve their local areas and priorities, which includes how they support their parks and green spaces. I am pleased to see that there are many examples across the country of local authorities developing innovative practice and partnerships to manage their parks estate. However, as the right hon. Member mentioned, it is important that those partnerships do not impinge on communities' access to those parks. A balance has to be struck.

The right hon. Member may know that, in order to support parks, Camden Council and Islington Council have agreed a joint parks for health strategy. Health-related projects and social prescribing are being rolled out across both boroughs, and Islington Council is incorporating parks for health in its public realm by greening its highways and creating new green spaces.

Central Government continue to support local authorities in this regard. The Government have helped local authorities to develop innovative practice through the future parks accelerator programme, which we jointly funded with the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Trust in 2019. That programme funded eight local authority areas to pilot new ways of managing parks estates. The results are currently being evaluated and disseminated across the sector.

The green flag awards have been mentioned a few times already. The addition of the green flag awards scheme—which is owned by my Department and run by the Keep Britain Tidy charity under licence—promotes the national standard for parks and green spaces across

the UK. Over 2,000 green flags were awarded this year, demonstrating that the parks that won them had met the highest-quality standard. I am also proud of the contribution of community groups and volunteers, such as the friends of parks groups, which have already been mentioned, in designing and managing local parks. Over 400 green flag awards have already been awarded to community-led parks, with many more to come, I am sure.

Getting the best for our parks is not just about spending more or dictating how local authorities should use their budgets. It is about communities, health authorities, park sector stakeholders, and local and national Government working together to get the best outcomes for our parks estates. That is why the Government have reflected on the importance of access to good-quality green space as a key factor for health in a wide range of policies, including the childhood obesity strategy, the loneliness strategy, the clean air strategy, "Sporting Future" and "The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health". The Government have set clear expectations for how parks and green spaces should be incorporated into our communities in the national planning policy framework and the national design guide and code. We have outlined our ambition to ensure that every household is within a 15-minute walk from a quality green or blue space in our environment improvement plan, which we published in January this year.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for what he is saying. Does he think that there should be guidance from central Government about the amount of time that a park can be exclusively used for private interests or private commercial interests, in order to protect the generality of public access to what is valuable open space?

Jacob Young: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that contribution. It touches on his points about what he feels are abuses happening in places such as Finsbury Park and Hyde Park. I would say that those decisions are best made locally. Obviously, there is a local democracy angle at play in local authorities, and authorities are held to account at the ballot box every couple of years. Certainly from my party's perspective, we would always go to the ballot box ensuring that access to local parks was important.

Finally, if the House will indulge me, I want to share briefly my memories growing up as a child, visiting Albert Park in Middlesbrough. As the right hon. Gentleman said, it was a park gifted by a wealthy benefactor—our first mayor, Henry Bolckow—to the people of the town in 1865. Over 150 years later, that park is still in the centre of the town. When I was growing up, it played host to the Middlesbrough Mela—a celebration of the south Asian community in Teesside. We also have Stewart Park, where as a kid I would go and see the animals. Years later, I visited when it played host to BBC Radio 1's Big Weekend in 2019.

As we have heard, parks are about history, celebration, memories and culture. They are the centre of communities and key to healthy communities. I add my thanks to those who protect and maintain our parks, particularly those in Redcar and Cleveland but nationally too, and to the armies of volunteers who do the same. Going forward, we must ensure that our parks' workforces are

well equipped with the skills to meet the current and future expectations of our communities. Learning and best practice from current park programmes needs to be embedded to develop and protect our parks for the future. We must work together to ensure that these treasured assets are passed on to future generations in the best possible condition, so that our children and grandchildren can enjoy them just as much as we have.

5.33 pm

Jeremy Corbyn: I am pleased that we had this debate today; it gave us the chance to set out the issues facing us. I understand what the Minister said about the use of parks for mental health recuperation and the generality of people's needs, and I fully support that. I hope that we will recognise that increasing pressure on local authorities to get an income from parks can be detrimental to the basic needs of parks. I look to the Government to at

least set out guidelines on the amount of time that a park, or even part of it, should be taken out of public use and into exclusive private use, because I see a trend that is rather worrying—to me in my own area and, I suspect, to people all over the country.

I thank the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for what they said, and I thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke). We value our parks; we love our parks, and they are the only open space that so many of our people ever get access to. We should value them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for parks.

5.34 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 24 October 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Shared Services Connected Ltd: Sale of Cabinet Office Stake

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I am pleased to announce that the Cabinet Office has exercised its option to sell its 25% stake in Shared Services Connected Ltd (SSCL) to its joint venture partner, Sopra Steria Group SA, which owns the remaining 75% stake. The sale is expected to complete in early November.

Sale of the stake will generate cash proceeds of £82.3 million payable on completion. Of the £57 million proceeds retained by the Cabinet Office, up to £45 million of the proceeds will be reinvested into accelerating programmes that increase cross-Government productivity. This will include a particular emphasis on digital capability across Government.

The change in ownership arrangements is expected to affect neither the management nor staff of SSCL. Sopra Steria has confirmed that SSCL will remain a key component of Sopra Steria's UK family of businesses and that there will be no impact on services to customers.

Background and rationale

The SSCL joint venture was established in 2013 as part of a strategy to consolidate and transform the provision of shared business support services to central Government and the wider public sector. Founding customers included the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency.

Over the last 10 years, SSCL has successfully expanded its customer base to cover other public sector bodies including the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, Metropolitan Police and the Construction Industry Training Board. Revenue has grown from £123 million in the year to 31 December 2014 to £292 million in the year to 31 December 2022.

It had always been envisaged that the Cabinet Office might one day sell its stake. When the joint venture was established, Sopra Steria granted the Cabinet Office a put option exercisable in 2022 and 2023.

The sale follows a review triggered by the approaching expiry of the put option. The Cabinet Office concluded that SSCL had been a successful joint venture delivering significant savings and value to the Government and the taxpayer, that the business was now well-established and that it was time for it to move to the next stage in its evolution. The sale price was based on an independent valuation advisory report and exceeds the Cabinet Office's retention value. As at 31 March 2023, the carrying value of the stake and related put option in the Cabinet Office accounts was some £48.2 million.

Fiscal Impacts

The impact on the fiscal aggregates, in line with fiscal forecasting convention, are not discounted to present value. The net impact of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics is summarised as follows:

| Metric | Impact |
|---|---|
| Sale proceeds | £82.3 million |
| Hold valuation | The price achieved is above retention value |
| Public Sector Net Borrowing | The sale will generate cross-Government productivity savings and reduce future debt interest costs for Government, offset by the loss of dividends Government might otherwise have received from its shareholding |
| Public Sector Net Debt | Immediate reduction of £25.3 million—£82.3-£57 million |
| Public Sector Net Liabilities | Immediately improved by £34.1 million—£82.3-£48.2 million—less the extent to which the £57 million retained by the Cabinet Office is spent |
| Public Sector Net Financial Liabilities | Immediately improved by £34.1 million—£82.3-£48.2 million—less the extent to which the £57 million retained by the Cabinet Office is spent |

[HCWS1087]

EDUCATION

Relationships, Sex and Health Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Earlier this year, I wrote to schools to set out that schools can and should share curriculum materials with parents, in light of the current concerns in relation to materials used to teach relationships, sex and health education (RSHE).

Parents are among their children's most important teachers. It is vital that they know what their children are being taught in relationships, sex and health education, and that they are reassured that the materials used by schools are thoughtful and appropriate.

Today, I have written to schools again to provide further information in the light of some important cases. This letter confirms that, where contractual clauses exist that seek to prevent schools sharing resources with parents at all, they are void and unenforceable. This is because they contradict the clear public policy interest in ensuring that parents are aware of what their children are being taught in relationships, sex and health education.

The letter is clear that, if faced with such clauses, schools should write to providers asking for those clauses to be withdrawn on the ground that they are unenforceable. In the event that providers refuse to withdraw the clauses, legislation allows schools to still share resources proportionately, for the purposes of explaining to parents what is being taught.

For example, it is best practice to do this via a "parent portal" or, if this is not possible, by a presentation. This is providing that access to the documents is accompanied by a sufficient acknowledgment of the provider's authorship and includes a statement, which parents agree to as a condition of access, that the content should not be copied or shared further except as authorised by copyright law. Where relevant and possible, IT systems should also be in place to prevent downloading.

Where parents cannot attend a presentation or they are unable to view materials via a "parent portal", schools may provide copies of materials to parents to

take home on request, providing parents agree to a similar statement that they will not copy the content or share it further except as authorised by copyright law.

The points made in both of my letters will be reflected in the updated statutory RSHE guidance, on which we will publicly consult. This additional content will help to further strengthen schools' position, as they have a statutory duty to have regard to the RSHE guidance and can communicate this duty to their external providers.

We are clear that in all circumstances, parents have a right to see the materials being used to teach RSHE, which is why we have written to schools and parents today clarifying the legal position and reiterating that right.

[HCWS1086]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation and UK Humanitarian Efforts

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Today I am updating the House on the UK's response to the situation in Gaza.

The UK is committed to easing the desperate—and deteriorating—humanitarian crisis in Gaza, while standing alongside the people of Israel against the terrorist group Hamas and supporting Israel's right to defend itself.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, announced an additional £20 million in humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza in response to the severe humanitarian crisis.

This assistance is in addition to the £10 million of aid announced by the Prime Minister last week and brings the total UK contribution to the occupied Palestinian territories since Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October to £30 million—doubling our existing aid commitment this year and making us one of the largest donors.

The funding will allow key UN agencies and trusted partners, including the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), a number of whom have presence in Gaza and Egypt, to provide essential relief items and services. The aid will respond to critical food, water, healthcare, shelter and protection needs for those affected by this severe humanitarian crisis. We are committed to ensuring UK aid is allocated to address the greatest needs.

The Prime Minister welcomed the limited opening of the Rafah crossing—it is important progress, and testament to the power of diplomacy. Sustained, unimpeded and safe humanitarian access must be allowed so civilians can receive vital, lifesaving support, including food, water, shelter, and fuel as quickly and effectively as possible.

Civilians must be protected and we continue to stress to all the importance of humanitarian access. Hamas, who have no regard for Palestinian civilians, continue to indiscriminately terrorise the Israeli people and the region as a whole. We unequivocally support Israel's right to self-defence. The UK has been clear that international humanitarian law must be followed and every effort made to avoid civilian casualties.

The UK is at the forefront of the global effort to help Palestinian people access the vital lifesaving support they need. We will consider further support depending on the changing humanitarian needs on the ground.

This support goes beyond funding alone and includes intensive diplomatic efforts to prevent regional escalation, back Israel's security and support long-term solutions to the crisis in the middle east. The Prime Minister raised humanitarian support in his meetings with the leaders of Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Palestinian Authority last week. During the Foreign Secretary's recent visit, he spoke to counterparts in Egypt, Turkey and Qatar to work with them to push for agreement on ongoing humanitarian access to Gaza. Lord Ahmad has also spoken with the Foreign Ministers of Iraq, Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco, Algeria and the Palestinian Authority. I am in regular contact with Development Ministers and our humanitarian partners to discuss response and co-ordination efforts.

[HCWS1091]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Appointed Person Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Today I lay before Parliament the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 Appointed Person report covering England and Wales for the period 2022-23. The Appointed Person is independent of Government and scrutinises the circumstances and manner in which search and seizure powers conferred by the Act are exercised without prior judicial approval and where nothing is seized for more than 48 hours.

I am pleased that we are now able to publish the Appointed Person's latest report. The report details that search and seizure powers were used in these circumstances on seven occasions.

The Appointed Person has confirmed in the report that he is satisfied that the criteria required for justifying the searches without prior judicial approval were met and that the powers of search were exercised appropriately. The Appointed Person has made no new recommendations for the period. This would indicate that the powers are being used reasonably and appropriately in accordance with the Act. We will continue to monitor the way that the powers have been used closely.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1089]

Director of Labour Market Enforcement: Publication of Interim Annual Strategy 2023-24

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): Alongside my hon. Friend the Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business (Kevin Hollinrake), I am publishing today the Labour Market Enforcement Annual Strategy for 2023-24, submitted by the DLME Margaret Beels OBE. The strategy will be available on www.gov.uk.

The Director of Labour Market Enforcement's role was created by the Immigration Act 2016 to bring better focus and strategic co-ordination to the enforcement

of labour market legislation by the three enforcement bodies which are responsible for state enforcement of specific employment rights:

The Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EAS);

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs National Minimum and Living Wage enforcement team—HMRC NMW/NLW team; and

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA).

Under section 2 of the Act, the Director of Labour Market Enforcement is required to prepare an annual labour market enforcement strategy, which assesses the scale and nature of non-compliance in the labour market and sets priorities for future enforcement by the three enforcement bodies and the allocation of resources needed to deliver those priorities. The annual strategy, once approved, is laid before Parliament.

The director is a statutory office-holder independent from Government, but accountable to the Department for Business and Trade's Secretary of State and the Home Secretary.

In line with the obligations under the Act, Margaret Beels submitted this strategy for 2023-24 on 31 March 2023.

This strategy continues on from the 2022-23 strategy by using the same four themes to provide an assessment of the scale and nature of non-compliance and notes sectors where the risk level has changed. The strategy sets out the DLME's desire to achieve improved cohesion and join-up between the DLME and the three state enforcement bodies through non-legislative measures, including suggestions of where the enforcement bodies and sponsor Departments should be focusing their efforts.

The Government's view is that the enforcement bodies have been funded sufficiently to deliver the activities set out in the strategy.

The DLME carried out stakeholder engagement for the 2023-24 strategy with a call for evidence and also by engaging with the enforcement bodies prior to submission.

As with previous reports, these recommendations are not formal Government policy. We have worked with the director, their office, and the enforcement bodies to understand the recommendations, and will carefully consider them moving forward.

[HCWS1088]

Investigatory Arrangements following Police Use of Force and Police Driving-related Incidents: Terms

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): Police officers across England and Wales do an incredibly difficult job, in some instances having to make life or death decisions in a split second to keep us safe. It is vital that the public and officers have clarity and confidence in the accountability system relating to police use of force and police driving, including the efficacy of investigations.

Successive Governments have referred to the need to consider the balance between ensuring the police can do their job to keep the public safe, while ensuring operational guidelines are complied with and officers act within the law.

On 24 September I announced a Home Office-led review to assess the existing legal frameworks and guidance on practice that underpin police use of force and police driving, and the framework for investigation of any incidents that may occur. It will examine:

Whether use of force or police driving frameworks provide clear, understandable and well understood guidance for officers;

Whether a lack of clarity or the frameworks themselves in any way inhibit or prevent the police from carrying out their role to protect life;

Whether they serve to maintain public confidence in the police, in particular for those impacted by police use of force;

How the UK meets its obligation to independently investigate situations where a death or serious injury (DSI) results from an incident involving law enforcement;

Whether necessary lessons have previously been understood and acted upon after historic incidents; and

Whether individuals are held to account appropriately.

I am pleased to announce that today we will publish the terms of reference for the review on www.gov.uk. A copy of the terms of reference will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

These make it clear that the review will not consider live or ongoing investigations or proceedings. The need to ensure it does not in any way prejudice or interfere with ongoing or concluded investigations or proceedings is paramount. To that end, the Home Office will keep under consideration any potential effect of the review on such investigations or proceedings.

The review will be co-ordinated by the Home Office, reporting to me and working with other Government Departments such as the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney General's Office. It will aim to provide findings to me by the end of year.

[HCWS1092]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Building Safety: Second Staircases

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): This Government are committed to ensuring that people can be confident that our buildings are safe. The Building Safety Act set up a new, robust regime, with a new Building Safety Regulator at its heart. In recent years, we have also changed statutory guidance on fire safety, with new measures including:

a ban on combustible materials for residential buildings, hotels, hospitals and student accommodation above 18m, and additional guidance for residential buildings between 11m-18m;

a lower threshold for the provision of sprinklers in new blocks of flats from 30m to 11 m;

a requirement for wayfinding signage for firefighters in residential buildings above 11m;

requirements for residential buildings over 18m to have an Evacuation Alert System, and for new residential buildings over 11m to include a Secure Information Box (SIB).

We must never be complacent in our approach to safety. In July, I confirmed that I intend to introduce new guidance requiring second staircases in new residential buildings in England above 18m. This not only reflects the views of experts including the National Fire Chiefs Council and Royal Institute of British Architects, but also brings us into line with countries—including Hong Kong and the UAE—in having a reasonable threshold for requiring second staircases.

I can now announce the intended transitional arrangements that will accompany this change to Approved Document B. From the date when we publish and confirm those changes to Approved Document B formally, developers will have 30 months during which new building regulations applications can conform to either the guidance as it exists today, or to the updated guidance requiring second staircases. When those 30 months have elapsed, all applications will need to conform to the new guidance.

Any approved applications that do not follow the new guidance will have 18 months for construction to get underway in earnest. If it does not, they will have to submit a new building regulations application, following the new guidance. Sufficient progress for this purpose will match the definition set out in the Building (Higher-Risk Buildings Procedures) (England) Regulations 2023, and will therefore be when the pouring of concrete for either the permanent placement of trench, pad or raft foundations or for the permanent placement of piling has started.

With these transitional arrangements, we will ensure that projects that already have planning permission with a single staircase, the safety of which will have been considered as part of that application, can continue without further delay if they choose. It means that, for some years yet, we will continue to see 18m plus buildings with single staircases coming to the market. I want to be

absolutely clear that existing and upcoming single-staircase buildings are not inherently unsafe. They will not later need to have a second staircase added when built in accordance with relevant standards, well-maintained and properly managed. I expect lenders, managing agents, insurers, and others to behave accordingly, and not to impose onerous additional requirements, hurdles or criteria on single-staircase buildings in lending, pricing, management or any other respect.

Those who live in new buildings over 18m can be reassured that those buildings are already subject to the additional scrutiny of the new, enhanced building safety regime. Their fire safety arrangements are scrutinised in detail at the new building control gateways and planning gateway one.

I realise that developers and the wider market are waiting for the design details that will go into Approved Document B. The Building Safety Regulator is working to agree these rapidly, and I will make a further announcement soon. In the meantime, I am confident that this announcement of the intended transitional arrangements will give the market confidence to continue building the high-quality homes that this country needs.

[HCWS1090]

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