

**Tuesday
28 November 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 28 November 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

DAVID FULLER CASE

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Report, dated 28 November 2023, entitled Independent Inquiry into the issues raised by the David Fuller case - Phase 1 Report.—(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Household Income: Energy Costs

1. **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): If she will make an estimate of the proportion of households that spent more than 10% of their income on energy costs in (a) 2021 and (b) 2022. [900331]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): In England, the share of households required to spend more than 10% of their income on energy after housing costs was 21% in 2021 and 30% in 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine that year. We provided close to £40 billion of energy support to households and businesses last winter, one of the most generous levels in Europe. Since then, we have seen the Ofgem price cap fall from £4,279 at its peak in January 2023 to £1,928 from January 2024.

Sarah Champion: More than 20% of Rotherham households are living in fuel poverty, yet the Government's flagship energy policy will not, by their own admission, save a single penny from those households' energy bills. Bills are set to rise again in January. How can the Minister justify the Government's appalling failure to act to support my constituents, struggling to heat their homes this winter?

Claire Coutinho: The extra support announced by the Chancellor last week brings our total cost of living support to £104 billion over the period 2022 to 2025. That is one of the largest support packages anywhere in Europe. On top of that, we are providing £900 in cost of living payments across 2023 and 2024 to ensure that support gets to those most in need.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I recently bumped into Christopher Thexton, who is one of the "green doctors" working out of College House in Barrow. He does an amazing job with his team, going into homes to try to help people to save money on their energy bills and reduce the cost of living, whether that is help with energy debt, fixing drafts in their home or even changing the lightbulbs to make them more energy-efficient, but demand is massively outstripping supply. Can my right hon. Friend speak to whether any more support is available to such teams to help people on the ground to reduce their energy bills?

Claire Coutinho: We are spending £20 billion on energy efficiency over this Parliament and the next. We can be proud of the steps we have taken so far. When we took over in 2010, just 14% of homes were energy-efficient. Now the number is 50%, and we have plans to go further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): An estimated 6.3 million households are in fuel poverty across the UK. Ofgem has announced that energy debt has reached £2.6 billion. With millions of people facing another difficult winter, the Government promised to consult on a social tariff to help the most vulnerable. Can the Secretary of State provide an update on that consultation?

Claire Coutinho: People mean many different things by a social tariff, but fundamentally it is about providing people with support to help with their bills. Just in the autumn statement, we have increased the national living wage, which is worth £1,800 to people; increased benefits by 6.7%, which is worth £470; and cut national insurance contributions, which is worth £450. Those are all on top of the £900 cost of living support we already have in place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Thursday is Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, and recently the Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel estimated that nearly 30% of households in Scotland are facing extreme fuel poverty, up from 12% in 2019. Does the Secretary of State agree that at the very least that is concerning? Somehow a third of my constituents in the north-east of Scotland—home to a 50-year bonanza for His Majesty's Treasury—live in energy-rich Scotland but find themselves in fuel poverty. Is that what Unionists mean by pooling and sharing resources?

Claire Coutinho: We have taken energy prices going up incredibly seriously, which is why we have spent £104 billion protecting the British people. That is one of the most generous packages anywhere in Europe. If the hon. Member cares about the incomes of people in Scotland, I suggest that he backs British oil and gas jobs.

Inflation Reduction Act and Low Carbon Industries

2. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the impact of the US Inflation Reduction Act on levels of investment in low carbon industries in the UK. [900332]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): In the UK, we have seen nearly £200 billion-worth of investment in low carbon sectors since 2010. That is 50% more than the US as a share of GDP. At the global investment summit just yesterday, it was clear that businesses see Britain very much as open for business, and that was backed up by £29 billion-worth of investment.

Nick Smith: In the summer, I heard about President Biden's plan to use America's industrial might to power up New York using offshore wind. Given that we need to turbocharge the green economy, why will the Government's response to the Inflation Reduction Act not come into effect until 2025?

Claire Coutinho: We have taken many steps already. We have set out new plans for auction round 6 of renewable energy and for permanent economy-wide full expensing. We changed planning, and we are unlocking the grid. The fund that the hon. Member mentioned will unlock supply chains across the UK. What have people said? Scottish Renewables has said it is

"a shot in the arm for the sector".

The Offshore Wind Industry Council has said that it will help us retain our position as a "global leader". It has been welcomed by Make UK, Energy UK and many other businesses as well.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Last week, the Chancellor's autumn statement included an important commitment on the Government's part to bring forward legislation to modernise the Crown Estate's investment and borrowing powers, which is a vital step for deploying 16 GW of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. That will benefit the whole of Wales, and we hope in particular my constituency and the port of Milford Haven. When are the Government likely to bring forward that important legislation?

Claire Coutinho: My right hon. Friend has been a doughty champion for the Celtic sea. He knows that we have a commitment to unlock an additional 12 GW of wind power in the Celtic sea. That is important to us, and we will bring forward the legislation in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Instead of properly responding to America's Inflation Reduction Act, the Government held a meeting with businesses yesterday—you might not have seen it, Mr Speaker, as it did not make any of the front pages. Was the global investment summit not just a distraction from the same old fundamentals—business confidence is down, exports are down, and growth forecasts are down after 13 years of instability and uncertainty? Does the Secretary of State think that lack of business confidence is because her Government trashed the economy last year, because her Government told business to eff off, or because, as Mark Carney said, the Government have "juvenilised" the climate debate instead of using it as a driver of good jobs? Does she not agree with those from a global pension fund I spoke to this morning who said it is time we got some adults in the room?

Claire Coutinho: What we saw yesterday was £7 billion from Iberdrola for UK electricity networks and renewables, and £300 million from Aira, the heat pump installer. In the last couple of weeks, we have had £500 million from Sea Wind, £2 billion from Nissan, and £186 million from Siemens Gamesa. What the hon. Lady should understand is that there is a difference between what the Government are offering, which is £29 billion of investment, and what Labour is offering, which is £28 billion of borrowing.

Net Zero Targets: Businesses

3. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with businesses on the Government's net zero targets. [900333]

16. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the contribution of businesses to helping meet the UK's net zero targets. [900346]

Andrew Gwynne: As a fellow Lancastrian, I hope you had a good Lancashire Day yesterday, Mr Speaker.

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): As a Yorkshire MP, I resent that remark. [Laughter.]

I meet regularly with business leaders and organisations. I chair or co-chair, among others: the Offshore Wind Industry Council, which I will be going straight to after questions; the solar taskforce; the green jobs delivery group, which met yesterday; the North sea transition forum, which I will attend tomorrow; and, from a strategic cross-cutting point of view, the Net Zero Council. Of course, the Secretary of State and I met global leaders yesterday.

Andrew Gwynne: Well, as the Minister seems to meet so many business leaders, he must have heard their shock and horror about the Government's roll-backs on net zero. Earlier this month, the Aviva chief executive officer Amanda Blanc said that the Government were putting our climate goals as a country "under threat", putting at risk

"jobs, growth and the additional investment the UK requires".

She is not wrong, is she?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman has a well-founded and highly esteemed reputation for anger. Under this Government, this country has cut its emissions more than any other major economy on the planet, and we have the most ambitious plans for 2030. When I attend COP28 next week, we will be inviting and supporting others to join the UK, which under this Conservative Government has led the way on a pathway to net zero.

Joanna Cherry: The Industrial Decarbonisation Research and Innovation Centre based at Heriot-Watt University in my constituency is doing incredible work on the green transformation across the UK's industrial heartlands. It is working with all the biggest industrial clusters and is supporting more than 30 universities and research initiatives, looking at all aspects of the Government's decarbonisation challenge. As such, it is well placed to assist business to meet our net zero targets. The problem is that its funding is coming to an end next March, and at present there is nothing to replace it. The science

Minister promised me a meeting about this urgent issue several months ago, but it has been cancelled a number of times. Will the Minister advocate with his colleague so that I can get this meeting arranged and get funding in place for IDRIC to continue its fantastic work?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for championing vital research, not least in Scotland. I am looking forward to meeting scientists when I am in Scotland over the next couple of days. We have all heard her request, and it will be noted.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned that he will go to COP28 next week. Could he remind Members of the House, particularly those on the Opposition Benches, of the measures taken in last week's autumn statement to help to promote the green energy agenda in this country?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is quite right. We must never forget the parlous state of this country in 2010. Less than 7% of our electricity came from renewables—that was the legacy of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). In the first quarter of this year, that was nearly 48%. Opposition Members raised the issue of people being cold and unable to pay their bills, but just 14% of homes were insulated properly; now, it is 50%. In last week's autumn statement we heard announcements about the grid and—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister talks about emissions, and we are getting a lot of them from him today.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): My constituents put in 10% of the energy into the national grid from two nuclear power stations. We are No. 7 on the template for new builds, so I would like to invite the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) to come to Heysham to see for himself the good work of EDF and the new nuclear power programme that is coming to my constituency.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is a stout champion not only of the pathway to net zero but of the jobs and prosperity that come with it. It is with great alacrity that I accept on behalf of my hon. Friend the Minister.

Fuel Poverty

4. **Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP):** What assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of fuel poverty since 2018. [900334]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The share of households in fuel poverty in England reduced every year between 2010 and 2021, with energy efficiency being the key driver. Although fuel poverty is devolved, we continue to engage with the devolved Administrations, including on specific schemes such as the energy company obligation and the warm home discount.

Anne McLaughlin: Across the world and in the United Kingdom, human rights are being eroded and fuel poverty is on the rise. This Government could address both by declaring access to energy a human right. It would mean that people could not be cut off willy-nilly simply because they could not afford to pay for their energy at that time. Does the Minister agree that energy should be a human right? If not, will she tell me which human beings she believes should not have the right to heat their homes?

Amanda Solloway: As the hon. Lady indicated, the Government take fuel poverty incredibly seriously. Everybody has the right to heat. We have been helping people with their energy bills, including a £900 cost of living allowance, as well as all the great things that we announced in the autumn statement.

Community Energy Schemes

5. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What steps her Department is taking to support the development of community energy schemes. [900335]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government have created a new £10 million community energy fund to support community energy projects in England. We are working with the sector on content and a timetable for a consultation on barriers for community energy projects.

Patrick Grady: Does the Minister recognise the frustration and disappointment at the length of time and legislative barriers that remain for campaigning community groups who want community energy schemes to move forward? It is the most secure way of generating electricity. The Conservatives are supposed to be the party of free markets and competition, so why are they denying consumers the choice that would come with an exciting community energy scheme?

Andrew Bowie: Far from denying consumers opportunity, we are already beginning to work with organisations, such as the Community Energy Contact Group. On the content of the consultation we launched and whether it should include solutions to barriers, I will need to take a view when it responds.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero earlier mentioned the solar taskforce. Will my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary liaise with his colleagues and the National Farmers Union on combining community energy schemes with farmers and the rural sector? The solar taskforce mentions acres of supermarket rooftops being available for solar, but makes no reference to farm buildings. It makes sense that community schemes, working with local farmers in rural areas, can deliver community energy and allow farmers to diversify.

Andrew Bowie: I hear very much what my right hon. Friend says and understand his concerns. It is therefore with equal alacrity that I accept a meeting on my right hon. Friend the Minister's behalf to discuss those issues moving forward.

Prepayment Meters: Vulnerable Households

6. **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the impact of the mandatory code of practice for the involuntary installation of prepayment meters on vulnerable households. [900336]

20. **Michael Shanks** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the impact of the mandatory code of practice for the involuntary installation of prepayment meters on vulnerable households. [900350]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Secretary of State and I met CEOs of energy suppliers recently. We emphasised that Ofgem's new rules must be implemented and lead to improved protections for vulnerable consumers. We are working closely with Ofgem and the industry to ensure that that is the case.

Tony Lloyd: The Minister will be aware that the ban on the involuntary installation of prepayment meters will be lifted soon. That will mean families with children over two years old and pensioners under 75 who are still vulnerable will potentially face the higher cost of prepayment meters. There is the possibility, of course, that when they run out of tokens they will be cut off. Is that right?

Amanda Solloway: First of all, we have been mindful of ensuring that there is no higher cost to prepayment meters. We are mindful of the fact that prepayment meters have a place in certain households, because we are very sure that we must not increase debt. However, one reason why we scrutinised the process so carefully is to ensure that it does not impact negatively on vulnerable customers.

Michael Shanks: I thank the Minister for that answer, but what is it about the code of practice that means two-year-olds are vulnerable but three-year-olds are not? What is the difference between those households? Why has Scottish Power been able to go to court to obtain warrants to install prepayment meters forcibly before it has been able to demonstrate any compliance with the code? Is that not the wrong way around?

Amanda Solloway: Just for assurance, we have held conversations with Ofgem and suppliers to make sure no forced instalments have taken place yet. We are scrutinising the system to ensure that all vulnerable people are able to access the energy they need.

Onshore Wind Farms

7. **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): If she will take steps to increase the number of onshore wind farms. [900337]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): This has been a record year for onshore wind, which is already the largest renewables technology. The latest contract for difference added an unprecedented 1.7 GW.

Dame Meg Hillier: The Minister seems to be comparing figures I have not seen. If it is a record year, why have we seen such a dramatic drop in planning applications for onshore wind farms and in the number of onshore wind farms delivered? From a peak of 64 applications in 2011, it went right down to zero in 2019 and now to 10 in 2022, the latest figures the House of Commons Library could provide. That does not seem like a record year to me. Is it not time the Government stopped shilly-shallying on onshore wind and backed the builders, not the blockers?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is renowned in the House for her arithmetic skills, but in this case they seem to have failed her. The 1.7 GW is a tremendous success. I share her enthusiasm for onshore wind where communities support it. In September, the Government announced changes to planning policy for onshore wind in England to help make it easier and quicker for local planning authorities to consider and, where appropriate, approve onshore wind projects where there is local support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the Kettering constituency there are 30 large wind turbines. Together with solar panels, they generate enough renewable electricity to power all 45,000 homes in the constituency. Is this not yet another case of where Kettering leads, others follow?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend has championed, does champion and, I am sure, will continue for many years to champion the good people of Kettering, and the fact that they are providing such leadership on net zero and the delivery of renewables after our parlous inheritance from the Labour party. Let us make sure that we never go back to a system in which renewables are not brought on to our grid in the way they are today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Minister is being a little shameless with his figures. We really ought to look at what is continuing to happen in England. In England, industry and other bodies warned that the supposed changes to onshore planning restrictions that were announced in September were far too timid to make any real difference to the dearth of new onshore wind.

I recently visited the site in Leighton Buzzard of the only turbine that has been put in place onshore in England since those supposed restrictions were lifted. It turns out that it has been in the planning process since 2014, and is not on a new site anyway. The Department's renewable energy planning database shows that there are precisely zero new schemes in the pipeline in England. Should the Minister not go away and reconsider the remaining planning and funding restrictions on onshore wind so that it really can get going again?

Graham Stuart: As I have said, I share the enthusiasm on both sides of the House for onshore wind. The Government have set regulations that require onshore wind developers to consult communities in advance of submitting a planning application, as well as having it consulted on post-submission. We make no apology for

rolling out this transformation in renewable technologies in concert with communities, rather than seeking to ride roughshod over them.

AQUIND Interconnector Project

8. Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): When she plans to make a decision on the application for development consent for the proposed AQUIND interconnector project. [900338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The proposed AQUIND interconnector project is a live planning application currently being redetermined by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who is progressing the work in the normal course of business. That means that, as set out in the planning propriety guidance, I am unable to give any further information on the progress of this live case.

Stephen Morgan: Portsmouth people have waited far too long for the Government to decide against AQUIND. Will the co-owner's donation of more than £1 million to the Tories—including £6,000 to the Prime Minister's constituency party and over £70,000 to the Chancellor—be a factor in the Minister's decision on what is a disastrous project for Portsmouth?

Andrew Bowie: The Secretary of State is following a well-established planning process. I am sorry that I cannot say any more about this live case beyond what I have said already; it is with the Department and the Secretary of State for a decision.

Climate Change Committee: Progress Report

9. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the Climate Change Committee's 2023 progress report to Parliament. [900339]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): The Climate Change Committee itself has said that there was "no material difference" in our overall projections after we made the changes to policies in September. The Government have taken considerable further steps since then, including our introduction of the zero-emission vehicle mandate, our agreement with Tata Steel on industrial electrification in Port Talbot, and reform of electricity grid connections.

Afzal Khan: The Climate Change Committee has stated that the UK needs to

"regain its international climate leadership",

but last year the Prime Minister was uninterested in attending COP27. The committee's recent report to Parliament made it clear that the UK was

"no longer a climate leader".

Since then we have seen approval for massive oilfields, weakened climate targets, and the resignation of a Minister because the Prime Minister is so "uninterested". COP28 is days away, and there is still confusion over whether the Government will push for the phasing out of fossil fuels. Given all that, is it not fair to say that the Government are failing to do everything possible to halt the climate breakdown?

Claire Coutinho: The UK has one of the most ambitious climate targets in comparison with any of our international peers. The UN's emissions gap report, published just last week, shows that the UK is expected to reduce emissions between 2015 and 2030 at the fastest rate in the G20 group. We remain extremely ambitious about climate change. We have over-delivered on all our carbon budgets to date, and the work that has been done shows that we will continue to do so.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The committee's recent progress report advocated a faster transition to lower-carbon energy. What fiscal and regulatory measures are the Government taking to encourage more capital investment by business in this important area?

Claire Coutinho: We are already taking steps. We have set out new plans for another round of renewable auctions, and we have set out the most radical plans to unlock the electricity grid since the 1950s. We have also launched a new gigafund that will unlock supply chains across all these areas, and we can see that investors are voting with their feet.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to national and household energy security, ownership matters, as championed by the Co-op party. The Labour party is committed to 1 million owners of UK-produced renewable energy, with 8 GW that will be cheap, green and owned by the people here in the UK, so why will the Government not meet that ambition?

Claire Coutinho: I think the hon. Gentleman's argument is completely wrong-headed. Let us look at what the UK Government have done since 2010. We now have the first, second, third, fourth and fifth largest offshore wind farms anywhere in the world. As I have said, the plans we have set out meant that yesterday we were able to secure £29 billion of investment into this country. That will drive jobs and prosperity. The Opposition's plan is to borrow £28 billion, which would only drive up inflation.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Yesterday was Lancashire Day and today is Bedfordshire Day—happy Bedfordshire Day to all Members. It is the job of the Climate Change Committee to be enthusiastic about achieving our net zero goals. It is the responsibility of the Government to be fiscally prudent in achieving that objective. Does my right hon. Friend agree with the Prime Minister that we need to be clear with the British public all the way along about the costs that will be incurred to achieve our net zero ambitions?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is really important that we are honest with the British public. We are pursuing the most ambitious climate targets, but we will do so in a sensible way that protects the economy, grows jobs and investment, and ensures that we can deliver for the country not only on energy security but on our climate change ambitions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have to say that I spent the first 40 years of my life in Bedfordshire and I had no idea that Bedfordshire Day was a thing, but happy Bedfordshire Day anyway.

Fifteen years ago, the Labour Government introduced the Climate Change Act 2008, a landmark piece of legislation that has guided climate policy and progress in this country and inspired similar action around the world—admirably led, it has to be said, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). But where is that leadership now? How can the Prime Minister show his face at COP when, in the words of the Climate Change Committee, his entirely cynical backtracking has created

“widespread uncertainty for consumers and the supply chain”,
has increased

“both energy bills and motoring costs”

and made

“Net Zero considerably harder to achieve”?

Claire Coutinho: I think the hon. Lady is putting a lot of words into the Climate Change Committee’s mouth there. What it actually said was that, in terms of emissions, it would make no material difference. As I have said, the UN’s emissions gap report showed just last week that the UK was expected to reduce emissions between 2015 and 2030 at the fastest rate in the G20 group. This is yet more doom and gloom from the Opposition. If we look at what we have actually achieved, we can see that we have the most ambitious targets in the world and we have set out unprecedented levels of detail. We will continue to do so.

Energy Bills Alternative Funds

10. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the energy bills support scheme alternative fund and the alternative fuel payment alternative fund. [900340]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government provide energy bills support through the energy bills support scheme alternative funding to over 150,000 households, and via the alternative fuel payment alternative fund to nearly 90,000 households that could not automatically access this vital support.

Christine Jardine: Energy bills are up 50% since 2021, but there was no mention of this in the autumn statement and £440 million earmarked for the most vulnerable households went unspent last year, yet in my constituency of Edinburgh West, pensioners, carers and disabled people who often have to use more electricity for life-saving equipment are paying those bigger bills. All of them are also paying higher standing charges than elsewhere in the UK. If the Chancellor will not commit to reopening the energy bills support scheme or the alternative fuel payment scheme, will the Secretary of State do so?

Amanda Solloway: Of course, as a Government we are looking at the standing charges; it is imperative that we do that and Ofgem is working through that. We have also given an unprecedented amount of support to households and non-domestic organisations. I reiterate that there is support at the moment. We have the £900 for the cost of living. We also have the disability allowance and other allowances. To give assurance, I meet regularly with all stakeholders.

National Grid Infrastructure: East of England

11. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What discussions she has had with National Grid on its planned timetable for building new substations, pylons and cabling in the east of England. [900341]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I frequently meet the network companies to discuss their important work developing our electricity transmission network. I have also been pleased to meet communities and MPs from East Anglia to discuss concerns about network infrastructure. However, as the decision maker for planning consents, the Department does not get involved in individual projects.

Giles Watling: I feel moved to found a Clacton Day. Why not?

I have called for the old Bradwell site on the Dengie peninsula to be used for the arrival of undersea cables, as opposed to wrecking the environment of Essex and other areas with substations, pylons and so on. With the scrapping of High Speed 2 as an example, does my hon. Friend agree that public bodies now need to do a better job of assessing possible alternatives, instead of just barrelling forward with boatloads of taxpayers’ cash and destroying our beautiful countryside?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As he knows from when we met to discuss this in June, the Electricity System Operator is responsible for planning the design and location of grid reinforcement, while transmission owners develop individual projects. I understand that Bradwell had been assessed but was not deemed appropriate for this project. However, I cannot comment on specific projects, in order to avoid prejudicing planning decisions. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend again to discuss this in further detail.

Offshore Wind Sector

12. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for workers in the offshore wind sector. [900342]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): This Government are proud to have made the UK a global leader in offshore wind, and the industry believes that UK jobs in the sector will rise from the current 30,000-plus to 100,000-plus by 2030—if, of course, Conservative stewardship continues.

Kenny MacAskill: Jobs for whom? That is the question. We have already seen the shameful situation of UK seafarers who work in the offshore wind sector being laid off, to be replaced by low-wage, exploited migrant labour. As the sector develops, as we see people go out to work on the turbines for longer and as we see the building of floating accommodation for them to stay on, there is a huge risk that those workers—not just those on the supply ships—will also face exploitation. Will the Minister work with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the national minimum wage applies in the offshore sector beyond the 12-mile territorial limit? That is the solution to protect our workers, and those from abroad, from being exploited.

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I share his enthusiasm for making sure that we continue the development of good, well-paid jobs, and the development of the skills required to help people access those jobs, and that we do not have exploitation onshore or offshore during that development. It is a huge opportunity for the United Kingdom and for Scotland. Working together, I am sure we can develop it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As we know from the excellent Rampion wind farm in Sussex bay—hopefully it will soon be expanded—offshore wind farms support workers not just in energy production but in tourism, fishing and leisure too. This year we celebrate 50 years of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973. It is estimated that there are more than 6,000 wrecks around the UK coast, but only 57 of them are listed, so will my right hon. Friend speak to his colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about how we can co-ordinate activity between new wind farms and marine archaeologists so that we can boost both our efforts to combat climate change and our cultural protection, which will give particular assistance to coastal communities?

Graham Stuart: As ever, my hon. Friend puts his finger on an important point. Existing assets such as wrecks have so many uses, all of which need to be understood. Our seas look so large, but they have multiple uses for shipping, defence and energy. We are working to ensure that we have a strategic, joined-up energy plan and a spatial strategy so that wrecks, marine protected areas and other interests can all be protected in an integrated manner.

Energy Bills Support: Shropshire

13. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support people in Shropshire with their energy bills. [900343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government are continuing to provide up to £900 of cost of living support throughout 2023-24 to help vulnerable households, which is an increase on the £650 that we provided the previous year, as well as targeted support such as £150 through the warm home discount.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Farmers in my constituency and the neighbouring Ludlow constituency are among the most productive in the United Kingdom and, speaking as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, we are very proud of their contribution to British exports. At the moment, they are rather adversely affected by rising energy costs. What additional assistance will the Government give to the agricultural sector to help this very important industry survive?

Amanda Solloway: My hon. Friend is a champion for Shropshire and for the farming industry. Farmers in Shropshire constituencies and across the UK have already benefited from the energy bill relief scheme, which ended on 31 March and provided more than £7.4 billion of support.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): I wish to welcome Faroese politicians who are here watching today. In the past year, the energy bills support scheme alternative fund was set up to help 900,000 households. As the Minister said earlier, only about 150,000—141,000, in fact—got the £400 promised, which means that 750,000 eligible households missed out on their £400. With one in four bill payers now in energy debt, will the Government keep their promise and make good to those 750,000 who missed out on that money when the scheme closed in May?

Amanda Solloway: As I stated, the alternative fund was an incredible support and provided households with that support. The Government lent in to try to ensure that everyone who was entitled to the funding was able to receive it. Now that the scheme has closed, the money will return to His Majesty's Treasury.

Energy-intensive Industries

14. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help energy-intensive industries to decarbonise. [900344]

22. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help energy-intensive industries to decarbonise. [900352]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government have committed £20 billion to support early development of CCUS—carbon capture, usage and storage—and £500 million to the industrial energy transformation fund to help industry to decarbonise, with phase 3 expected to open for applications in early 2024.

Alex Cunningham: We are still waiting for a lot of that to happen. The Tees Valley hosts a huge number of energy-intensive industries, but we have lost many of them over the years—a few years ago it was steelmaking, but more recently we saw the demise of the Cleveland Bridge & Engineering Company at Darlington, which built the Sydney harbour bridge. The last ammonia manufacturing plant in the country, that of CF Fertilisers, closed its doors this year, as did Mitsubishi's Cassel works, with both citing that their energy costs were way higher than those of their European and American competitors. What are Ministers going to do to ensure that we do not have any more closures as a result of their policy failures?

Andrew Bowie: It is a shame that the hon. Gentleman could not find it within himself to congratulate Mayor Ben Houchen on all the work he is doing to bring steelmaking back to the Tees Valley for the first time in a generation. The Government are engaging with the steel industry on a sustainable future, as announced on 15 September. Tata Steel expects to invest £1.25 billion, including a UK Government grant worth up to £500 million, in a new electric arc furnace. Frankly, the hon. Gentleman should start talking up the Tees Valley.

Gill Furniss: Sheffield has a proud history of steelmaking, so much so that we are known globally as the "steel city." To this day, steel supports thousands of jobs in Sheffield, but repeated failures by this Government

mean that more and more families are worried about the future of this key industry and the livelihoods that depend on it. Will the Minister commit to giving this vital sector the support it needs to decarbonise in a fair way, while ensuring that the industry has a green, sustainable and prosperous future?

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and, yes, I can give that commitment, because we are already engaging in that work. We are working with companies up and down the UK to ensure that they are able to decarbonise and deliver secure, high-wage, high-skilled jobs into the future, which will be the backbone of this economy as we move forward.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): First, let me thank the Government for the support they give for CCUS, and not least the Acorn project in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that CCUS needs to be developed across the UK at pace? Does he recognise the particular value of new CCUS power stations, such as the planned project in Peterhead in my constituency, which will generate more than 900 MW and, in conjunction with the Acorn project, will do so 95% emission-free?

Andrew Bowie: Yes, I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on his relentless efforts to decarbonise the North sea and the north-east of Scotland, and his support for the Acorn project. I was pleased to join him and the Prime Minister at the announcement on that in the summer. As my hon. Friend knows, CCUS is a priority for this Government, and we are progressing at pace. Power CCUS will be a vital component of our route to net zero, which is why we are committed to supporting at least one power CCUS plant by the mid-2020s.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Government are taking significant steps to support industrial clusters around the UK. They are each at a different stage of development and much of the technology is emerging as we speak, but the 2030 target is quite close and the scale of investment runs into billions of pounds. What engagement is my hon. Friend undertaking to discuss investment plans with individual businesses, to ensure that they meet the target and use the latest available technologies?

Andrew Bowie: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that investment is key to delivering our ambitious plans, which is why the Secretary of State was at the global investment summit yesterday. Working with the Department for Business and Trade and the Minister for Investment, we are engaging with companies on a daily basis, inspecting their investment plans to ensure they are fit for this country and the future, and will deliver the ambitious, world-leading targets we have set ourselves to decarbonise and provide the jobs of the future for this country.

Household Energy Efficiency

15. **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): If she will make an estimate of the number of households that had energy efficiency measures installed in (a) 2010 and (b) 2022. [900345]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): In 2010, 960,000 measures were installed. In 2022, around 200,000 measures were installed. In 2010, Government schemes were aimed at low-cost, easy-to-install measures. In 2022, our funding schemes focused on high-cost measures.

Samantha Dixon: Upgrading homes to energy performance certificate band C would create a huge economic and social boost to Britain. In my constituency of Chester more than half of homes are below EPC C and almost 20% of the housing stock is classed as historic, as it was built before 1919. What plans does the Department have to upskill the workforce and speed up the roll-out of energy efficient homes, including historic buildings, such as the ones in my constituency?

Amanda Solloway: The hon. Lady makes a good point about upskilling the workforce. Good progress has been made and around half of all homes will now reach the Government's ambition of EPC C by 2035, compared with just 14% in 2010.

Offshore Wind: East of England

17. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Whether she is taking steps to support the development of an offshore grid for wind farm energy in the east of England. [900347]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): Grid reinforcement is critical to delivering our world leading offshore wind targets. The electricity system operator is responsible for designing a modern grid that uses a mix of upgraded existing lines, offshore transmission networks and new underground and overhead lines to bring this low-cost, homegrown generation to consumers.

Priti Patel: My constituents are angry about the ill-thought-out proposal by National Grid to impose 100 miles of pylons and overhead powerlines between Norwich and Tilbury. Will the Minister share with me, the House and my constituents what work he is doing to ensure that the Government do all they can to encourage National Grid and developers to build an offshore grid that will provide more investment and growth in renewables, and pull the plug on these awful pylons?

Andrew Bowie: As my right hon. Friend knows, I visited East Anglia a few months ago and I plan to visit again. I hear the frustration and the concerns of her constituents, which she has brought to the House today. As she knows, the ESO remains responsible for electricity network design. Offshore routing is more expensive and the costs would be borne by consumers across the country. However, we will continue to engage with the ESO as it develops proposals that strike the balance of offshore and onshore infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, who must have a great connection with the east of England.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): It comes as a great relief that the Minister is listening, certainly to my constituents and his own. There are extraordinary levels

of cheap green Scottish renewable energy transmitted to large consumers in industrial bases in the south by the network. This north-south transaction should rightly be done by subsea transmission cables, negating the need for onshore pylons and their attendant visual blight, environmental degradation, loss of productive farmland, costly compulsory purchase and wayleave charges. Why are Angus and other Scottish communities now threatened with a new 400 kV pylon line, instead of transmitting that energy south using subsea methods?

Mr Speaker: I think there would have been better questions. Time is a bit tight, but please answer the question, Minister.

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman should probably direct that question to my Scottish Government counterparts, who are in the same party as him. He wants to ride roughshod over the Scottish planning system to allow for a faster deployment of this new energy infrastructure across Scotland, including in his and my own constituencies. The Scottish Government have control over planning, the ESO have control over developing those plans and—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us come to topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. [900357] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): Since my last appearance at departmental questions in September, we have shown that Britain remains open for business. Through our announcement on AR6, we have taken the next steps towards 50 GW of offshore wind energy. We have announced £960 million of investment in advanced manufacturing for key net zero sectors, including offshore wind networks, carbon capture, usage and storage, hydrogen and nuclear. We have set out the most radical plans to update the grid since the 1950s. I have signed a memorandum of understanding with South Korea to ensure closer co-operation on nuclear and offshore wind, bringing in £10 billion as well.

Jack Brereton: Given the success of exempting the ceramics sector from the climate change levy, and the risks of carbon leakage from offshoring the industry, will my right hon. Friend seriously consider exempting the ceramics sector from the emissions trading scheme?

Claire Coutinho: I know that my hon. Friend is a long-standing champion of the ceramics sector. The sector receives free allocations under the ETS, reducing carbon price exposure and mitigating its risk of carbon leakage. The Government are reviewing the free allocations policy and will consult this year to ensure that we effectively support at-risk industries.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The world sorely needs leadership at COP28, but the verdict of our most globally respected climate expert, Lord Stern,

earlier this month was damning. He said that the Government's backsliding on climate action is a "deeply damaging mistake"—damaging for the UK, the world and the future of us all. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to place on record her response to Lord Stern?

Claire Coutinho: The right hon. Gentleman should understand that we have the most ambitious climate target of any of our international peers. If he looks at the delivery today, he will see that we overshot on carbon budgets 1 and 2, and we are on track to overshoot on carbon budget 3. In fact, the UN gap report showed just last week that between 2015 and 2030 the UK is expected to reduce emissions at the fastest rate of any of the G20 countries.

Edward Miliband: The Secretary of State has no response to Lord Stern. The problem is that he sees a Government preaching one thing and doing another. Her negotiators at COP will argue to phase out fossil fuels, but she wants to drill every last drop at home and open new coalmines. She will tell developing countries that climate action is good for the economy, but the Government use climate delay to divide people here at home. Does she not realise that climate hypocrisy just trashes our reputation and undermines our leadership?

Claire Coutinho: I completely reject that characterisation. At COP28, we will be talking about the UK's leadership when it comes to cutting emissions. We had cut emissions more than any of our international peers by 1990. Even if we look forward to our targets for 2030, we see that we will still be cutting emissions by more than any of our international peers. That is something that the right hon. Gentleman would do well to welcome.

T2. [900358] **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Paragraph 3.10.14 of the National Policy Framework Statement EN-3 states that new solar farms should avoid the use of

"‘best and most versatile’ agricultural land where possible”,

using the designations of the agricultural land classifications. But there are concerns that field surveys can artificially downgrade land. Will my right hon. Friend say that both she and the planning inspectorate will be vigilant in protecting best and most versatile land and in ensuring the integrity of land classification?

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work championing both this area and the concerns of his constituents. As he rightly says, planning policy and guidance encourage large solar projects to locate on previously developed or lower value land and we will indeed undertake to be vigilant in ensuring that those principles are respected.

T4. [900360] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Given the UK's decline under this Government to seventh place behind the US and Germany in attracting green investment as per Ernst and Young's analysis, what urgent steps is the Secretary of State taking to boost our competitiveness in green industries?

Graham Stuart: The hypocrisy and the ignorance coming from the Labour party is extraordinary. We have decarbonised more than any major economy on this earth and we will decarbonise more to 2030, and we are doing it by unlocking a level of investment into renewable energy double that we have seen in the United States. So, Labour can take its selective facts and put them where the sun don't shine.

Mr Speaker: I think that we have had a few problems with language already. I am sure the Minister will think carefully before he answers again.

T5. [900361] **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What plans do the UK Government have to buy the Wylfa site and associated intellectual property from Horizon to expedite gigawatt development at Wylfa in my constituency of Ynys Môn? Will the nuclear roadmap lay out a clear role for large gigawatt-scale nuclear projects like Wylfa after Sizewell C?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It would not be Energy questions without a question on Wylfa from my hon. Friend, who is such a champion for that technology and for her constituency. We all agree that Wylfa is a great candidate for new nuclear and one of several potential sites that could host new projects—[*Interruption.*] Ignore the luddites on the SNP Benches. As a first step towards a new national policy statement, the Government will consult later this year on a way forward to determine how new nuclear developments might be located.

T6. [900362] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In energy-rich Scotland, roughly one in three households in my constituency is living in fuel poverty. A properly designed social tariff would at least alleviate some of that poverty. Why have the Government broken their promise of a year ago to consult on a social tariff?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State indicated earlier, a social tariff can mean different things to different people. We are consulting suppliers and many stakeholders to ensure that what we are doing is the right thing. We are also looking at flexibility around the warm home discount.

T7. [900363] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): In February, the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero assured me from the Dispatch Box that a decision on hydrogen blending was coming soon. Seven months later, in September, the Department's consultation again promised that a decision would come soon. How can our constituents trust that this Government know what they are doing when they keep dithering over proven technology that would cut our carbon emissions, our constituents' energy bills and our dependence on foreign gas imports?

Andrew Bowie: The Government aim to reach a strategic policy decision before the end of the year on whether to support blending of up to 20% hydrogen by volume into the GB gas distribution networks. We are building the evidence to determine whether blending offers strategic and economic value and meets the required safety standards.

T8. [900364] **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On the subject of facts, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) just said that there are currently zero planning applications in the pipeline for onshore wind in England. Can the Minister please confirm whether that is true?

Graham Stuart: As I have said in earlier answers, we are seeking to encourage more applications. As far as I know, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) may be right, which is exactly why we are consulting on improving community benefits and have consulted on changing the planning system.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I welcome the fact that the UK is doing more offshore wind than any other country in Europe, but fishermen in Leigh-on-Sea are deeply concerned about the effect of expanding offshore on fish stocks. Can the Minister assure me that renewable power production on the south Essex coast will also focus on tidal, and will he join my vision to make Southend pier a shining beacon of renewables, completely powered by tidal energy?

Graham Stuart: I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for tidal. We have had a specific pot in previous rounds of the CfD precisely to develop that. We are the world leader in deployment and will continue to be, and I hope that her vision for her local area will be fulfilled.

T9. [900365] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Over the past year, the north-east has seen a dramatic collapse in the number of homes being upgraded through the Government's sustainable warmth and eco schemes. That poor record is costing households in my constituency dearly. What is the Minister going to do to put it right?

Amanda Solloway: I have previously answered questions on that and indicated that we have committed to making sure that we eradicate fuel poverty and support all people with their energy bills.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): With organisations such as the Dalton Nuclear Institute and the University of Bolton Institute for Materials Research and Innovation, combined with the Greater Manchester vision for "Atom Valley", will my hon. Friend update the House on the part that it will play in Britain's nuclear future?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued support for this growing and important sector. Alongside the work of the nuclear skills taskforce, we are currently in phase B of our advanced modular reactor research, development and demonstration programme. We aim to demonstrate that technology by the 2030s to decarbonise industry and we welcome his support in that work.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): As part of the recent floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, ambitious and comprehensive bids for funding to support developments by three major industry players on the Tyne were unsuccessful. Will the Minister meet me and those key Tyne businesses to discuss what further opportunities the Department can bring to mobilise the high-quality assets of our great river?

Graham Stuart: The Government are collaborating with industry to identify solutions to unblock barriers to offshore wind deployment. I know that the UK Infrastructure Bank is providing support to the Port of Tyne. The FLOWMIS project is currently live, so I cannot comment on it, but I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss these issues.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made a lot of progress in trying to bring together a holistic network, but it is too late for communities in Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex. In that regard, will she request that the electricity system operator publishes its survey of the Bradwell site, and that it undertakes a fresh one, with a full cost-benefit analysis, as a pilot for future connections?

Andrew Bowie: As my right hon. Friend knows, the ESO has conducted an investigation into Bradwell and its suitability, but I am happy to meet her again to discuss Bradwell, the location of future projects, and how we might work together to ensure that her constituents see the benefits of any future energy infrastructure built in that part of the country.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It now seems clear that the funds that the Government plan to commit to loss and damage at COP28 will come from the UK's existing climate finance commitments. We cannot tackle the climate crisis by robbing Peter to pay Paul. Given that a properly resourced and operational loss and damage finance fund has to be a litmus test of success, will the Minister commit to looking at new and additional forms of funding, including a permanent windfall tax on fossil fuel companies and a tax on high-emission travel, to deliver new finance and make polluters pay?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is right to highlight loss and damage as we approach COP28. We were pleased to play our part on the transitional committee in getting a recommendation to COP, and we look forward to its being operationalised in the near future. I agree with her that, if we are to get the scale of finance that is required, particularly for the most vulnerable countries at the front end, we need to look at innovative ways of adding to that finance.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Wind energy projects have a standard compensation scheme for all local communities, but solar projects do not. Industry will not act, so I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to bring in a standard measure for all solar projects to bring fairness to clean energy in our communities.

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for pursuing this matter assiduously; we have met and discussed it, among other issues. I think both industry and communities would appreciate greater clarity about community benefits, and I look forward to discussing that with her further.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): One in four households in my constituency is now living in fuel poverty, compared with the national average of one in 10. Why do the Government continue to give millions

to gas and oil giants, which enjoy billions in bumper profits, while our constituents continue to be dragged into poverty?

Graham Stuart: Regrettably, the content of so many Opposition Members' questions this morning is absolutely not in line with reality. Oil and gas production in the UK not only typically has lower emissions than the alternative of imports, but supports 200,000 jobs, all of which would be at risk if the Labour party came to power. To answer the hon. Gentleman's specific question, it is expected to raise £50 billion of tax over the next five years, all of which—including the safety of his constituents—would be at risk if Labour ever came to power.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Do my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister for Nuclear and Networks, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), agree that the very best location for two 470 MW Rolls-Royce small modular reactors is next to Sellafield, which will use some of the power and is a centre of nuclear excellence?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend is another great champion for nuclear. It gave me great pleasure to visit her constituency just a few weeks ago to see the great work being done at Sellafield. As we have set out, we aim to deploy up to 24 GW of nuclear energy by 2050, and we remain open to all available technologies that will deliver it. We are developing a new national policy statement that will provide the planning framework for new nuclear power beyond 2025. We are consulting on a proposed way forward for determining how new nuclear developments might be located.

Mr Speaker: Including in Lancashire.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This year, receipts from the emissions trading scheme will reach a new peak of £6.2 billion. The effects of attacks on energy-intensive industries are felt by workers in the aluminium and steel industries, and this week by workers at Grangemouth, where one of our few remaining oil refineries is going to close. Despite what the Minister said earlier, is it not a fact that, rather than helping energy-intensive industries, net zero policies are destroying them and sending them overseas?

Graham Stuart: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the EU has already legislated for a carbon border adjustment mechanism. Following our hosting of COP26, 90% of global wealth was covered by net zero pledges. At the beginning of that conference, the figure was just 30%. The right hon. Gentleman may not see it, but this is the direction the world is going in, and if he wants to future-proof British jobs he will get with the decarbonisation programme. Opposing it is to oppose the interests of his constituents and the sustainability of their of their jobs.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Melton CLP has of the biggest sites in Hyndburn and Haslingden. The renewables obligation certificate is due to end in 2027, and certainty is needed on whether the scheme will be

extended or another scheme will take its place. Will the Minister give us some assurances as to what comes next?

Graham Stuart: Mindful of how loquacious I am, I simply say to my hon. Friend that I will meet her to discuss the matter.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Over the space of a year, living in a cold home cost 21 of my constituents their lives. One reason behind that tragic

figure is that homes in rural communities are more difficult to insulate. On that basis, will the Minister urgently review the ECO4 and ECO+ guidelines to prioritise the hardest properties to insulate so that we cut bills and save lives?

Amanda Solloway: Of course it is always a tragedy to hear such figures. I have regular meetings with the hon. Gentleman and I will have a meeting to discuss this issue further, because this Government are committed to supporting all vulnerable people, including all those who have disabilities and additional needs.

Speaker's Statement

12.36 pm

Mr Speaker: Nominations closed at 12 noon for the election of the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. One nomination has been received. A ballot will therefore not be held for this position. I congratulate Sir Robert Buckland on his election as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He will take up his post immediately and serve as Chair until the end of this Parliament.

Ukraine

12.37 pm

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

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): Since I last updated the House on 24 October, the situation on the ground has remained largely unchanged. The armed forces of Ukraine continue to make slow but steady progress in their fight to retake their country, while a small crossing of the Dnipro has been established. Russian forces have made small advances in the northern axis of a pincer movement with which they are attempting to surround the town of Avdiivka.

Over the weekend, Russia launched what was likely the largest wave of one-way attack drone strikes on Ukraine of the war so far, ahead of another likely winter campaign of strikes against Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Ukraine neutralised most of the incoming weapons from the latest assault, and international partners, including the UK, are working with Ukraine to further strengthen its defences.

We will continue to support priority areas for Ukraine in the coming months, including air defence and hardening critical national infrastructure sites. Our foundational supply of critical artillery ammunition continues. We also continue to develop Ukraine's maritime capabilities, helping it to deny Russia sea control in the western Black sea. With Government help, a UK-based commercial insurance provider has developed an insurance facility for shipping using the Ukraine maritime corridor; the facility charges premiums in line with those under the Black sea grain initiative, which is crucial for re-attracting commercial shipping.

The UK has committed £4.6 billion of military support to date, as we continue to donate significant amounts of ammunition and matériel from our own stocks, as well as those purchased from across the globe. In addition, we have trained more than 52,000 soldiers since 2015. Our support for next year is being finalised, both internally within the Government and with our partners around the world, and will be announced shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey: Early on Saturday morning, sirens sounded across Kyiv for six hours. Families took to shelters and fear spread across the city. That day, 75 drones were launched on Kyiv—the biggest strike on Ukraine since Putin's brutal illegal invasion began, as the Minister said. With attention on the middle east, this is a wake-up call about Russia. Putin can still unleash fresh horrors on Ukraine, still shows contempt for international law, and still wants to redraw sovereign boundaries by force. Six hundred and forty-two days on, Ukrainians are living with fear every day, fighting every day, and dying every day. The defence of the UK starts in Ukraine, because if Putin prevails, he will not stop with Ukraine. I pay tribute to the UK troops who are training Ukrainian forces, flying out military aid and reinforcing regional security through NATO.

Last month, the Defence Secretary said:

"Let's not forget about Ukraine."

[John Healey]

So why did the autumn statement do just that? There was no 2024 military funding or action plan for Ukraine. At the very time when Ukraine needs confidence that it has strong, continuing support from allies, the Prime Minister is stepping back. UK leadership on Ukraine is flagging: this year's £2.3 billion of UK military funding runs out in March, while this month Germany announced €8 billion of military aid for next year. When will the Defence Secretary himself make a statement on Ukraine? When will Ministers announce the next delivery of UK weapons? When will the Government pledge funding for fresh military aid and publish a 2024 action plan for the military, economic and diplomatic support that Ukraine needs? When will the Prime Minister demonstrate by his decisions and actions that Britain will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to win?

James Heappey: I do not think there is any doubt in Kyiv—in fact, I know there is no doubt—about the UK's continued support, and indeed its leadership on gifting within the international community. While I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman is keen to make a political point, I think that deep down he knows that too, because he speaks to the Ukrainians. I know, as he does, that they continue to regard the UK as the standard bearer globally for encouraging others to donate ever more and, crucially, to donate weapons systems with ever more complexity. I have no doubt—as I think, deep down, the right hon. Gentleman has no doubt—that the Ukrainian Government maintain their confidence in us as one of their key allies, if not their key ally, and that the UK's leadership is certainly not flagging.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the announcement of weapons. The reality is that we are giving a very broad range of weapons. While he might think it is militarily sound to focus on always giving something new, just being resilient in our ability to keep giving what we are giving is every bit as important to the operational planning that the Ukrainian armed forces need to do. This is not a set of gimmicks—a set of announcements. This is about the resourcing of a military operational plan that UK military operational planners are key in developing with the Ukrainians. I am entirely comfortable that across a whole range of weapons systems, the pipeline that we now have in place to deliver every month, not only from our own stockpiles and manufacturing capacity but from those that we can access globally, is a reliable, dependable part of the Ukrainian plan.

As for the plan for next year, I completely accept that the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that a number could have been given in the autumn statement, but surely it is more important to give a number that reflects the discussions that the chairman of the joint chiefs, the Chief of the Defence Staff and General Zaluzhny have had, and those that senior US, UK and Ukrainian politicians have had, in order to understand the Ukrainian ambition for their operations next year, so that we can resource that properly. All the way through, what the UK has done better than anyone else in the world is understand what the Ukrainians want to do next and get there first in delivering that capability, in so doing emboldening others to follow. As soon as the plan for next year is confirmed, I am certain that the amount

that it will cost will be announced to Parliament and the plan firmed up, so that the right hon. Gentleman will be satisfied.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): That is an intriguing rationale for the fact that we gave £2.3 billion for the first year of the war and £2.3 billion for the second year of the war. Can the Minister convey to his colleagues in Government that Members on both sides of the House would be dismayed if we gave less than £2.3 billion for the year ahead? In his discussions with the Chancellor, might the Defence Secretary remind him that, when he stood for the leadership of the Conservative party, he recommended not 2% but 4% of GDP to be spent on defence?

James Heappey: I certainly can.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): At the weekend, the Ukrainian Government and peoples commemorated the holodomor—the genocide inspired by the Government of Joseph Stalin. During those celebrations, as the Minister rightly said, the Russian Federation launched its largest air attack on Kyiv to date, which included 75 Iranian-made Shaheds towards the capital. Part of the financing of the Iranian regime comes from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Back in January, Ministers intimated to the House and to Members that they were considering proscribing the revolutionary guard, a financier of the Iranian regime that is feeding the Russian Federation's military might. When will the Minister's Government stop considering and start proscribing it?

James Heappey: These are not conversations to which I am directly privy, so I am loth to offer detail that I do not have. Suffice it to say that the debate is more nuanced than the hon. Gentleman implies in his question, but I suspect he knows that. When we proscribe an organisation such as the IRGC, which is so integral to the Iranian state, we can make it quite hard to have any sort of communication with the Iranian state, but those are matters for colleagues in the Foreign Office. I will bring his question to their attention, and encourage them to write to him or seek to respond in some other way.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about insurance for shipping in the Black sea to encourage grain exports. Can I ask him if the British Government intend to carry on doing everything they can to make sure that those exports happen? He will be aware that Lebanon relies on those grain exports, and with the current situation in that region, we must ensure that starvation does not become another factor in an already exceptionally tense situation.

James Heappey: There is lots in my right hon. Friend's question—on all of which he is entirely right. First, many countries around the world are dependent on grain exports from Ukraine. It is a source of constant frustration to me and Government colleagues who go overseas on diplomatic missions to find that the Russians try to claim that somehow Ukraine is using food as a weapon of war, when it is they who are seeking to limit those crucial exports. Secondly, the more that Ukraine

is able to export, the more that the Ukrainian economy survives and, potentially, grows. One consequence of the insurance initiative, alongside the military success or the naval success that the Ukrainians have had in the western Black sea, is that shipping from Odesa is growing, which is encouraging. It is a sign that the new front in the Black sea is succeeding not only militarily but economically.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): In August 2022, the Defence Secretary's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), promised a 2023 action plan for Ukraine, but that is still nowhere to be seen with just over a month left in 2023. Surely, the UK must provide our friends in Ukraine with the long-term certainty of UK military support to repel Russia's illegal invasion, which is so important to Ukrainian friends and family in Feltham and Heston and across the country. Will the Minister explain why this action plan has not been published, and when there will be one for 2024?

James Heappey: The former Defence Secretary is a great man. The Opposition Front-Bench team has rightly sought to hold the Government to account for his commitment to an action plan, but I would reflect personally, in a rare moment of slight disagreement with him, that the masterplan for Ukraine next year is the Ukrainians' plan for next year, and we, as their key leading supporter, have a duty to resource their plan. Understanding what that plan is and resourcing it, both through straight cash in-year as well as commitment over three to five years thereafter, are all things we undoubtedly need to do; I think there is complete agreement in the House on that. I understand the disappointment that the commitment was not made in the autumn statement, but for the UK to publish Ukraine's plan would clearly be the wrong way of doing things; we need to understand what Ukraine's plan is and then announce how we will resource it, and we will do so.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Ukraine is holding firm against one of the biggest militaries in the world and it still rightly refuses to see the mass loss of Ukrainian life. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me on the following two points? First, as there are reports that we are already seeing a reduction in artillery deliveries to Ukraine, is enough getting through? Secondly, following Medvedev's threat to Poland, what are we doing to make sure our allies, such as Canada, meet their 2% of GDP commitment to NATO, as we need them to stay in the fight and protect that eastern flank?

James Heappey: On the first point, "enough" is what there is. Part of military planning is to moderate consumption levels to meet the scale of deliveries. Ukraine's military planning must reflect manufacturing capacity and stockpiles across the donor community. Enough is getting through, but we will not find a single Ukrainian general who would not want 10 times that amount if it were available. On the second point, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must ensure that the donor community remains foursquare behind Ukraine. In all probability the plans for next year will need to be more around consolidation than the plan for this year, but it is very important that those in the donor community see whatever consolidation is necessary as the right military, strategic

judgment—and still worthy of maintaining donor support—rather than peeling away because it does not feel as sensational as plans in previous years.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The previous Defence Secretary the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) was well thought of for the support he demonstrated for Ukraine, and in September last year he told the House that the Government had written "letters of comfort" to industry outlining the Government's intention to place orders with manufacturers. In last year's autumn statement the Treasury announced £560 million for the replacement of the UK stockpile, to be funded from the Treasury reserve rather than the MOD procurement budget. Where does the Minister think industry, Ukrainians and British service personnel should look for comfort given the silence in the autumn statement on the subject of continued UK support for Ukraine?

James Heappey: I suspect the first line of the hon. Gentleman's question would make it into the leaflets of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) if he were standing again as that was rare, but much deserved, praise. I am not sure I understand the rest of the hon. Gentleman's question. The Ukrainians know what they are getting this year and they have seen time and again the UK seeking to lead the world and catalyse donations. We have been the first to go through every capability threshold; they know that and they continue to know that.

UK service personnel will take comfort from the fact that in the autumn statement the Chancellor promised to maintain the 2% commitment—we are actually comfortably exceeding that—and that the complete modernisation and recapitalisation of the fighting echelon across all three services is well under way, with investment, too, in sorting out all the strategic enablers that bring credibility to our warfighting force. I do not see where any further comfort is needed, either on the Ukrainian side or for the men and women of the UK armed forces. In fact, it is quite the reverse; I think they know exactly what the Government are doing.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that political resolve in NATO will remain as strong as ever in the event that this campaign becomes enduring, protracted and attritional? Will he also assure the House about what is being done to ensure that all NATO countries step up and pay their 2%?

James Heappey: NATO's resolve is clear but its part in this is to deter escalation beyond Ukraine, whereas the donor community that has formed around Ukraine is a rather separate entity that extends beyond NATO's borders; that is an important distinction. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that as we prepare for a summit in Washington at which our American colleagues will want to see progress in meeting the NATO commitment, all NATO countries that are not meeting the 2% commitment will perhaps want to consider their spending plans before getting on the plane to Washington.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): How is it possible that our NATO ally Turkey has seen a more than threefold increase in exports to Russia this year of goods vital for Putin's war machine, and what are the Minister and our NATO allies going to do about that?

James Heappey: I am not familiar with that detail and will have to write to the right hon. Gentleman on it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): You, Mr Speaker, and the Minister will know that one strength that the Government and people of Ukraine have got from this place, both with their President's two visits and the visits of Members of Parliament, is the cross-party consensus on UK support for Ukraine. Does the Minister agree that it is concerning—unless I have got this wrong—that today the shadow Secretary of State the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), perhaps for the first time, slipped into party political fighting over this? I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Gentleman and hope that will not be the case as we get nearer to the election because of the strength offered by this place through the cross-party consensus for support for the Ukrainian effort against Russia's illegal invasion.

James Heappey: The right hon. Gentleman the shadow Defence Secretary has a job to do and it has been a feature and a great strength of the UK response that it has been largely non-partisan. I think the right hon. Gentleman saw an opportunity through the omission in the autumn statement, but I hope in my initial answer I was able to explain to him why understanding the Ukrainian plan must come first and announcing what the UK will do to support that plan necessarily comes second.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): There is a benefit to having these regular sessions, and there is of course the opportunity for more regular ministerial statements rather than just urgent questions; I encourage the Minister to think about that in the future. He will remember that on the last occasion I raised the issue of lethargy and concerns that events in the middle east could be a distraction from support for Ukraine, and I questioned some of the political dynamics evident in the US system. On this occasion I want to invert that question and ask if he has assessed the impact of the ongoing issues in the middle east and their consequences for countries such as Iran and their support for Russia, and whether that might present an opportunity for Ukraine.

James Heappey: I must be careful not to stray into intelligence matters but my sense is that it would be overoptimistic to think that raised tensions in the middle east might lead to a reduction in Iranian support for Russia; I think that support is now well embedded. On the other side of the formula, as the hon. Gentleman implied in the first part of his question there is of course a concern that the wider donor community might be distracted by what is going on in the middle east, and it is important to take moments like this to reassure Ukrainians and remind friends and partners around the world that we must remain steadfast in our support of Ukraine even while we all work together to deter escalation in the middle east.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Effective military support to Ukraine is more than just about providing weapons; it is also about stopping Russia producing and getting its own weapons. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) asked about this in

relation to Turkey but I would broaden the question: is the Minister aware of western technology being sourced by Russia and does he think we are doing enough to stop it?

James Heappey: I am certainly aware that there was an alarming level of content from the west in a number of Russian systems that were compromised in the early part of the war. That leads to two further points. First, there is the reassurance that if we are constraining our supply chain to Russia—which the sanctions regime largely is, albeit not completely and we need to work on that—its capacity to develop complex weapons is diminished. Secondly, that also suggests that Russian industry does not have the ability to do these things itself.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): It does seem now as if this war will be much longer than we had all hoped. In that context, political leadership will change. While it is important that NATO maintains its present position, NATO leadership may change over time. What steps can be taken, including by our Ministry of Defence, to make the case across the world that the defence of Ukraine is in the global interest, not simply the Ukrainian national interest?

James Heappey: The UK has been making that case from the outset. The stated aim of the UK Government has been that Russia must fail in Ukraine and be seen to fail. That is first because that is the right moral outcome for Ukraine—it deserves to restore its territory and live as a free sovereign country—and secondly because if Putin does not fail in Ukraine, he will be emboldened to go again and again. Euro-Atlantic security over the next 30 to 50 years would be profoundly affected as a consequence.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): With much of the media and world now focusing on the ongoing conflict in the middle east, does my right hon. Friend agree that we must not lose sight of the ongoing suffering of Ukrainians at home and on the battlefield?

James Heappey: I absolutely agree. We certainly are not allowing it to become a zero-sum thing where we focus only on the middle east or on Ukraine. We can do both, and the western Balkans and everywhere else where the UK's interest is challenged.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): It is clear that despite heroic efforts by the Ukrainian people, at best a military stalemate will be achieved. What is the Minister's estimate of the civilian and military casualties on both sides of this conflict to date? What are the prospects of negotiations to bring the bloodletting to an end?

James Heappey: I will need to write to the hon. Gentleman with estimates on both sides. The number I have in my mind on the Russian side is 320,000 dead and wounded, but clearly there will be Ukrainian casualties as well, and those are numbers are military, not civilian. I will do my best to respond on that.

I am not sure that I accept the hon. Gentleman's assessment that there is an inevitability to stalemate. The effort required to maintain the current apparent stalemate on land—in the Black sea, things are still

quite dynamic—is incredible. It is not an inevitable consequence, but the consequence of an extraordinary amount of effort on both sides. If one side loses the strategic depth or patience to maintain that effort, it is perfectly possible that a very different outcome will be achieved one way or the other. That is why it is important we are completely committed to maintaining the current level of effort. As the question from the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) pointed to, we continue to make that case to friends and partners around the world, so that the donor community remains strong, because there is nothing inevitable about the outcome of this war.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Russia's financing of this illegal conflict is derived from international trade, particularly the export of oil. I have highlighted how Russia is circumventing the unprecedented sanctions that have been introduced. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in this dynamic situation we need to be constantly alive to how international trade is made, so that we can prevent and block the financing of this conflict? Will he agree to work with international partners in reassessing what further needs to be done?

James Heappey: Absolutely. There is a military line of endeavour, but so too there is a diplomatic and economic one. The Minister for Europe—the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty)—was on the Front Bench to hear my right hon. Friend's question. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to note the importance of advancing on all fronts with equal vigour.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The renewed attacks on Kyiv at the weekend and the threats to power plants remind us how widespread the impact of the war is on Ukraine. Could the Minister update us on what recent talks he or ministerial colleagues have had with Ukrainian Ministers about recovery and reconstruction? Can he give details of what the UK is doing to help now?

James Heappey: The Prime Minister and other Ministers, including the Defence Secretary—this mostly sits in other Departments—meet the Ukrainians all the time to discuss exactly that issue. Indeed, the new Foreign Secretary was in Kyiv only last week. It is hugely important that alongside Ukraine's military resilience, its economy and democracy remain equally resilient and are not strangled out of existence, which would undermine the existence of the state of Ukraine just as much as any military failure. In answering the previous question, I noted that it is important that we advance on all fronts, that we support Ukraine militarily, and that we help Ukraine to maintain resilience and even growth within its economy. It is important globally that a key part of that economy—the export of grain—flows as freely as possible, hence the amount of effort we are putting into the western Black sea.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that he continues to do. He mentions the number of Ukrainian military recruits we have been able to help with training in the UK. Can he say any more about that training? How many recruits will we be able to assist in the coming months?

James Heappey: Our aim is to maintain that pace. For colleagues who have had the opportunity to visit, I know it is regarded as one of the moments of a lifetime to see the determination in the eyes of those men who are training to go to war. To train for five or six weeks in the absolute certainty that active combat waits immediately at the other end of that training pipeline focuses the mind in an extraordinary way. I pay tribute to them for their courage and heroism in volunteering to undergo the training, but also to the brilliance of the UK and other nations' armed forces that are here in this country delivering that training all day, every week of every month.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have always loved the opportunity to put my support for Ukraine and Ukrainians on the record. I appreciate that the Minister is not the correct Minister for this point, but I can see that the Immigration Minister has arrived for the next urgent question. We have been getting a lot of casework about Ukrainians finding it difficult to get their biometric residence permits processed in any meaningful time, including one who has been waiting since July. Can the Minister help with making representations to the Home Office to ensure that people can get those permits in swift time, so that they can rebuild their lives?

James Heappey: I make those representations now.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the continued work that my right hon. Friend and the whole Government do to support our friends in Ukraine.

May I return to the question of grain exports? Just a couple of days ago at a food security summit, President Zelensky was clear that he believes air defences are the missing link to secure those exports. Does my right hon. Friend share that assessment? If he does, how can we help make those air defences a reality?

James Heappey: Air defences have been an important part of the Ukrainian response to Russia's belligerence from the very beginning. Air defences are necessary to protect critical national infrastructure, the Ukrainian frontline and ports and other key economic infrastructure, as well as the sea lanes through which ships travel. The reality is that we are doing our best to source as much air defence globally as we can, and we will continue to do so.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): A few of us who are members of the all-party parliamentary group on the Holy See visited the Ukrainian Catholic cathedral in Mayfair this morning and visited the fantastic welcome centre that has provided so much support to Ukrainians who have come here seeking refuge and safety. One of the key messages we heard—I have heard this from constituents, too—was about the uncertainty they are facing as the visa programme extended by the UK Government is starting to come to an end. Can the Minister assure us that colleagues are working across Government to provide Ukrainians with the certainty they desperately need that they will continue to be welcomed here in the United Kingdom and will not have to pay for the privilege of extending their visas?

James Heappey: The Home Office will be seized of the need to provide as much certainty as it can. Indeed, on Friday I had the pleasure of visiting the welcome hub in my constituency and met eight Ukrainian families who were asking me the same questions. As I explained to them—I share this with the House now—while I completely understand why they individually want as much certainty as possible, it is also important that Putin does not get to see all these countries across Europe that are hosting so many millions of Ukrainians between them offering them an opportunity to stay permanently. The danger is that we would end up with Ukraine losing millions of its best people to economies around Europe, when ultimately we hope they will be able to go home to a free, sovereign Ukraine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his determination and leadership, which we all endorse. Ukraine has reported territorial advances of 3 km to 8 km in the Donetsk region, which have been hard fought—the cost has been in lives and injuries—but the determination of Ukrainians to retake their land from Russia is as strong as ever. What can the Minister do to allocate more high-grade military equipment to strike Russia hard in its backyard?

James Heappey: The UK is doing a lot—indeed, it is doing more than most—and we have been the first to go through every capability threshold. Although unfortunately it cannot yet be discussed openly in public or even in the House, the UK has also been able to use our ability to support the Ukrainians in developing their own complex weapons. That, when the time comes, will be one of the great stories, but it is of course something that we are doing all the time.

Net Migration Figures

1.10 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the publication of net migration figures.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): The most recent published data from the Office for National Statistics estimated that net migration in the year to June 2023 was at 672,000. That places untold pressure on housing supply and public services and makes successful integration virtually impossible. As the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have repeatedly made clear, it is far too high. The Government remain committed to reducing levels of legal migration, in line with the manifesto commitment on which every single Conservative MP stood in 2019 and the express wish of the British public as articulated at every single general election in the last 30 years.

Earlier this year, we took action to tackle an unforeseen and substantial rise in the number of students bringing dependants into the UK to roughly 150,000. That means that, beginning with courses starting in January, students on taught postgraduate courses will no longer have the ability to bring dependants; only students on designated postgraduate research programmes will be able to bring dependants. That will have a tangible effect on net migration.

It is crystal clear that we need to reduce the numbers significantly by bringing forward further measures to control and reduce the number of people coming here, and separately to stop the abuse and exploitation of our visa system by companies and individuals. So far this year, we have initiated a significant number of investigations into sectors such as care companies suspected of breaching immigration rules. We are actively working across Government on further substantive measures and will announce details to the House as soon as possible.

Yvette Cooper: Where is the Home Secretary, and what on earth is going on? The media were briefed that he was going to make a statement on net migration yesterday or today, but we have had nothing, and he is nowhere. The Immigration Minister has been everywhere, madly briefing all his ideas, but who speaks for the Government?

Net migration figures are now three times their level at the 2019 general election, when the Conservatives promised to reduce them. That includes a 65% increase in work migration this year, which reflects a complete failure by the Conservatives on both the economy and immigration. The Immigration Minister is complaining today—he will be furious when he discovers who has been in charge of the immigration system for the last 13 years.

Net migration should come down. Immigration is important for Britain and always will be, but the system needs to be properly controlled and managed so that it is fair, effective and properly linked to the economy. Net migration for work has trebled since 2019 because of the Government's failure on skills and training, their failure to tackle record levels of long-term sickness and people on waiting lists, and their failure to make the

system work. Social care visas have gone from 3,000 a year to more than 100,000 a year, yet this spring Ministers halved the programme for recruiting care workers here. Health visas are up, yet Ministers cut training places last autumn. Visas for engineers are up while engineering apprenticeship completions in the UK have halved.

Will the Government immediately agree to Labour's plan to get rid of the unfair wage discount that means employers can pay overseas recruits 20% less than the going rate, and which prevents training and fair pay in the UK? Will the Government immediately ask the Migration Advisory Committee to review salary thresholds for skilled workers in shortage occupations, which have not kept up, and where the MAC has warned repeatedly about low-paid exploitation? Will the Minister link the points-based system to training and employment standards in the UK and have a proper plan for the economy and the immigration system?

The Government have no serious plan; they are just ramping up the rhetoric. They have no plan for the economy, no plan for the immigration system and no plan for the country. Britain deserves better than this.

Robert Jenrick: I listened to the right hon. Lady for five minutes or so and detected absolutely no trace of a plan from her—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am worried, because I can only allow two minutes. Please do not go telling everybody that I have allowed five minutes. Honestly, it was only two minutes.

Robert Jenrick: I will keep that as a secret, Mr Speaker.

The only policy that the right hon. Lady articulated is something that is barely used and would have a de minimis effect on net migration, but that should come as no surprise to any of us. She has spent her entire political career campaigning for uncontrolled migration. She has campaigned for freedom of movement—she backed a Leader of the Opposition who campaigned for freedom of movement. She has always supported and lobbied and campaigned for unfettered access to the United Kingdom. She said that there is chaos on the Government side of the House, but all we heard from her was rhetoric and posturing. It would be laughable if it were not so serious.

Every single Conservative Member of Parliament campaigned on a manifesto commitment to bring down net migration. I did not see that in the Labour party's manifesto at the last election. Although she may be doing what she is because she is reading the polls or wants to posture, we are doing it out of deep political conviction. We believe that the number of people coming into this country is too high, that it places unbearable pressure on our public services and on housing, and that it is making it impossible to integrate people into this country and harming community cohesion and national unity. It is also a moral failure, because it is leaving people on welfare and enabling companies all too often to reach for the easy lever of foreign labour. For all those reasons, we are determined to tackle this issue. We understand the concerns of the British public, and I am here to say that we share them and will bring forward a serious package of fundamental reforms to address the issue once and for all.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I congratulate the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), as it is clear from the two ideas she laid out that she has read the 12 points in the New Conservatives' immigration plan. She is more than willing to copy and paste, just as the shadow Chancellor would, had she had the opportunity.

My right hon. Friend has my full support, although I am sure that will not help him with those in No. 10. I am deeply concerned and confused. At the weekend, the Prime Minister said that migration was “too high” and needs to

“come down to more sustainable levels”.

That is the full-fat option. Yesterday, I got the skimmed option, with the Prime Minister boasting about our “competitive” visa regime. Are the Cabinet members who sit with my right hon. Friend full-fat, semi-skimmed or skimmed?

Robert Jenrick: I support my hon. Friend in his lobbying and campaigning for the Government to take this issue seriously. He speaks for millions of people across the country who see the levels of net migration as far too high. Of course, it is right that we want the UK to be a country that is open to the very best and the brightest, and that is why we have taken action in creating visa routes such as the global talent one that the Prime Minister was promoting at the investment summit this week, but we must reduce net migration. That means taking difficult choices and making a tangible difference in the months ahead. The public are sick of talk. They want action, and they want us to bring forward a clear plan.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I wish to take a different approach from the Westminster parties to the migration statistics. On behalf of the SNP, I thank those people who have come to make their home here and to contribute to our universities, public services and health and care sector, and who have made our society and our economy all the richer for their presence. Have the Government thought this through? Who will carry out the vital tasks of those who have come to our shores if they pull up the drawbridge and send people away? The CBI has said that two thirds of UK businesses have been hit by labour shortages in the last year. Pressures on services are helped, not hindered, by those people coming here. Those pressures on services are a result of more than 10 years of austerity from the Conservatives. Under-investment in those services is the fault not of immigrants but of this Government.

Interestingly, those who have come on small boats represent only 3% of the total, which is the flimsy basis on which the Minister and his colleagues want to disapply human rights laws, pull us out of the European convention on human rights and renege on our international commitments. It is clear that Scotland has different needs and attitudes towards migration. According to Migration Policy Scotland, six in 10 Scots say that immigration has a positive impact. In Scotland we need to deal with the challenges and the pressures of emigration over many decades. Can we finally have an immigration

[*Alison Thewliss*]

policy that meets Scotland's needs? If the Government will not devolve that, Scotland will need independence more urgently than ever before.

Robert Jenrick: Fortunately, immigration is a reserved matter, and we do not intend to leave it in the hands of the hon. Lady and her colleagues in the SNP Government. As she knows with respect to illegal migration and asylum seekers, the fine words that she says here in the Chamber are not matched by the actions of the SNP Scottish Government. For example, in June there were fewer asylum seekers in the entire city of Edinburgh than in a single hotel in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). Her humanitarian nimbyism really sticks in the throat.

On legal migration, here is the difference between us: we see that there is a reason for people to come to the UK, but we also see millions of people on welfare or economically inactive, and we care about those people getting back into the workplace. We do not want companies simply to reach for the easy lever of foreign labour. That is not a route to sustainable prosperity and productivity. That is why my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary and the Chancellor set out major measures last week. That is our vision for this country—one that genuinely drives up GDP per capita so that we can support and protect all our citizens.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The figures are unsustainably high, but to put them in context, they also include 200,000 Ukrainians and 150,000 Hong Kong citizens. I wonder if those are included in the “something must be done-ism” from the Opposition. Can my right hon. Friend explain why 135,000 visas were granted to dependants last year, up from 19,000 just three years ago, and around 100,000 visas were granted to Chinese students, up 87% over the past 10 years? He mentioned care worker scandals and the 78,000 visas to care workers. Is it true that some visas have been granted to care workers to work in care homes that do not exist?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises a number of issues, all of which are worthy of consideration and which the Home Office is working through at present. It is certainly true that a very substantial number of dependants have come to the UK alongside visa holders, whether students, care workers or skilled workers. It is a choice for the country whether we want to continue to pursue that. There is a strong argument that it is unsustainable for the country to continue to take so many dependants, who put pressure on housing, public services, school places and so on. We could base our visa system on different models to stop so many dependants coming into the country. We have seen a very substantial number of care worker visas issued, and those care workers bring dependants with them on almost a one-for-one basis. As my hon. Friend knows, we are actively considering that.

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

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Although today we are discussing one single set of net migration figures, we know that net migration has hugely varying impacts in regions and communities. We also know that the most skilled migrants flow disproportionately towards London and the south-east. Has the Minister given any thought to developing a more regionalised approach to immigration, to ensure that communities across the country benefit evenly and fairly from it?

Robert Jenrick: In recent years we have given thought to the concept of creating a more regional system, but it is difficult to create in practice—I would welcome ideas from the right hon. Lady's Committee. As a general rule, we have maintained one single United Kingdom immigration system, but there are a number of visa categories that reflect particular issues facing different parts of the country. Those include the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which is focused on rural England, and global talent, which increasingly takes individuals with a science or technology background and will impact those parts of the country with a science cluster. The system is able to support different sectors and needs of parts of the country.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that many myths about immigration are perpetuated by the unholy alliance of greedy globalist corporate businesses and guilt-ridden bourgeois liberals? One of them is that immigrants bring only economic benefit and no cost. In practice, dependants of the kind he described bring more economic costs than benefits, so will the Minister immediately introduce measures to restrict the number of dependants who can come here? In doing so, will he recognise that we are relying on him to sort this out, because we know that he shares our concern that it is time for British workers for British jobs?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend and I are at one on this issue. He is right to say that there are two challenges: the sheer number of people coming in, and the types of people coming into our country. It is right that we make careful judgments about who will benefit our citizens and who will add to our country's economy and skills base, and not simply allow very large numbers of people with low or, at best, mid skills. They are unlikely to add to our economy and, in many cases, will be net costs to the Exchequer. Those are the choices that we need to make to establish a more discerning migration system. I have already answered the dependants question, and we are carefully considering it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Government had a commitment in 2019 to deal with immigration. I have a simple question: why has it taken four years for them to recognise that they need a plan? Social care relies on workers from abroad, because there is no strategy in place for workforce, training or funding. So before the Minister agrees to increase the salary at which people can come from abroad to work as social care workers, will he agree to do a full impact assessment on what that would mean for the social care sector? What measures will be put in place to provide better salary and training for UK residents to take those jobs?

Robert Jenrick: First, I would say politely to the hon. Gentleman that it is only because we left the European Union that we have the levers at our disposal to control net migration. It is crucial that we use those levers to deliver on the promise of Brexit. With respect to social care, I dispute the fact that there is not a plan; there is a workforce plan for the NHS and social care. It is essential that we take a rounded judgment about the individuals who come to the country to work in social care. Of course there are vacancies to fill, but enabling an individual to come with their dependants will cost the British taxpayer a great deal. We must ensure that we are coming to the right judgments about what is in the best interests of the UK. Those are the conversations that we are having across Government. I hope we will be able to bring forward proposals very soon.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): People in Ashfield have had enough of this. There are 7,000 people on the council house waiting list. People are struggling to get a GP or dental appointment and are struggling to get school places. Is it not about time that we had a cap on migration and put a clear divide between us and that lot over there?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend speaks for my constituents as well as his—he represents a constituency near mine—in saying that the British public want us to get on with the job and bring down the numbers coming into the country. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I are committed to bringing forward a set of fundamental reforms that I hope will achieve the objective that my hon. Friend sets out. There are definitely strong arguments for using caps, whether in general or on specific visas, but those are conversations we need to conclude within Government.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Instead of sitting in Whitehall and trying to persuade people that this is some sort of threat to them, why does the Minister not get out and talk to the businesses in communities such as mine that are crippled by labour shortages? He first promised me a meeting to talk about the issue of visas for deck hands in the fishing industry. He is obviously scared—because he has not met me yet—to sit across the table from people like my constituent, a skipper of a crab boat in Orkney, who has had to sell one of his two boats because he cannot get the crew to work on it. That is the reality of the Minister's failure.

Robert Jenrick: The right hon. Gentleman obviously missed our announcement earlier in the year where we added various fishing occupations to the shortage occupation list. That was as a result of a very helpful meeting I had with other colleagues from across the House, which he did not come to.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Minister will know that some of us have been banging on about this ever since he took office, saying that we should increase the level of work visas to average UK earnings. We have not done that because Ministers are worried that the care home sector will fall over, but if we did insist on people coming to this country earning a proper wage, would there not be a sort of virtuous circle? The care home sector would have to pay proper wages—after all, what is more important than looking after our

elderly population?—and we could get more people off benefits because there would be decent jobs for them to go to. It is ridiculous that the care home sector is handing out visas like sweets and employing people, for starvation wages of £20,000 a year, from all over the world. So, more power to the Minister's elbow. We know he is on the right side. He just has to persuade the Prime Minister now.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and agree with everything he says. It is absolutely critical that we get a handle on this issue. The points he makes about social care are entirely valid. It is not sensible that our social care sector is reliant on importing foreign labour from overseas, including their dependants who then have to be housed, have access to public services and be supported on the NHS. We need to take a more sensible, sustainable attitude to how we pay and look after people in such an important career.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The increase in net migration has been fuelled by an increase in health and care visas last year of around 150%. I want to bring the Minister back to the central question. I am sure he shares Labour's ambition to upskill the workforce here, but the central question is why the funding for the new social care workforce pathway was halved earlier this year. He will know that the shortage of social care workers is contributing to bed-blocking in our NHS. That is the last thing we need ahead of another potential winter crisis.

Robert Jenrick: As I said in answer to an earlier question, we have set out a social care plan. The Chancellor and the Health Secretary set out a long-term plan for the NHS workforce more generally. It is absolutely right that we train more people in this country to be nurses and doctors than we have in the recent past. That is why, for example, the Health Secretary set out a plan for further medical schools in a number of parts of the country, including in places where there have been shortages. That is the way forward. It is not a sustainable future for the NHS or social care to recruit in other parts of the world. Even those places are now encountering shortages. There is a highly competitive international market for doctors and nurses, so the future of our NHS has to be by persuading more of our own young people to go into those sectors and train people properly here.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the people of this country will not be fooled by the shallow, opportunistic tough talk coming from Labour Members? They were the Members for remain, which would have meant completely open borders. They are the party of re-join, which would again mean completely open borders, including to those people who have since migrated into European countries and who would then be completely free to come to the UK. Does he agree that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) said, it is time for a cap on net migration?

Robert Jenrick: I do not think anyone listening to the debate will be fooled by the damascene conversion of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and her colleagues to controlled migration, when they have spent their entire lives

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campaigning for completely the opposite. One of the few pledges that the Leader of the Opposition launched his campaign on just a few years ago was freedom of movement. We have committed to controlled migration. We share a deep conviction that we have to get the numbers down. I am hopeful and confident that the package the Prime Minister and Home Secretary will bring forward very soon will do just that.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): International students contribute £42 billion annually to the UK. They are vital to the economies of towns and cities across the country. Most return home after their course. Those who do not are granted a visa for further study or a skilled workers visa, because we want them in the country. Students are not migrants. The public do not consider them to be migrants. Is it not time we took them out of the net migration numbers and brought our position into line with our competitors, such as the United States, whose Department of Homeland Security, as the arm of Government responsible for migration policy, does not count students in its numbers?

Robert Jenrick: I do not think fiddling the figures is the answer to this challenge. The public want to see us delivering actual results and bringing down the numbers. Of course, universities and foreign students play an important part in the academic, cultural and economic life of the country, but it is also critical that universities are in the education business, not the migration business. I am afraid that we have seen a number of universities—perfectly legally but nonetheless abusing the visa system—promoting short courses to individuals whose primary interest is in using them as a backdoor to a life in the United Kingdom, invariably with their dependants. That is one of the reasons why we are introducing the measure to end the ability of students on short-taught courses to bring in dependants. Universities need to look to a different long-term business model, and not just rely on people coming in to do short courses, often of low academic value, where their main motivation is a life in the UK, not a first-rate education.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am glad to hear the Minister, on behalf of the Government, recognising that the legal migration figures are far too high. I am glad he recognises that migrants bring not just economic benefit, but potentially economic cost and pressure on public services and communities. Will he confirm whether his plan will be published and brought to the House before Christmas, and will it include a raise in salary thresholds and an increase in the minimum salary required to bring in dependants?

Robert Jenrick: My plan would have been brought to the House before last Christmas if I could have done that, but let us hope we can bring forward a substantive package of reforms very quickly. I am working intensively with the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. We are at one on this issue. I hope my hon. Friend will not be disappointed.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The main driver of the ONS net migration figures is healthcare professionals. According to the Royal College of Nursing, 53% of nurses registered to practise in October had

been trained internationally. The only in-patient ward at Ysbyty Tywyn Hospital has been closed since April because it cannot get staff. High visa fees are already a red tape barrier to filling vacancies. In claiming credit for cracking down on visas, will the Minister also take responsibility for shutting down hospital wards?

Robert Jenrick: I think the right hon. Lady is rather overdoing the hyperbole. We are on course to meet our manifesto commitment to increase the number of nurses here in the UK. A significant proportion of those have come from overseas, but the sustainable answer to the problem of recruiting nurses, in the right hon. Lady's constituency and everywhere else, is to train more of them in the UK, rather than reaching out to developing countries and seeking to bring their nurses here.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the Government ever decided that it was not in the country's security interests for large numbers of communist Chinese students to be educated in our universities, would they be able to do anything about it?

Robert Jenrick: We do control the levers of our immigration system, so we have the ability to make determinations on individuals who come from different countries around the world. We do not today operate a system that discriminates between nationalities, although we do have different levels of security vetting on a case-by-case basis, which is particularly important in the case of certain nationalities. However, my right hon. Friend makes an important point.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Serco's half-year profits for 2023 are £148 million, while many asylum seekers are living in unsafe and insanitary conditions. Can the Minister explain why the Home Office refuses to disclose the amount that providers are allowed to make before part of that share is returned to the Home Office? Does he agree that the money should go to local authorities, to enable them to provide services in their own areas, and does he also agree that we need to lift the ban on unemployment rights?

Robert Jenrick: I have made an open offer to local authorities that want to provide asylum accommodation. None have come forward so far, but if the hon. Lady's local authority wants to provide such accommodation, I would be more than willing to consider that. The sustainable answer to reducing the reliance on hotels and other forms of accommodation is to stop the boats, but the hon. Lady has voted consistently against every measure that the Government have taken to do so. I would strongly encourage her, for example, when we introduce the emergency legislation on Rwanda, to support it with vim and vigour.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): One of the principal arguments against reducing the number of care worker visas is the shortage of workers in the care sector, and of course there is a shortage. However, in the 12 months to July, 70,000 people were recruited from abroad for care roles, while the number of vacancies in the sector dropped by just 11,000. Is it not the case that the principal impact of the care worker visa scheme is the displacing of British workers from the system? It is not having an overall impact on the size

of the workforce. Is it not also the case that until we turn off the taps to stem the arrival of cheap labour from abroad, employers will not improve pay and conditions here?

Robert Jenrick: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a number of important points. The health and social care visa has not worked as well as even its proponents would have wished. Not only have far more individuals come to the UK, including a significantly higher number of dependants than was envisaged, but, as she says, there has been a displacement effect whereby British workers have left the care sector to be replaced by foreign workers. The key necessity in care, as in other sectors, is to encourage the sector to pay better, improve conditions and improve productivity and skills, so that British workers can put themselves on a sustainable footing.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): The Minister is a gifted orator at the Dispatch Box but, as always, his fine words butter no parsnips. We have heard it all before from his predecessors, every one of whom has said that the Government will reduce net migration. After 13 years of broken promises, when the Minister says that he has a cunning plan to reduce it—undisclosed at the moment—why should the public believe him?

Robert Jenrick: We are working intensively across Government to fine-tune our plan, and I hope we will be in a position to set it out very soon. I know that the hon. Gentleman shares my determination to tackle this issue. It is critical for his constituents and mine that we bring down net migration and make use of the levers that we now have at our disposal, and that we do not betray those who voted for Brexit and wanted to give us those levers so that we could use them.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): These figures were, I regret to say, entirely predictable, and they are unsustainable: they put too much pressure on our public services. My constituents want to know—and we have been talking about this for years—when they will see a drop in the numbers.

Robert Jenrick: According to the Office for National Statistics, the figures are starting to fall—although the ONS's methodology itself keeps moving around, so one has to treat that with a degree of scepticism. It is now critical, to my mind, that we introduce a set of fundamental reforms. The time for tinkering is over, and I hope that the package that the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I will put together in the coming weeks will meet the expectations of my hon. Friend.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): We should not forget that we are talking about fellow human beings who have made, and will go on to make, enormous contributions to our society—not least in holding together a health and social care sector that has been left broken by 13 years of Tory failure. Does the Minister regret, as I do, the fact that the fearmongering and hyperbole that we have heard from his Benches today will give succour to the forces of the far right who seek to divide our communities, and will he join me in welcoming, and expressing his solidarity with, all those who have chosen to make the UK their home over the last year?

Robert Jenrick: There has been no fearmongering whatsoever on the Government side of the House. There has been a simple and clear articulation of the view of the British public—including, I suspect, the hon. Gentleman's own constituents—that the levels of net migration are too high, and of course we want to bring them down. I recall that when the hon. Gentleman and I had a discussion about housing asylum seekers in Birkenhead, he was not too keen on that, so I think we all have to engage in an honest debate and take the actions that are needed.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend is working on many policies to try to solve the problem, but he will be aware that the performance of the Home Office in processing all kinds of applications has been chronically poor. Can he update us on the actions that are being taken, and on the direction in which he hopes efficiencies may be moving when it comes to processing the policies that he wants to put in place?

Robert Jenrick: On that front, I can give my right hon. Friend good news. The visa service and the Passport Office are performing in a way in which they have not performed for many years, and are meeting their service standards in almost every respect. As for the asylum case working system, there has been a complete transformation over the last 12 months. A year ago, 400 decisions were being made each week; today the figure is about 4,000, and I pay tribute to the many dedicated civil servants who have achieved that—particularly the director general of HM Passport Office and UK Visas and Immigration, Abi Tierney, an outstanding civil servant who has transformed that service.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can the Minister explain to the musicians in Glasgow North who can no longer afford to travel to Europe, the academics in Glasgow North who have lost so many opportunities to collaborate across borders, and the hospitality and care sector venues that are crying out for staff why he thinks that the end of freedom of movement has been such a good thing?

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Gentleman is arguing for higher levels of net migration than we see today, I suspect that he is a lone voice in the country. We are seeing substantial numbers of people coming into the UK, in all visa categories, and we want to take action to bring those numbers down.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend and perhaps the Home Secretary, who is present, tell me whether they share my concern about the fact that an increasing amount of questionable European Court of Human Rights case law, via judgments, is actually being drafted by foreign non-governmental organisations—unaccountable—and foreign judges—often unqualified—many of whom have close links with NGOs? I should like an answer to this, please.

Robert Jenrick: We are very concerned about some of the issues that have arisen out of the Court in Strasbourg, including the so-called pyjama injunctions of the kind that blocked a flight to Rwanda in the summer of 2022. That is why we are working with the Court on a

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package of reform. The first proposals in that regard have now been mooted, and the Attorney General, the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary are working to put them into practice. This issue did raise fundamental questions about the rule of law, and we want to see those resolved.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Chad: five coups in three years in sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. What more can the Government do to work across Government in order to reduce the number of failing states becoming a situation in which Islamic State, the Wagner Group and other terrorist organisations use push factors and illegal migration into Europe as a weapon of war?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. There is some evidence that hostile states are using migration as a weapon against countries such as the United Kingdom. The new Home Secretary in his former role and I in my role as Immigration Minister have been to many countries in north Africa and beyond, and time and again we have seen persistent conflicts, climate change and instability driving migration. That is going to be one of the features of the 21st century, and that is why we want to be a strategic partner to those countries, using our diplomacy and our overseas development aid budget to support refugee-producing countries and crucial transit countries such as those in north Africa for mutual benefit.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is quite clear that my right hon. Friend gets it on net migration. It is a shame that many people do not get it. In 2019, I stood on a manifesto when net migration was around 220,000 and I promised my constituents that it would come down. Last year the figure was 740,000. This year it was 650,000. This is a truly shocking state of affairs. The disconnect between where most of the public are on migration and the reality is growing and growing. Does the Minister agree that this growth in the disconnect has become an affront to our shared democracy and that urgent, radical action is needed now?

Robert Jenrick: I agree with my hon. Friend that for 30 years the public have voted in general elections to reduce the levels of net migration, and it is important that we as politicians, if we want to maintain their trust and confidence, act upon that. That is why the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and I are working on a package of fundamental reforms, and I hope that we will be able to bring those to the House very soon.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I would like to thank the Minister for all the hard work he has done while he has been in his place, because I know how much he has done and how he has worked with colleagues here to make sure that he can drive this initiative through. It is absolutely the truth that the vast majority of people in this country want to see both the legal and illegal migration figures go down, and near to zero in the case of illegal migration. Does he agree that we have seen from the Opposition today that their plan is not

really to affect any figures, which is to prevent democracy from happening, but also to tinker around the edges and reclassify people to pretend that they can solve immigration when actually what they are going to do is just tell a few untruths, perhaps?

Robert Jenrick: Well, what a difference between the questions on our side of the House and those from the Opposition Benches. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said that the Labour party had a plan, but each and every one of her colleagues behind her set out reasons why we should have higher levels of net migration, not lower. So we all know what would happen should there be a Labour Government; it would be uncontrolled migration once again. A leopard does not change its spots. The Labour party has always stood for open door migration and it would do so again.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The UK has been an extremely open and welcoming country, but I think most people can see that even the most basic maths shows that numbers in the hundreds of thousands are not sustainable and cannot continue. This is having an unbearable impact on our housing, on our public services and particularly on schools. In schools in Stoke-on-Trent, some of the classrooms have nearly every single child speaking a different first language, which is having a massive impact on those schools without any additional funding. Can my right hon. Friend ensure that we take urgent action now to address these serious issues?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to take urgent action. He is also right to point out the profound impact that very high levels of net migration have on certain communities in particular, such as the one that he represents. It is often the poorest communities that feel the impact of legal and illegal migration most keenly in terms of a lack of social housing, lack of access to public services, and people living more segregated lives. We want to build a more cohesive and unified country.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Time and time again, the British public have told us that immigration is too high and needs to come down, and time and time again we have sadly left them bitterly disappointed. The levels of net migration we have seen over recent years are completely unsustainable, have no democratic mandate whatsoever and are completely unacceptable. Surely it is time to put this House and MPs in charge of the issue and to set legally binding caps on the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers. That might finally be a net zero policy I can support.

Robert Jenrick: The great reform that this Government have achieved is taking back control of the levers of migration by leaving the European Union. Now the task falls to us to use those in a judicious and discerning way to bring down the levels of net migration, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Criminal Justice Bill

Second Reading.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I ask the Home Secretary to move the Second Reading, just another little reminder that as well as being here at the beginning to listen to the opening speeches, it is important that those who are participating not only stay in for the majority of the debate but get back in good time for both the Opposition and Government wind-ups. If anybody feels that they cannot get back in time, they should let me know now so that I can withdraw their request to speak.

1.56 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Victims of crime must have justice, and lawbreakers must face the consequences of their actions. This Criminal Justice Bill will give the police the powers they need to crack down on criminals and ensure that those who pose the biggest threat to the public are imprisoned for longer. It will give the public greater trust in the police and more confidence that the system works for them. We have always faced criminal threats, but those threats mutate and evolve, so we have to stay ahead of them by updating our technological capability and also updating our laws.

We are building on strong foundations. Compared with the year ending spring 2010, as measured by the crime survey of England and Wales, domestic burglary is down 57%, vehicle-related theft is down 39% and violent crime is down by 52%. Police-recorded homicide is down by 15% and the number of under-25 NHS admissions for assault by a sharp object is down by 26% in the year ending June 2023, compared with the year ending December 2019.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way. It is so good to see him in the Chamber now. Could he tell us what the percentage increase has been in knife crime since 2015?

James Cleverly: I do not have the figures to hand, but the—

Yvette Cooper rose—

James Cleverly: The right hon. Lady has made an intervention. Let me make some progress now—*[Interruption.]* If she had the answer, she could have just stood up and said it rather than making this rather performative intervention. I will make some progress.

We have also taken the fight to the county lines drug gangs and to antisocial behaviour. Of course, these successes are not the Government's alone, but we have enabled and supported that success with record funding for police; record numbers of police officers in England and Wales; expanding the powers to stop and search; and expanding the powers to tackle disruptive protests. Of course, we have also cut red tape, which means that more of those police officers are out on the beat fighting crime. We are building over 20,000 more prison places and ensuring that offenders face the toughest possible punishment for their crimes.

We will never rest, and we will go further still. This Bill will support the Government's zero-tolerance approach to crime by giving the police, the courts and the other criminal justice agencies the powers they need to make our neighbourhoods even safer still.

Illegal drugs and knife crime bring chaos and misery to individuals. They destroy families and ruin neighbourhoods. Knife crime is a scourge in many of our cities and, during my time on the London Assembly and as a Member of this House, I have seen for myself the devastation it can bring to families.

Any family can be affected by drug misuse. I send a message to so-called casual users of recreational drugs that their actions underpin a vicious trade that has a profound and negative human cost. That is why we are giving the police more powers to seize and destroy bladed articles and to drug test more suspects upon arrest.

The Bill increases the maximum penalty for selling dangerous weapons to under-18s and creates a new criminal offence of possessing a bladed article with intent to cause harm. It will enable the police to seize, retain and destroy knives held in private when officers are lawfully on private property and have reasonable grounds to suspect the item or items will likely be used in violent crime.

The police will also be able to test individuals in police detention for specified class B and class C drugs, just as they can already test for specified class A drugs. This will mean that the police can direct more suspects using illegal drugs into treatment, which will help to reduce drug use, support recovery and, of course, cut crime. Those who refuse a drug test, or who fail to attend or stay for the duration of a directed drug assessment, may be committing a further offence.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Although drug testing makes sense, it is also important that we have drug and alcohol treatment facilities, which are still very patchy across the country. Will the Home Secretary comment on what can be done to improve that patchiness?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. Of course, this Bill focuses on the crime and criminal justice part of the equation, but he is right that treatment is important. That is why I am very proud that this Government have invested an extra £600 million in the very thing he raises, because we realise that, as well as having robust criminal justice action, we need those treatment facilities.

A tough but humane approach to illegal drugs is the only plausible way forward. The House knows that being a victim of any kind of crime is deeply distressing. No crime should be screened out by the police solely because they perceive it to be minor. In August, the police committed to following all reasonable lines of inquiry for all crime types. That is a hugely welcome development, and it is my job to give police forces every possible support in that endeavour.

The Bill confers additional targeted powers on the police to enter premises without a warrant to seize stolen goods such as mobile phones where they have reasonable grounds to believe that there are particular items of stolen property on the premises. GPS location tracking technology, for example, could provide such

[James Cleverly]

grounds. This gives the police an opportunity to address a particularly prevalent crime type. The Bill also gives the police greater access to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's driver records in order to identify criminals.

Public confidence in policing is, of course, vital, but it is also vital that officers have confidence in each other and that police leaders can root out those who are unfit to wear the uniform. We want to ensure that we never again see the culture of defensiveness and self-interest that, sadly, we saw in the aftermath of the terrible incident at Hillsborough and following the killing of Daniel Morgan. The Bill therefore introduces a duty of candour in policing. This follows Bishop James Jones's report, which shone a light on the experience of the incredibly brave families of the Hillsborough victims. Those families have been through a lengthy and terrible ordeal.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Home Secretary to his position. He rightly says that a new proposal is being brought forward on police misconduct, but he also mentions public confidence. Would the public not have more confidence in the police if any officer who failed their vetting was automatically dismissed?

James Cleverly: We are taking action to ensure that police officers, both at the start of their career and through their career, are held to appropriately high standards. On that particular issue, this is something we are taking forward. It is part, but not the totality, of what needs to be done, which is why we are outlining a number of things in the Bill.

Through the Bill, we will give chief constables the right to appeal the outcome or findings of a misconduct panel to the police appeals tribunal. Chief constables are responsible for upholding standards in their force, so it is right that they have a statutory route to challenge decisions that they consider unreasonable.

A person is not safe unless they are safe everywhere: in their home, at work, in public places and, of course, online. The Bill builds on the intimate image sharing offences in the Online Safety Act 2023 by introducing new offences addressing the taking or recording of intimate images or films without consent, as well as addressing the installing of equipment to enable the commission of the taking-or-recording offence. This means we now have a comprehensive and coherent package of offences that is effective in tackling intimate image abuse, which is a truly horrible crime that can have a lasting negative effect on victims.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for their fantastic work in implementing the Law Commission's review in this area. It really is a testament to the Government that they have done that. However, some victims of intimate image abuse face another issue, because their images are still legally online and have not been taken down by some website providers. Will my right hon. Friend encourage one of his Ministers to meet me to talk about this further, and about possibly addressing it in this Bill?

James Cleverly: I welcome my right hon. Friend's intervention. I am more than happy to ensure that her point is discussed with the Department, so that we can see what we can do to incorporate what she hopes to achieve either in this Bill or in guidance to the internet service providers and online platforms.

The Bill also fulfils the Government's commitment made during the passage of the Online Safety Act to broaden the offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm to cover all means, not just communications, by which serious self-harm may be encouraged or assisted. That could include, but is not limited to, direct assistance such as giving someone a blade with which to seriously harm themselves. This broader offence will give full effect to the recommendations of the Law Commission's 2021 "Modernising Communications Offences" report.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Home Secretary to his post. Not only is he the Home Secretary, but he is an old friend of mine, and I hope he stays longer in this post than he has in the others. Having had a tragedy close to my family of a young woman taking her own life, may I ask that we remove from social media these aids to and promotion of suicide, and things showing people how to conduct it?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. Sadly, far too many people have, like him, experienced the implications of this kind of content online, and I take his point very seriously. We will look at both legislative and non-legislative measures to make sure that we genuinely do everything we can to remove content that encourages sometimes very vulnerable people into a dark place.

The Bill creates a new statutory aggravating factor for murders that are connected to the end of a relationship or the victim's intention to end a relationship. Killing in that context is the final controlling act of an abusive partner, and its seriousness will now be recognised in law. The Bill also adds the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour to the list of offences that require automatic management of offenders under the statutory multi-agency public protection arrangements.

We recognise that antisocial behaviour does so much to blight people's lives and undermine the pride and confidence that they rightly have in their local communities. At its worst, antisocial behaviour can drastically lower the quality of life for whole neighbourhoods. The Government's antisocial behaviour action plan, published in March, sets out a strong approach to working with local agencies so that antisocial behaviour is treated with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. The Bill enhances that with a range of new measures, including enabling the police to make public spaces protection orders and registered social housing providers to issue premises closure notices; lowering the minimum age of a person who may be issued with a community protection notice from 16 to 10; and increasing the maximum amount of a fixed penalty notice from £100 to £500 for breaches of a public spaces protection order or community protection notice.

Every public service should be accountable to the public, and we are strengthening the accountability of community safety partnerships and improving the way in which they work with police and crime commissioners to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. For example,

PCCs will be given the power to make recommendations on the activity of community safety partnerships, which in turn will be duty-bound to consider those recommendations. That proposal follows feedback from various sources that the powers available to the police, local authorities and other agencies could be used more consistently. We need every part of the system to work together as one well-oiled machine.

Nuisance begging and rough sleeping can, of course, be a form of antisocial behaviour. The former may be very intimidating and the latter may also cause damage, disruption and harassment to the public.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Home Secretary will be aware of the campaign across the House to scrap the Vagrancy Act 1824, which does not come into force until all these clauses come in—so I am very pleased to see them. Looking at the detail, we see that it forms a third of the Bill—it is enormous. Does he share my concern that by replacing the Vagrancy Act with a measure of this level and strength, we are not treating homelessness with the compassion that we said we wanted, and we are creating a rod for our own back, which we just do not need?

James Cleverly: We have committed to scrapping the 1824 Act, and nobody should or will be criminalised simply for having nowhere to live. That is why we are repealing the outdated 1824 Act. However, we need to make sure that things such as nuisance begging are addressed, because the British public have told us that they feel these actions are intimidating—I am sure that Members from across the House hear that in our advice surgeries and will have had people tell them that—and it is right that we respond to their concerns. The hon. Lady makes the point, implied in her question, that people end up rough sleeping for a wide variety of reasons, including, sometimes, because they are themselves the victims of abuse or they have medical conditions, be they physical or mental. That is why last year we published our “Ending rough sleeping for good” strategy, and we have made an unprecedented £2 billion commitment over three years to accelerate the efforts to address homelessness at source.

Layla Moran: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way again; I will not test his patience too much more. However, I should point out that we have been working on this since 2018, when I started this campaign. I have met countless Ministers over the years and not once did nuisance rough sleeping come up as the issue. Nuisance begging did, and there is a debate to be had on that and I would happily have it. All I ask is: will he consider meeting me and others from both sides of the House who have taken a keen interest in this issue for a very long time so that we can put across our concerns about what is in this Bill to replace the 1824 Act? I say that because this looks like Vagrancy Act 2.0 on steroids.

James Cleverly: We have presented a Bill and the House has the opportunity to debate it. So rather than having conversations in private, the legislative process—the process of debate—is designed for Members from across the House to inject their ideas, thoughts and suggestions into the legislation. That is literally what the passage of a Bill is designed to do.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I wish to share my concerns, which are those the hon. Lady has mentioned. The Bill introduces a wide definition of “nuisance rough sleeping” that is incredibly concerning to me, because it will criminalise people who are rough sleeping. In practice, it will result in worse criminalisation of people sleeping rough than under the draconian Vagrancy Act. Will the Home Secretary and Government Members give any assurance and clarity about the intentions?

James Cleverly: The Bill makes it clear that any actions that will be taken will be in response to a continuing refusal to abide by the moving-on powers that the Bill provides, so I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s assessment of how this will play out in practice. However, as I say, this is the Second Reading of the Bill and there will be opportunity through its passage for ideas, thoughts, concerns and potential improvements to be put forward. I encourage her and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) to put forward their ideas, because we recognise that this is an important issue. We want to get it right, but we are responding to specific concerns that have been raised.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to say that the Vagrancy Act, as it comes to its bicentenary, is ripe for renewal and change, and there is an interesting debate to be had. He is right to identify that it is a problem for many of our constituents. The other problem, which he knows I will be talking about later, is the offence of spiking. I was listening keenly to what he said and no doubt he will touch on that in a moment or two.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to update a number of provisions, including the Vagrancy Act 1824. I know he feels strongly about that and, through the passage of the Bill, I am more than happy to listen to his contributions about other opportunities to update and modernise legacy legislation, which has served us well but for a very, very long time, to ensure that it is relevant for the modern world, not the Victorian—or sometimes Georgian—era when the provisions were originally drafted.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): These matters raise the issue of proportionality, and I am sympathetic to the Government’s position, but does my right hon. Friend accept that a number of other areas in the Bill, most of which is very good, will need careful examination? For example, the power to enable entrance to premises without a warrant will need to be supported by the evidence base. Will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind that we need to move with some care on the practicalities of transfer to foreign prisons? Although that may be useful to have in the toolbox, when it has been used abroad the evidence is very mixed as to how long and significant a difference it can make. As the Bill progresses through the House, will he engage with the Justice Committee and others on the evidence that we have received on those issues?

James Cleverly: My long-standing hon. Friend makes a number of points. Of course we want to ensure the Bill works. When the Bill is enacted, we want to ensure it improves the lives of people who might be victims of crime and helps to avoid that victimisation, but we also

[James Cleverly]

want to ensure that appropriate checks and balances are in place. I feel confident that those are in place, but it is the duty of those on the Treasury Bench to ensure that all Members of the House share that confidence.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): In that spirit, on the basis that this is Second Reading and there are opportunities for this otherwise good Bill to be improved, will my right hon. Friend take on board the important points about ensuring that we get right the extension of the identification principle on corporate criminal liability? We made big progress in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 and the Government are now following through on their intention, but I want to ensure we get the wording absolutely right.

Secondly, I note with enthusiasm the presence in the schedule of restricted cost provisions relating to restraint orders for the proceeds of crime. We have long said that uncapped costs are a deterrent to making robust applications. Will he consider extending those principles to other areas of activity, so that we can see more applications being made without the fear of being clobbered by costs?

James Cleverly: My right hon. and learned Friend makes some important and useful points based on his extensive experience. Of course, we listen very carefully to the contributions that have been made. With the indulgence of the House, I want to make progress so that Back Bench Members have time for debate.

We need to understand that crime is a business—a big business. Serious organised criminals are relentless, adaptable and resourceful. That is why we are banning articles that are used to commit serious crime, including templates for 3D printed firearms components, pill presses, and vehicle concealment and signal jammers that are used in modern vehicle theft. In banning the supply, adaptation, manufacture and import of those articles, as well as their possession, we will target the corrupt individuals who profit from supplying those articles to those involved in serious criminality while keeping just enough distance from the offences being carried out to avoid facing the inevitable consequences of their actions.

We are also strengthening the operation of the serious crime prevention orders. It is absolutely right to make it easier for the police and other law enforcement agencies to place restrictions on offenders or suspect offenders and stop them from participating in further crime. Fraud is now the most prevalent form of crime. It costs this country billions of pounds annually and is a terrible personal violation. I have no doubt that every Member of the House will know constituents who have suffered from that type of crime.

The Criminal Justice Bill contains several new measures to tackle fraudsters and the perpetrators of other serious crimes. We are prohibiting the possession and supply of SIM farms that have no legitimate purpose. Law enforcement agencies will have extended powers to suspend domain names and IP addresses used for fraudulent purposes or other serious crimes. We are also reforming the powers used to strip convicted criminals of the proceeds of crime. A new scheme will see the Government

work with the financial sector to use the money in accounts suspended on suspicion of crime to fund projects tackling economic crime.

Going beyond economic crime, we are further expanding the identification principle, so that companies can be held criminally responsible when a senior manager in that company commits a crime.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): While fraud accounts for 40% of recorded crime at the moment, only 1% of police resources are used to deal with it. What are the Home Secretary's thoughts on that?

James Cleverly: By the nature of this crime type, specialism in investigation is inevitable. Ultimately, the training and deployment of the resources of the police and other crime fighting agencies will naturally need to reflect that. It is not quite as simple as mapping the proportion of crime to the proportion of police officers, but implicit in the right hon. Lady's question is the fact that we need to upskill investigators so that they can focus on those crime types. We are putting the legislative measures in place, the funding is in place, the increase in police numbers is in place and we are happy to work with PCCs and chief constables to ensure that those resources are deployed in the most effective way.

Sir Robert Neill: Will my right hon. Friend give way a final time?

James Cleverly: Cheeky.

Sir Robert Neill: It may save the House hearing from me at some length later.

I welcome the measures on fraud, because they follow on from the Justice Committee's report last year that highlighted the gaps in our ways of dealing with it. Will the Home Secretary look carefully at how we reform the identification principle? There remains a concern that the exemptions that were placed on the size of businesses in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 may have the perverse effect of allowing many fraudsters to split their businesses up into smaller units that fall below the threshold in that Act. Glencore, for example, had only 50 employees but was still one of the biggest frauds that did massive harm. Can we take the opportunity to look at that issue?

James Cleverly: Once again, my hon. Friend makes a good point. We are always willing to listen to suggestions from colleagues around the House that will strengthen the ability to close loopholes, so that sinister but clever and adaptable individuals do not find a way of navigating through the legislation, so I take his ideas on board. I do not have much of my speech left, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure you would encourage me to move quickly, and I beg the indulgence of the House to do so.

There has been a concerning increase in the number of serious offenders refusing to attend their sentencing. It is a further insult to the victims and the families; as we have seen, it causes a huge amount of upset. That is why we are giving judges express statutory powers to order offenders convicted of an offence punishable with a life sentence to attend their sentencing hearings. That measure will apply to all offenders convicted of any offence that carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Adult offenders who refuse to do so,

without reasonable excuse, will face punishment with an additional custodial sentence of up to 24 months. The legislation will also make it clear that judges in the Crown court may direct the production of any adult offender, and that the custody officers can use reasonable force to ensure that they are produced.

Sir Robert Buckland: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

James Cleverly: I am sorry, but I promised Madam Deputy Speaker that I would be winding up.

Last year, the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse published its final report. It revealed the terrible extent to which children have been betrayed over decades not only by rapists and abusers but sadly, in too many instances, by those who should have been there to protect them. We must honour the courage of those who have spoken out by doing things differently. Everything possible must be done to prevent these crimes. When they do occur, they should be met with heavy punishment. The Bill introduces a new statutory aggravating factor to capture offenders who demonstrate grooming behaviours in connection with specified sexual offences against children and young people, or whose offences have been facilitated by grooming by others.

The grooming itself need not be sexual; it may be undertaken by any offender or a third party and committed against the victim of the underlying offence or a third party. The Government will also bring forward amendments to the Bill to restrict the ability of registered sex offenders to change their names in certain circumstances. Following consideration of the responses to our consultation, which closes on 30 November, we also plan to bring forward amendments to provide for a legal duty to report child sexual abuse.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to the Home Secretary for bringing forward legislation on sexual offenders changing their name by deed poll, but we could not find it anywhere in the Bill, so is there any reason why there is a lag?

James Cleverly: It is because we will have to bring it through as an amendment, but I can assure the hon. Lady that we are committed to making this work. *[Interruption.]* It is a Government amendment. *[Interruption.]* I disapprove of theft in all circumstances except for when someone brings forward a truly good idea.

Let me return now to the duty to report child sexual abuse. Walking by or turning a blind eye should never, and must never, be an option. The Bill enables polygraph testing to be extended to more serious sexual and terrorism-linked offences, including for convicted murderers who are assessed as posing a risk of sexual offending on release. It also ensures that those serving multiple sentences alongside a sentence for a sex offence can be tested for the whole of their licence period. The measure further applies to individuals convicted of non-terrorism offences who would have been determined by the court to have a terrorism connection if the option had been available at the time of the sentencing.

The Government have a programme to build 20,000 new prison places. It is the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era. Prison demand is

likely to increase over the medium term, as we continue to empower police forces and the courts to drive down crime and punish offenders.

In order temporarily to increase prison capacity, the Bill will introduce domestic powers to transfer prisoners to rented prison spaces overseas subject to future agreements with other countries. Norway and Belgium have successfully rented prison places from the Netherlands in the past. The Bill will also extend the remit of His Majesty's inspectorate of prisons to include any rental prison places abroad.

The Criminal Justice Bill will give the police greater powers, the public greater confidence, and the courts greater ability to punish offenders and protect the law-abiding majority, and I invite the whole House to get behind it.

2.34 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is good to see the Home Secretary in his place. He was not here for the urgent question earlier, but he has been having a bit of a week of it. He had to pseudo-apologise yesterday to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for his language. He has been rude about northern towns and rude about northern MPs. Although he may be all over the place on home affairs, we should perhaps be relieved that he is no longer in charge of diplomacy for the nation—although, to be fair, given the treatment of the Greek Prime Minister in the past 24 hours, things may have got even worse since he left.

As I said, the Home Secretary did not come to the Chamber earlier to answer the urgent question, but I gather from reports that he was meeting Back-Bench Conservative MPs. Certainly, yesterday, he had half his party standing up to complain about his policies. The problem seems to be that he thinks his Rwanda policy is batshit, that has driven his Back Benchers apeshit, and now his whole party is in deep sh-ambles.

The Home Secretary told us yesterday that he does not really know yet what is going on in the immigration system, so I assume from today's speech that he is still getting the hang of what is going on in the criminal justice system. His claims about how well things are going are incredibly out of touch. Let me sum it up for him. After 13 years of Conservative Government, things are pretty dire: 90% of crimes now go unsolved; the charge rate has dropped by two thirds; more criminals are getting off; and more victims are being let down. The Prime Minister has an excuse when he says that things are great: he only sees things from a helicopter, but the rest of them have no such excuse and they are out of touch.

If a person commits a crime today, they are less than half as likely to be caught as they were under the previous Labour Government. That is the collapse of law and order under this Conservative Government, who have been in power for 13 years. In the past eight years, we have had eight Home Secretaries and 10 Justice Secretaries. We have huge court backlogs and delays, record numbers of crimes being dropped with no suspect identified, and record numbers of victims dropping out of the criminal justice process due to lack of support and unacceptable delays.

[Yvette Cooper]

New technology has helped to prevent some volume crimes, but serious violence is up by 60% on 2015. The Home Secretary did not have the figures to hand on knife crime, but knife crime is up by 70%, and the number of young victims of violence is at its highest in a decade. I have spoken to mums who have lost their children through knife crime; they feel as if they have lost their future, but they want us to act to save other children's lives.

Crime at the heart of our communities and town centres is also on the rise. We have seen shoplifting surge to record levels—up 25% in the past year alone—but town centre policing has dropped. Many towns have seen a huge drop in neighbourhood police on the beat and half the country say that they do not see police on the streets. There are now 10,000 fewer police and police community support officers in neighbourhood teams. When the Home Secretary talks about police numbers, we remember the 20,000 police officers that his party cut, for which we are still paying the price across the country. The lack of police on the street means that half the country never see them. That is the result of 10,000 fewer police and PCSOs on our streets, and that is the backdrop to this Bill. Quite simply, it is not enough to tackle the serious problems that the country and the criminal justice system face.

Mr Sheerman: My right hon. Friend is speaking with great authority on this. Every Member of this House knows how underfunded the police are. We have not only an underfunded police force, but a justice system that has been cut and cut and cut again. We must do something to build it up again, and perhaps the way we will do that is to have a new Labour Government.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that huge damage has been done to policing and the criminal justice system. In addition, because police are often the public face of the criminal justice system, the fact that confidence in policing has been heavily knocked has an impact on confidence in and respect for the rule of law in our country. That is why it is so serious and why there ought to be cross-party support for restoring confidence in policing and the criminal justice system.

Mr Sheerman: One more very small point: I think my right hon. Friend knows of my interest in miscarriages of justice, but is it not a fact that in this underfunded criminal justice system we see more miscarriages of justice?

Yvette Cooper: It is certainly the case that far too many victims are not getting justice, because they are either dropping out of the system or being let down.

The Opposition support the Bill before us and we will support its Second Reading. Of course there will be individual measures that we need to pursue, but there are many measures in it that were Labour policies or that Labour has called for. However, the Bill simply does not go far enough to address the challenges that we face.

We welcome the fact that the Government have now agreed to Labour's calls to crack down on antisocial behaviour by going after drug dealers with stronger closure orders and the introduction of the power of

arrest for breaches of antisocial behaviour injunctions. In 2013, the then Conservative Home Secretary removed the power of arrest when antisocial behaviour injunctions were introduced, and we warned that they would not be strong enough. It has taken the Government 10 years to restore the power of arrest, but we welcome it.

On fraud, we called for the introduction of corporate criminal liability during the passage of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, so we are pleased to see it in this Bill now. We have also supported stronger sentences on sexual offences. We support the increase in sentencing for the most serious offences and the power to compel perpetrators to attend sentencing in person. Justice must be seen to be done and the victims of the most heinous crimes need to see justice done and sentence given with the perpetrator standing before the court.

We also welcome plans to tackle revenge porn and image-based abuse. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) makes a very important point on that, which we are keen to discuss further and support in Committee. We also welcome tougher sentences for those who commit murder at the end of a relationship.

It is welcome that the Government have ditched the plan to make cancelling tenancy their entire policy on homelessness, but we will need to pursue the detail of the measures in the Bill, because they do not address the root causes of homelessness. The last Labour Government cut rough sleeping by two thirds, but under the Conservatives that progress has been reversed and it is now up by 75%.

Paula Barker: In February last year, both Houses of Parliament supported the repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824 via an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. However, no commencement date was included in the amendment, so the Vagrancy Act technically remains in force. The Government are now introducing replacement legislation via this Bill. Is my right hon. Friend as confused as I am about why that would be?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the detail and I hope that, in the evidence-gathering sessions in Committee, evidence is properly taken on that. It is an area where the legislation needs to be got right and concerns have been raised. There is also the wider problem of a toxic mix of rents and the failure to end no-fault evictions, which is hitting vulnerable people hard, and the Conservatives still have not kept their promises to act on that.

There is still a series of substantial omissions from the Bill that we would like to see added to it. There is nothing to ensure that neighbourhood policing is properly restored. We have set out proposals for 13,000 more neighbourhood police and police community support officers, and we want to see that underpinned in legislation.

There is nothing in the Bill to turn around the shocking collapse in charge rates. For example, there is no plan to tackle the problem of redaction—a problem I know the Policing Minister recognises—where officers effectively spend hours and the equivalent of a bottle of Tipp-Ex having to redact a whole series of things before files are even passed to the Crown Prosecution Service. Many have argued that legislation needs to be changed to tackle that. Doing so could save police officers hours

and hours of time, and I think it is included in the police productivity review. Surely we ought to be able to tackle that, but it is currently not in the Bill.

The Bill is also not strong enough in its measures to tackle town centre crime. A law brought in by the Conservative Government, again around 10 years ago, means that shop thefts under £200 often are not investigated, even if the same gang comes back time and again. We should end that £200 rule to tackle the shoplifting gangs. We also have shop staff who are petrified to go to work when there are 850 incidents a day of violence and abuse against shop workers.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The week before last, during Respect for Shopworkers Week, I had the pleasure of visiting one of my local Co-ops. They have had £155,000-worth of goods stolen in the first six months of this year. For many stores, that is enough to close them down. I commend USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—and the Co-op for the work they are doing on that, but the police are just not turning up or taking it seriously. I commend what my right hon. Friend says; let us see whether she can push the Government to move further here.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the impact of shoplifting. If town centres do not feel safe, it is local businesses that are hit and can end up going under as a result, undermining local economies and putting off local residents who want to go shopping. Sometimes elderly residents, in particular, will simply not go into town anymore if they do not feel safe, and if they feel that laws are just not being enforced when they watch people leaving the shops with a big bag of goods stolen from the shelves and see nothing being done. It is just not good enough.

That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) rightly called for stronger measures to tackle assaults on shop workers. The Government did finally agree, as a result of his campaigning, to an aggravated sentence for assaulting shop workers, but that is not enough. The whole point is to make it simpler for the police to take action and to send a clear message from Parliament to police that this is an offence we take immensely seriously. That is why Labour will be tabling amendments that reflect the campaigns by USDAW, the Co-op, Tesco, the British Retail Consortium and small convenience stores for a new law and tougher sentences for attacks on our shop workers. Everyone should have the right to work in safety and to live free from fear.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): We do take retail theft and shoplifting very seriously and agree that more needs to be done, but may I draw the shadow Home Secretary's attention, and that of the House, to the retail crime action plan, which the Government agreed with the National Police Chiefs' Council just a few weeks ago? In that plan, the police commit to investigating reasonable lines of inquiry for all shoplifting cases, including running CCTV evidence through facial recognition software, attending the scene of a crime where that is necessary to gather evidence, where there has been an assault or where the offender has been detained, and using data analytics specifically to go after prolific offenders. All that is in addition to

Project Pegasus, a joint project with retailers to go after serious and organised crime. I hope she will join me in welcoming the plan, which I believe will be very effective.

Yvette Cooper: I would gently say to the Minister that the fact that it is an announcement—

Chris Philp: It is a plan.

Yvette Cooper: It is a plan; it is not even an announcement of something that is going to happen. It is an announcement that there is a plan for the police to check CCTV when a theft has taken place. That just shows how bad things have got over the past 13 years. We welcome any work that is being done, including by the British Retail Consortium with the National Police Chiefs' Council. However, the Government are not taking the action that they should be taking to underpin this. In particular, they are not changing the law either on assaults against shop workers or on the £200 limit, and neither are they supporting the neighbourhood police we need to do the work to deliver the plan. There are 10,000 fewer neighbourhood police and PCSOs on our streets and in our communities, and communities know that. It does not matter what the Policing Minister says or what figures he plucks from thin air: people know. They can see it. We all see it in our own towns in our own constituencies, and half the country now say they never see the police on the beat.

Chris Philp: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way, because the Policing Minister is a glutton for punishment on this one.

Chris Philp: The shadow Home Secretary is very kind to give way. I am sorry that facts and figures get in the way of her argument but, as I said at oral questions yesterday, the neighbourhood policing figures that she keeps quoting are unintentionally misleading. Local policing numbers cover neighbourhood policing, emergency response and others. Since 2015, which is the year that she cites, those numbers have gone up from 61,000 to 67,000, and overall policing numbers are at record levels, at 149,566—3,500 higher than under the last Labour Government.

Yvette Cooper: This is the problem with the Policing Minister: he just thinks that the country has never had it so good on crime and policing. As far as the country is concerned, he is incredibly out of touch. That is not what is happening in towns and cities across the country. The idea that we can just merge neighbourhood policing and response teams, which are different things, shows that he simply does not understand the importance of neighbourhood policing or what it actually does.

Neighbourhood police are the teams who are located locally. They will not just be called off for a crisis at the other end of the borough, district or force area; they are the police officers who can deal with local crimes. They are not the officers who have to deal with rising levels of mental health crisis, which we know so many of the response units have to deal with. There has been a big shift away from neighbourhood policing and into response policing because the police are being reactive, dealing with crises that this Conservative Government have totally failed to prevent for 13 years.

[Yvette Cooper]

The Government have demolished a lot of the prevention work and teamworking between neighbourhood officers and other agencies in local areas, and as a result the other response officers are having to pick up the pieces instead. The Policing Minister's approach just shows why the Tories are failing after 13 years. It is not the answer.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Ind): On the restoration of police numbers, may I inform the Policing Minister that in Cleveland the numbers have been slashed by 500 since 2010? They have still not been restored, so we are still down in those numbers. On retail crime, we cannot take any lessons from the Conservative party—the Conservative police and crime commissioner in Cleveland received a caution for handling goods stolen from his then supermarket employer. This stuff about retail crime is, quite frankly, hogwash.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point—[*Interruption.*] I do not think the claims made from a sedentary position by the Policing Minister help him in the slightest, given the challenges involving the current police and crime commissioner.

We ought to have a consensus on tackling knife crime. There are some measures in the Bill, but they do not go anywhere near far enough. I urge the Home Secretary to consider a proper offence of child criminal exploitation to prevent people drawing children into criminal activity in the first place, as well as stronger action on the loopholes that still allow online marketplaces to sell knives. We have had multiple announcements over the years about taking action against zombie knives, but it is groundhog day, because far too many are still being sold easily and not enough is being done about it.

The Bill also does not go far enough on violence against women and girls. We still need rape investigation units in every police force, we need all 999 control rooms to have domestic abuse experts, and we need stronger requirements on police forces to use the tactics and tools normally reserved for organised crime and terrorist organisations to identify and go after the most dangerous repeat abusers and rapists and get them off our streets.

Too many things are not in the Bill. Overall, there is still no proper plan to raise confidence in policing and the criminal justice system. That confidence has plummeted, putting respect for law and order in our country at risk. We support the Bill and will work across parties to strengthen the measures in it, but it will not tackle the serious problems that we face. Security is the bedrock of opportunity. If people do not feel safe—if they do not believe that anyone will come or anything will be done when things go wrong—that undermines confidence in their community, in their way of life and in the rule of law in our country.

That is what is at stake here, that is why incremental measures are not enough, and that is why we need to tackle the crisis of confidence and halve serious violence. Labour has committed to halving serious violence, including violence against women and girls, and to increasing policing confidence, the number of criminals who are charged, and the number of victims who get justice.

Those ought to be shared objectives, but for too long the Conservatives have undermined them. That is why we need change.

2.55 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the opening Front-Bench speeches, to which I have listened with interest. It feels like groundhog day, if I may say so, on many counts and fronts.

First and foremost, there is much to welcome in the Bill. I bear the scars of having taken a number of criminal justice measures through the House—with great pleasure and through working with colleagues, including some Back-Bench colleagues who served with me in government. I think we can all reflect on how important it is that this criminal justice legislation strikes a fundamental balance between protecting civil liberties; supporting victims wholeheartedly in everything that we do as legislators; preventing crime, which must be absolutely front and centre of what it does; and punishing offenders.

This is a point of reflection. We in this House have discussed all those themes in separate debates, urgent questions and statements over a number of weeks. When it comes to punishing offenders, I know that the Lord Chancellor has, from the Dispatch Box, tried to address the issues to do with prison spaces. At the same time, we have been having conversations about preventing crime and supporting victims. Those are all personal and human aspects on which we must get the balance right.

I cannot emphasise this enough: we need to bring in and operationalise practical measures that deliver the desired effects and outcomes. In the debate thus far, we have not fully reflected on what it means to put into practice the delivery of such measures—what it means for resourcing, policing, prison spaces, the use of stop and search, and, importantly, how we put victims front and centre of everything we do. We must also demonstrate why those desired impacts are needed above and beyond what is already in place. We have good measures in place already, but now we have to reflect on them and go over and beyond, in the light of some of the points that have been made in the debate. I will come to many of those points.

I know that, while the Bill is going through Parliament, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will have to brace himself for the significant amount of lobbying that will come his way from inside and outside the House. I reflect on that because a great deal of experience that will come his way, and those important discussions will be moments for him to reflect on the practicalities not just of what goes in the Bill, but of its delivery. I thank him for the conversations that we have had in the past week. He will build on the many practical suggestions that will come his way.

Before I comment on the measures in the Bill, it is important to reflect on the actions that have been taken in recent years and the difference that they are making. It is too easy to come in and throw the baby out with the bathwater. A lot of good was done in previous Bills. I will pay tribute later to the work to invest in and recruit 20,000 more police officers. That has had an effect not just on the criminal justice system, but on building public confidence in policing—we should never stand still on that. At the end of the day, the public look to us all—certainly to a Conservative Government—to

ensure that we have the manpower to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, which has been mentioned. Importantly, we must give the public confidence that law and order is on their side and will use every pillar and strain every sinew, including police officers and the criminal justice system, to be on their side. Of course, the beating crime plan contained significant details about measures to target hotspots of criminal activity, including many dreadful aspects that have been touched on today, such as antisocial behaviour, homicide and knife crime. For example, the plan included the introduction of violence reduction units and investment in safer streets through the safer streets funds—important measures that must be built on to deliver safety practically and to build confidence in the criminal justice system.

Dame Meg Hillier: The right hon. Lady talks about having confidence in the criminal justice system. I will park for a moment the reason we are seeing an increase in police numbers: that, obviously, there was a drop previously. Does she agree that one of the biggest problems is the huge backlog in the courts—not as a result of covid; that has exacerbated it, but it was there before—that will take until 2025 to get anywhere near back to previous levels? I have a constituent who was violently attacked in front of her seven-year-old child. It was three years before her court case was taken. The situation leaves the police powerless, as the individual in question can keep breaking his non-molestation order, with no further action taken. It is all very well having the police officers, but does the right hon. Lady have anything to say about the court system?

Priti Patel: The hon. Member is absolutely right. We have discussed that issue more broadly in relation to an end-to-end criminal justice system being fit for purpose: working to a sensible timeframe; the police being able to process the cases with the Crown Prosecution Service; and then, obviously, the cases going to court. I am afraid that there is a lot of merit in the whole debate, particularly around sexual violence and rape cases. We have discussed the matter many times and much more can be done.

Good support has been brought in to address violence against women and girls—the rape review has taken place and there has been investment in independent domestic violence advisers—but there are fundamental criminal justice system issues around cases of this nature, including: the time such cases take; the level of attrition; and the retraumatisation of victims, because these cases are absolutely appalling. I have raised this subject in the House many times, including from the Dispatch Box, and have spoken about personal cases that have come to me through constituents. We all have tragic constituency cases, and we have to make sure that we are strong advocates to bring about justice for those victims.

Let me turn to a number of strong measures that are already in place. A great deal of work has taken place to tackle drugs gangs, organised crime and county lines. The Government deserve great credit for that and for their work on the ring of steel. I used to harp on about the fact that we do not grow these drugs in our country—and some are obviously manufactured—but it is vital that we have in place a ring of steel around our ports and airports to make sure that we do absolutely everything we can to stop at source the scourge of terrible chemicals

and drugs coming into our country. We should never, ever stop doing that work; and that goes back to the point about the investment required in our ports and in law enforcement.

The violence against women and girls strategy and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 have helped victims of the most horrific crimes, but I will touch on what more can be done. I welcome the new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), to her place. I look forward to working with her on these sensitive and difficult issues.

On policing, the Government have enshrined the police covenant in statute, given the police more powers to fight crime and increased prison sentences. That is all part of offender management and making our communities safer.

Yvette Cooper: I know that the former Home Secretary takes the police covenant very seriously. Does she agree that, as well as the police covenant, we should have a police bravery award for those who lose their lives in the line of duty?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right; we have had discussions about that point previously. I think this might be an opportune moment to pay tribute to those police officers who have lost their lives defending communities, being braver than ever and going after the criminals out there. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] We see so many acts of bravery, but I am sorry to say that they are sometimes not recognised enough. A lot of our police officers sadly get a bad rap because of other reporting issues and all sorts of things, but the reality is that we should pay tribute to and give the right recognition to those who are out there on the frontline, defending us. The right hon. Lady will be familiar with the police bravery awards—what a sobering moment, when we honour our police officers—but we must do more to represent the fallen and to protect family members. That is why the police covenant is so important. I would like this House and Ministers in particular to do much more collectively to recognise that bravery, because the families of officers are affected in a very challenging way.

Richard Graham: I was moved, around the period of remembrance, that Gloucestershire Constabulary arranged for a short ceremony in which all the MPs in our county gathered together with the Gloucestershire Constabulary to commemorate those who had died in earlier conflicts and those who have suffered during very difficult moments more recently. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is something that might be rolled out across the country?

Priti Patel: That is a very nice practical example of a community coming together to commemorate and recognise that public service. We are speaking about people who give public service to our country to protect us all, while at the same time making enormous sacrifices. I had the great privilege of spending much of my time as Home Secretary with law enforcement, including police officers on the frontline, and with some of their family members, so I have heard first-hand testimony of the sacrifices made. That is particularly the case for the loved ones of officers who have died in the line of duty; it is incredibly sobering.

[Priti Patel]

This Bill is important, and as it progresses I look forward to working with the Front-Bench team on the measures they are introducing. I will touch on some of the positive measures, as there are sections of the Bill that are hugely welcome. This legislation goes further in giving the public confidence in criminal justice and policing to keep our citizens and our country safe. There are provisions to address the use of 3D printers and electronic communications devices that aid vehicle theft. I think it is fair to say that we are great believers in designing crime out through the use of technology—making it harder for criminals who abuse the system to even commit the crime in the first place. The measures in the Bill should help in that preventive work.

Criminals are clever: they are constantly adapting, they are agile and they evolve their methods. As legislators, we must be prepared to make sure that we can do more to support the police to fight offenders. I welcome more details on how the Government will continue to grow their plans. The Policing Minister mentioned facial recognition, and I support that work. It is about time that we stood up to some of the legal challenges and brought in more facial recognition provisions to strengthen law enforcement.

I particularly welcome the measures in clauses 9, 10 and 18 relating to knives and bladed articles. I agree that more can be done. Online loopholes around the purchase of weapons has been a subject of discussion in the House for a long time, and I think we could do much more there. It is a fact that we are all horrified and shocked by the impact of knife crime on our streets on victims and their families. The lives of so many young people are blighted by the horrors of knife crime, and we can absolutely come together on this issue. Our hearts go out to victims of knife crime and their family members. We never, ever want to experience the grief and anguish that they endure, but we can do more. I pay tribute to the many campaigners in this space; we should stand with them to do much more.

I am pleased to see that clause 13 and schedule 2 include new provisions to strengthen the legal framework to prevent people taking, sharing and broadcasting intimate images—of course, I am referring to revenge porn. There are still loopholes, and we want to do more to close them. It is a sickening offence that blights people's lives. Essex police investigated a very high-profile revenge porn case that led to the successful prosecution of an offender, Stephen Bear. I pay tribute to Georgia Harrison, who was on television again just yesterday, both for her bravery in speaking out so strongly and encouraging others to come forward and for the many ways in which she has championed this issue. Our laws have to be flexible and able to adapt to modern technology, so that victims are protected from the people who commit those dreadful crimes.

That brings me on to the measures in the Bill that cover the management of offenders who have a record of coercive and controlling behaviour. Clause 30 puts those offenders under the multi-agency public protection arrangements, which is very welcome. Those measures build on a strong record of supporting victims of domestic abuse and violence, and it is vital that they are put into effective practice. Having mentioned domestic abuse and violence, I want to touch on a really harrowing

aspect of that issue: domestic homicides. A great deal of work has taken place in the Home Office around domestic homicide reviews. I led that work, and would like to see it strengthened so much more. We see too many loopholes, and I am afraid local authorities are not always following up on domestic homicide reviews in the way we would like them to. A lot of good practice is already out there, with some local authorities championing that work, working with multi-agency teams and law enforcement.

I also welcome the measures in clause 32 of the Bill to confiscate the proceeds of crime, and serious crime prevention orders, which are dealt with in clauses 34 and 37. Again, it is important that we constantly adapt and update our legislation, and that those measures are operationalised and implemented in an effective way. I look forward to hearing more details from the Government about those areas.

I have already touched on the great work undertaken to keep our streets safe and fight crime, particularly the work of the police, who are on the frontline. I believe that we should back the police when it comes to new technology, but also by standing by them as legislators, including in difficult times when the way in which they are policing and operationalising and their professional judgments are under scrutiny, including public scrutiny. The police are the ones who put themselves in harm's way to protect the public, and in recent weeks, we have seen the pressures they face when it comes to policing in challenging circumstances. I pay tribute to the police—I have seen them in very difficult situations. They are skilled professionals, and the recruitment of 20,000 police officers did not come out of the ether. A great deal of detailed work took place around that recruitment, but also around retaining them—how our laws back them, and how new technology and funding enables them to do their jobs. Our police officers are a credit to our country, and we should always show them our appreciation. They are diligent and maintain the highest possible standards, as I have seen myself.

However, we have of course seen some shocking and disturbing incidents, inappropriate conduct and serious criminality involving police officers. We have debated that issue in this House many times, both during my time as Home Secretary and since I left that position. It is right that chief constables and police commissioners across the country work to improve professional standards—I have had many discussions to that effect—but it is also important that we learn the lessons when things go wrong. In particular, the measures in clause 73 relating to ethical policing and the duty of candour can build on the work that has taken place through recent reviews. Of course, inquiries are still taking place, in particular the Sarah Everard inquiry that Dame Elish is working on. It is important that we maintain those standards going forward—we have a lot of work to do.

I will now touch on some areas in the Bill where I want to see greater scrutiny to ensure that the measures in this legislation will make a difference and will go further in some quarters. One area that needs reflection is clause 19, which the Chair of the Justice Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), touched on already. That clause contains measures that would permit entry into private premises without a warrant.

I am the first to recognise the desired outcome that the Government are seeking: to support the police in tackling the issue of stolen goods by enabling them to enter and search premises and to seize items without a warrant. We all want to see those responsible for those crimes apprehended more quickly, and the goods returned to their rightful owners—that is absolutely right. Too often, victims of crime are left frustrated by the challenges involved in investigating those crimes and getting their goods back. However, as the party of law and order that believes in safeguarding the rule of law, I want to ensure that if this power is introduced, freedom and civil liberties are maintained and due process remains in place. There is the prospect that that power will be misused, leading to miscarriages of justice.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I share my right hon. Friend's slight misgivings about that clause; it will be interesting to hear the argument that the Minister makes. Obviously, there are already circumstances in law where, if the police have reasonable suspicion that a person has committed a crime, they are able to enter that person's premises in pursuit of them or the goods they have supposedly stolen. As such, I am unsure what more the clause will add; it will be interesting to see where the Government take it. I share my right hon. Friend's nervousness about breaching a long-standing settlement with the British people about their privacy and the ability of the police to invade it.

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He and I spent a great deal of time discussing policing powers and what more we could do to strengthen them in relation to all aspects of criminality. The Bill rightly includes some safeguards, but there are measures in place already. We need to understand how the proposed powers will work—how their use will be authorised, and in what circumstances. The Bill is at an early stage, and it will obviously be scrutinised in Committee, but there are questions that need to be answered. We welcome those discussions.

I will say a few words about the provisions relating to nuisance begging and rough sleeping. I have listened with interest to the comments that have already been made about this issue on both sides of the Chamber. Members will recall that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 contained provisions to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824, which is nearly 200 years old. I and my colleagues in the Government at the time worked with all Members of the House on that—it was right that the repeal took place—and we spoke about the replacement legislation as it came forward.

No one in the House would dispute that dealing with homelessness is a difficult, sensitive and highly complex issue. I worked with Government, local authorities and charities on these issues as Home Secretary, as did my former ministerial colleagues. In particular, we looked to provide resources and the right kinds of interventions to support those sleeping rough on our streets. Project ADDER was brought in to deal with a lot of the addiction issues that are associated with homelessness. That is an incredibly successful programme that works with local authorities. The Government must invest more in it and roll it out further.

I recall working on this issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who was then Policing Minister. He brought

his London experience to the fore regarding problems in central London. There were some specific cases of begging and homelessness on Park Lane, and we were able to address those issues and deal with rough sleeping, which was causing a lot of problems in that community, by bringing in the police and Westminster City Council and taking some proactive measures. There are also some incredible charities doing outreach work in London and across the community, in particular those that engage with rough sleeping.

We should reflect on the fact that this issue involves some veterans with complex needs, including the challenges posed by mental health issues, as well as some individuals who need trauma-informed support. We need to invest time across different Departments and agencies to tackle this problem, rather than looking at it just in the context of a criminal justice Bill. It is right that the Government look at the legislation required to prevent rough sleeping, and it is also essential that they bring in measures from other Departments to provide the right help and support. It will be interesting to hear from Ministers about the work that will take place in this area and to hear some of their reassurances.

I would like to touch on the point my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) made about spiking. Some work on that has taken place already, and we have met victims of this horrendous crime and campaigners against it. I had the privilege of working with the police on spiking issues, and in fact with Assistant Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, who was brought in to support all the work on violence against women and girls in particular.

During my tenure as Home Secretary, we certainly introduced new restrictions on some of the drugs used for spiking, and we brought in tougher sentences. We also reviewed whether a new and specific offence was needed. One has not been brought forward, but it is subject to debate, and the Policing Minister is familiar with all this. As the Bill progresses, it will be interesting to see where the Government take this issue, particularly because it is difficult to track, as we know from policing data. We should recognise that as a House, but we want to do more to prevent further victims of spiking, and we need to come together to look at what practical measures can be put in place.

I look forward to working with Ministers. We have a very strong team, who will be very diligent when it comes to both building on previous measures and looking to strengthen the Bill to bring in proper practical measures. No one would dispute that the country wants robust action when it comes to going after offenders and punishing those who do dreadful things across our communities, leaving victims harmed. It is right that the Government bring in this Bill and it is right that we work collectively to strengthen our laws, but we do need practical measures to make sure that the legislation actually delivers for victims. We want fewer victims of crime, and we want to protect our communities and strengthen our safety.

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

3.22 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and I certainly

[Chris Stephens]

agree with her remarks on homelessness and veterans. I have a number of veterans charities in the Glasgow South West constituency, and they work with me and other elected representatives to make sure that veterans get the support they need. She was absolutely right about their trauma and some of the issues they have to face, and I certainly hope that the Government listen to her remarks.

Some of this Bill relates to Scotland. I will touch on those parts, and then I may sound like an international observer making constructive comments, because many other parts of the Bill affect England and Wales only. As the explanatory notes say, the Bill affects and applies to Scotland in relation to

“defence; official secrets; terrorism; telecommunications and wireless telegraphy; financial and economic matters; and consumer protection.”

I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that her officials and Scottish Government officials are engaging on those issues to make sure that the Scottish Parliament will be asked to approve a legislative consent motion. There will be some grey areas—consumer matters are often seen as one—but perhaps the Minister, in summing up the debate, will talk about what work is being done with the Scottish Government.

It does seem as though, instead of solving challenges relating to crime or alleviating push factors such as poverty—instead of tackling the causes of crime—the Government are intent on more incarceration. There are some welcome aspects of the Bill, such as measures to tackle organised gangs and violent crime, remove templates for illicit activities and tackle communications offences. There are 650 Members of Parliament, and certainly my view from what I see on social media is that the attacks on all of us are getting worse, so we do need to look at that. However, this is not just about us, of course; there are many other communications offences. We certainly need to strengthen the law on revenge porn.

The Home Secretary has had to leave for other business, but he served with me on the all-party Youth Violence Commission before his elevation on to the ministerial ladder. I do hope that the Government will look at the SNP's continued call, which is also the call of the all-party Youth Violence Commission, for the implementation of a violence reduction unit equivalent to the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, which focuses on preventing violent crime through community and youth work, education and social services. In the Glasgow South West constituency, youth organisations play a vital role in making sure that we turn young people away from youth violence. There is a clear role for social services and education in the whole approach to ensuring that we reduce violent crime, particularly for young people.

The Scottish Government's annual figures show that the rate of homicides continues to fall. The number of homicide victims has shown a downward trend since 2004-05. In 2022-23, there were 52 victims of homicide in Scotland, one fewer than in 2021-22. However, the biggest reduction in the number of homicide victims is among those aged between 16 and 24: for the last five years, the average rate of homicides in that group was 10 per million of the population per year. I hope that the Government will look seriously at what happens in

Scotland and learn from it by having a youth violence reduction unit for the UK and engaging with social services, education and the great youth organisations out there right across these islands engaging young people.

As the world is changing its views on drugs, the Government appear to be expanding drug testing on arrest, and there is a concern that stop and search may disproportionately target those from an ethnic minority background. In the year ending 31 March 2022, there were 516,684 stop and searches in England and Wales. For 20% of those, the person's ethnicity was not known or not recorded. There were 8.7 stop and searches for every 1,000 people, but there were 27.2 stop and searches for every 1,000 black people compared with 5.6 for every 1,000 white people. I think there is a concern there and I hope the Government will look at it. It does look as though the black, Asian and minority ethnic community is being discriminated against.

In tackling antisocial behaviour, we really do need to look at provisions that move us away from the theory that homelessness is some sort of lifestyle choice. The immediate predecessor of the Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), was wrong-headed in weakening modern slavery laws that target organised begging in the streets and then suggesting that people living in tents is some sort of lifestyle choice. I do not think I was the only one to find that comment completely and utterly ludicrous.

The Bill enshrines that,

“An authorised person may give a nuisance begging direction to a person appearing to be aged 18 or over if satisfied on reasonable grounds that the person is engaging, has engaged, or is likely to engage, in nuisance begging.”

Again there seems to be a complete mismatch of Government priorities. Instead of scrapping section 21s, which allow landlords to evict tenants who are not on fixed-term contracts without giving a reason in England and Wales, the Government will criminalise begging, which shows their warped priorities.

Between 2018 and 2022, nearly 4,000 people were arrested under vagrancy laws for sleeping rough or begging. Begging is legal in Scotland unless it is deemed to be aggressive. According to campaigners, begging has become a common sight, but steep fines and criminal charges do not tackle its root causes. Crisis chief executive Matt Downie has said:

“While genuine anti-social behaviour must be addressed, we know that engaging people in support services is much more effective at ending their homelessness for good”,

and he continued:

“Above all, no one should be punished just for having no home.”

In tackling antisocial behaviour, the Government appear to be reheating a ban on zombie knives, which successive Home Secretaries since 2016 have tried and failed to ban the manufacture, sale and importation of. The Government must get this right. Under the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 offenders with banned firearms can be jailed for up to 10 years, while those found with other weapons can be jailed for up to six months and fined. Under current rules, the possession of machetes and zombie knives is not outlawed unless they feature images or words that suggest they could be used for violence. This means that if police find weapons in someone's home, they cannot seize them even if they believe they

will be used to commit a crime. I hope the Government will tidy up the legislation so that from now on there will be a criminal offence of possession of a bladed article with the intent to cause harm.

The Tories appear to be prioritising more freedom of movement rights for prisoners than for any other UK citizens. British prisoners have more rights to stay in Europe than UK citizens currently do, with a 90-day maximum limit post-Brexit and a visa and/or residence permit required thereafter. The UK Government said the plan would only be undertaken if the

“facilities, regime and rehabilitation provided meets British standards.”

Transferring prisoners engaged in active legal proceedings in the UK, such as those appealing against their sentence, risks violating article 6 of the European convention on human rights guaranteeing the right to a fair trial, as enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998. There are also concerns about violating article 8 on the right to a family life due to the difficulties in ensuring family visits for inmates being kept overseas, as well as fears over the general quality of treatment.

The Government have accepted that the scheme could be costly, not least because taxpayers may have to pay for families to visit relatives in overseas jails and would only be pursued if it represented value for money. The Government point to similar practices by other countries but there are still concerns. Questions remain over how the Government could prove that their values and legal obligations were upheld in another territory. That is an important point which I hope the Minister will address in the closing remarks. If prisoners do not volunteer or consent to being transferred overseas, principles of procedural fairness could be violated that encourage prisoners to be able to share their side of the argument and have that considered in decisions made about them, such as on good behaviour for parole.

In concluding, I associate myself with the remarks of the shadow Home Secretary on shop workers. Daniel Johnson, a Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament, had a private Member's Bill that went through the Scottish Parliament with support from the Scottish Government, and I hope the UK Government will listen and look to work constructively on any amendments that protect shop workers. What happened in Scotland was built by persuasion and consensus and I hope the UK Government will listen, because if they do shop workers across these islands will be very grateful.

3.33 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about this very important Bill, and it is of course a pleasure to follow Scottish National party spokesman the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

There are some very positive aspects to the Bill that are welcome. Tackling violence against women and girls, giving powers to law enforcement agencies to respond to technological change, and strengthening the law to protect the public from violence and intimidation are much-needed measures that will certainly reassure my constituents. There are communities across my constituency that have been the victims of appalling antisocial behaviour in recent years. The police and local councils are doing what they can to protect these communities with the application and implementation of community protection notices and then public spaces

protection orders, but one challenge that the police have faced is that many of the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour are under 16. Lowering the age of a CPN to 10 will help the police in tackling antisocial behaviour and is much appreciated.

However, I am not comfortable with parts of this Bill—the last Criminal Justice Bill before the next election—and there are also things that are missing from it. I shall be as brief as possible. I apologise to those who have provided some excellent information, and I will probably do them a disservice as a consequence. I will also be blunt, as there is no other way of saying this, and I find myself being slightly firmer on this than the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper): I did not work as a Minister and as a Back Bencher on the repeal of the Vagrancy Act, only to see rough sleeping criminalised again via a different piece of legislation.

I get that there is an issue with aggressive begging. We on the ministerial taskforce, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) was very much a part of, were always aware of that. There was always a view that other pieces of legislation, such as the existing antisocial behaviour legislation, could cope with aggressive begging being transferred in. At no point did we, either as a taskforce or as part of the Vagrancy Act repeal, hear evidence about aggressive rough sleeping.

Rough sleepers require holistic support. They often have extremely complex needs, including significant mental health needs. Visibility may be uncomfortable for many, but it also enables support workers from the many brilliant charities and local authorities to reach out to them. Issuing prevention notices does nothing to solve the problem, but pushes them further away from the solution. Sentencing them to prison creates nothing more than extra problems for the person and the creaking prison estate.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What the hon. Lady is saying is incredibly powerful, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. Does she agree that one challenge we face is that we have a homelessness crisis? In my local area, our brilliant night shelters are already full, and the people working with the homeless would find it harder to help them if they had a criminal record. It would be counter-productive to the very good work we all know needs to happen to prevent homelessness so that it is one night only.

Tracey Crouch: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. People who find themselves sleeping rough on the streets are in a desperate situation, and the provisions in the Bill will do nothing to help them. Our local authorities, which often get a bad rap for the consequences of rough sleeping, have many officers doing brilliant work in trying to support rough sleepers. We need a holistic approach to tackling that issue. We do not need to criminalise them through these provisions, some of which, by the way, are laughable, respectfully. We have the idea that a prevention notice can be served to a rough sleeper at their last known address in writing. I am not entirely sure why that provision is even in there.

The point is that we need to be supporting people who are rough sleeping. I get that there is an issue with aggressive begging. In fact, various mayors across our

[Tracey Crouch]

metropolitan cities have said that, but rough sleeping does not need to be criminalised. We got rid of that as part of the Vagrancy Act repeal, which was supported by the Government. All we are doing is bringing that criminalisation in by the back door.

I will support the Bill on Second Reading because of the other measures, but I strongly urge the Government to remove the clauses on nuisance rough sleeping from the Bill. If not, I will certainly lend my name to amendments to remove those clauses from the Bill, on which I hope I would get cross-party support as a consequence. There are other ways of dealing with rough sleeping, rather than criminalising people.

The Bill also contains welcome measures to improve public confidence in policing after significant failings within forces to identify and investigate criminal behaviours. Those are welcome, given the shocking high-profile cases of recent years, but I suggest we reflect on how we protect good officers who do their job in challenging and fast-moving situations from prosecution. *The Times* on Saturday reported on the prosecution of PC Paul Fisher, who crashed en route to south London, where Sudesh Amman, a convicted terrorist, had stabbed two members of the public. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley said that it

“undermines the confidence of all officers using their powers to keep the public safe.”

He is spot on.

A constituent of mine—a frontline Metropolitan police dog handler—was sentenced today having been found guilty of actual bodily harm after apprehending a dangerous criminal, who was subsequently sentenced to 14 months in prison. At the time, he was hailed “brave” and a “hero”. A complaint made from prison was dismissed by every level of the internal standards process, and it was only when the prisoner appealed again that it ended up in court, with the shocking guilty verdict. My constituent’s 21 years of exemplary service are in tatters due to a system that actively works against frontline officers and instead advocates for passive policing. We do need to improve standards of policing across our forces, but, at the same time, we need to protect those officers who are doing their jobs.

I turn to issues that would be helpful inclusions in the Bill. This morning, the first part of the inquiry into the depraved acts of David Fuller in the mortuaries of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust was published. The families of the victims of Fuller are always at the front of our minds when we, the MPs whose constituencies are covered by the trust and where many of them live, are informed about the inquiry. We collectively agree that the Government, the NHS and the trust should accept and act on the recommendations of Sir Jonathan’s report without delay.

Fuller will rightly serve the rest of his life in prison for the heinous crimes he committed, but there are two additional aspects of his crimes that the Government must also act on. First, the woefully short maximum sentence of two years for anyone found guilty of the sexual assault of a dead body needs to be substantially increased to at least 10 years, as per Baroness Noakes’s amendment to the previous Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Secondly, the current legislation applies only to the sexual assault of a dead body that involves

penetration. Given the sensitivity of this matter, and on this day when coincidentally the inquiry published its report and we are debating the Bill, I do not want to go into further details, but, in short, non-penetrative sexual assault of a dead body is not included under existing legislation, and that needs to be changed. I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who is currently abroad on Government business, will table an amendment to the Bill to that end. I truly hope that we will never see such depravity again, but in memory of those who were victims of Fuller’s crimes, we must ensure that the offence covers all acts of assault and that sentences are increased significantly.

I turn to an entirely different point. I am surprised not to see in the Bill a specific offence of tailgating at football matches. The House will have seen Baroness Casey’s report following the violence at the Euro 2020 finals. Tailgating causes significant operational, safety and security problems for major events at Wembley stadium as well as other football matches across the country—I witnessed that as I experienced the surge of those illegally attempting entry to Wembley as I queued to get into the final. I understand that the Home Office agrees with the recommendation for a specific offence and that King’s counsel has recommended to the FA that that can be done through either an update to the Football (Offences) Act 1991 via statutory instrument, or adding it to the Bill. Given that the Bill is in front of us, it feels like a missed opportunity not to include that offence in it, so I will happily table an amendment to ensure that it is in place long before we host Euro 2028.

Finally, there is one other point that I was surprised not to see in the Bill. There are many reasons for us to be disappointed that the Government dropped the kept animals Bill, but one particular reason, which is relevant to this Bill, is that it would have introduced a specific pet abduction offence. Given that there is no debate about the harm and impact of pet theft, I was surprised not to see the offence included in this already wide-ranging bill. There has been an increase in pet theft, and the Government’s pet theft taskforce believes that pet owners should not live in fear of this cruel crime. Since this was in our manifesto, I hope the Government will either table an amendment or support a Back Benchers’ amendment that creates a stand-alone offence and bring reassurance to the millions of pet owners across the country.

I appreciate that I have raised a varied list of points, and that others wish to speak and I am running out of time. In summary, this is an important Bill—our last Criminal Justice Bill before the election. There are things in it that we need to do. There are things that we do not need to do. There are still things that we need to put into it. Fortunately, we have an excellent ministerial team responsible for the Bill. I look forward to working with them as it progresses through Parliament.

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

3.45 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak on the Second Reading of the Criminal Justice Bill. It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch),

who made a powerful speech. She speaks for many in Chamber when saying that there are things in the Bill that should not be there and things that should be that we do not have yet. I hope that we will see some improvements in Committee.

I refer back to the point made by the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), on spiking. That is an ongoing issue—the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) is in his place, and he has done an enormous amount of work on it. The Home Affairs Committee carried out an inquiry and produced a report in which we were clear that we would like a specific offence of spiking to be introduced. We were also conscious of how important it is to work on prevention. That is ongoing work, and I am hopeful that we might see some progress from the Home Office in the coming months. It will be interesting if we get to the point where we need to table amendments to introduce that specific offence.

Another Session, another Home Office Bill. As the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford said, it is probably the last before the general election. I want to focus on the issues that the Home Affairs Committee has considered in some detail in our recent inquiries. A few weeks ago we published our policing priorities inquiry, and before that a report on police misconduct. I want to look specifically at the clauses relating to policing. It is important to pay tribute to our police forces and officers for their work day in, day out, dealing with very difficult circumstances. However, we all know and accept that, in recent years, policing has had far too many scandals. Far too many police forces have gone into special measures, and there has been a real exposure of the racist, sexist and homophobic culture in many of our police forces. We must be mindful of the powerful report by Dame Louise Casey this year on the Metropolitan police. The Committee has been conscious of her recommendations in that report and the need for action from the Home Office and the Mayor of London.

I turn to clause 73, which I welcome in principle. It is the requirement that the College of Policing issue a code of practice on ethical policing. The College of Policing already publishes a code of ethics, so I assume from the drafting of the clause that the new code of practice relies on a trickle-down effect from chief officers, rather than being—as we all thought it would be—a general duty for all officers at all ranks to be open and honest with the public when mistakes are made. The importance of leadership in driving and improving culture is recognised in our policing report, but the public are entitled to expect openness and honesty from officers at all levels. The creation of a less defensive culture across policing is necessary to rebuild public trust and confidence in the police.

Priti Patel: The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech and has concentrated on the ethics of policing in a constructive way. The Government are introducing the duty of candour, which we welcome, although there has to be concern about how that fits within the overall structure of the language of ethical policing, which is important. She will be familiar with the work of the College of Policing and of His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services and its chief inspector, former police constable Andy Cooke, who has been doing a great deal of work on this. It has to be

deliverable. We are learning lessons from Hillsborough and other reports in the past, but we need specifics about what this means in practice.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady, who speaks with great knowledge about this area and about how legislation has to be deliverable. It has to work for every officer at every level in all our police forces, so there is a job of work to be done. I hope that in Committee the information on how it will all fit together will become clear. The Home Office has said that the duty will filter down to all officers. The concern of the Home Affairs Committee is that if we are really serious about changing police culture we need more than just a hope that things will cascade down. We need clear responsibilities and clear duties.

Clause 74 gives chief officers a statutory right to appeal to a police appeals tribunal against a disciplinary decision. I would like to highlight again that the Home Affairs Committee heard, on several occasions, that simply giving chief constables more powers of appeal will not solve the underlying problem of the initial quality of investigations or even the confusion over the definition of misconduct. That has proved very problematic in dealing with disciplinary cases, so more clarity on that is needed.

The Bill will allow the Secretary of State to enable appeals by police and crime commissioners in limited circumstances where the chief constable is the officer subject to a misconduct decision. The Home Affairs Committee has previously questioned whether extending rights to challenge misconduct hearing outcomes in general to police and crime commissioners would create a conflict of interest for them. The Committee was concerned that giving PCCs extra powers to challenge individual misconduct hearing outcomes could encourage them to stray into operational decision making, and that the often party political and elected nature of their posts could be seen to influence their decisions. The Committee concluded that PCCs should drive systematic improvements in local forces, for example by taking steps to assure themselves that misconduct and competence processes are fit for purpose, rather than intervening in individual cases.

At this point, I want to make a comment about something that is not in the Bill, but which the Committee would have liked to have seen in it. The Independent Office for Police Conduct has, very unusually for such an organisation, one post for the roles of chief executive and chair. The Committee has been concerned about that for some time, and a review of the structure of the IOPC is ongoing. Separating out those two very important roles would be an important part of the reform of the IOPC that is perhaps still needed, and that is not in the Bill.

Clauses 15 to 17 expand police powers to test suspects in police detention for drugs. I would be really grateful if the Minister was able to confirm what resourcing will be put in to ensure that any increase in those testing positive for the extended range of drugs will be matched by the necessary diversion services. I think we all want the Government's 10-year drug strategy to meet its aims and objectives, but if it is to do that we must be clear that much more work needs to happen.

As the Committee set out in its recent report on drugs, we must have the right interventions in place to help people break away from the terrible cycles of

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

addiction and criminality that drug addiction can cause. They need the right support to let them deal with addiction, but they also need psychosocial support and interventions to deal with the underlying trauma that may have led them to drugs in the first place. I welcome the measures in clauses 1 to 3, including the creation of a new offence to better enable law enforcement agencies to prove illicit use of pill presses. That is very welcome, and it too was proposed in our drugs report. However, I hoped that the Government might make an announcement about a roll-out of naloxone to all police forces. In Scotland it is carried by all police officers, and it plays an important part in saving the lives of people who have taken an overdose.

Clause 19 deals with extending the powers of the police in respect of acquisitive crime. There are some important unanswered questions here. First, can the Minister provide examples of what might constitute “reasonable grounds” for believing that goods are stolen and on the specified premises? Secondly, how confident is she that the new power to enter any premises without a warrant will be used proportionately? Thirdly, given that forces are committed to following “all reasonable lines of enquiry”

in the case of every crime, may I ask how they can be adequately resourced to undertake what they have promised to do?

There are a couple of other measures, recommended by the Select Committee in the past, that I hoped would be in the Bill. The first involves retail crime. We made a very specific recommendation that certain offences be created. A few weeks ago, the manager of my local Co-op was showing me the system that it had on its CCTV. While I was at the back of the store, someone came in, opened the door of the fridge, scooped out all the chicken legs and thighs and other kinds of meat, and then left. According to those at the Co-op, the crime that they see the most is organised crime. It is not a case of someone stealing a loaf of bread or some sandwiches; people are going into stores and stealing every day, and that needs to be addressed.

This issue has already been raised, but I still do not understand why each and every one of our police forces—rather than just two thirds of them—does not have specialised units dealing with rape and serious sexual assaults, when all the evidence makes it clear that what is needed is specialist investigation of those very serious crimes.

There is another provision that is not in the Bill and ought to be, in the light of recent disturbing and tragic events. I have mentioned several times in the Chamber that women can still face prosecution under section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 if they end a pregnancy after the legal time limit. In 1861 Queen Victoria was on the throne, Charles Dickens was writing “Great Expectations”, women could not vote or be Members of Parliament, and the age of consent was 12. The maximum penalty under section 58 is life imprisonment.

Between 1861 and November 2022, just three women were convicted of having an illegal abortion, but let us make no mistake: this not a defunct piece of legislation quietly gathering dust on the shelf. Since December 2022 one woman has been convicted for a late termination, and six women are awaiting trial. We also know that

police officers have investigated at least 52 women over the past eight years on the basis of suspicions that abortions have taken place after the legal limit.

Abortion care providers also report a stark increase in information requests from the police. For example, after Hampshire police found a human placenta in woodland in Southampton over the summer, it contacted the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and asked for details of anyone who had been seen at a clinic but turned away because they were past the time limit at which they could seek an abortion. That request was made without any court order. Earlier this year, it was reported that distressed women who have had miscarriages are being tested for abortion drugs by the police. Abortion providers have warned that women suspected of illegal abortions have been pushed into having these tests while in hospital, with no legal representation and without their proper consent being obtained. No woman should be pursued by the police for ending her pregnancy.

Those calling for the threat of criminal prosecution relating to abortion to be lifted from women include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and Rape Crisis England & Wales. That is why I will be tabling a new clause to remove women from the criminal law relating to abortion. Let me be very clear with everybody: this is a very limited and highly targeted amendment. It would not change any law regarding the provision of abortion services within a healthcare setting in England and Wales. The abortion time limit, the legal grounds for abortion and the requirement for two doctors’ approval would all stay as they are. What the amendment would do is usher in an end to women being put in jail for having an abortion, and in 2023, I hope that we can all come together and agree on that course of action.

4.1 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). She knows that I very much agree with the sentiment that she has just expressed around the criminalisation of women who are in one of the most difficult situations. In years gone by, people who took their own lives were subject to the criminal law. We have seen the error of our ways and changed the law on that, and I hope that we will on this too.

There are many good things in this Bill, and we have heard from the Home Secretary that there are more good things to follow, particularly the legal duty to report child sexual abuse and the prohibiting of sex offenders from changing their names. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has had a great deal to do with those measures and she certainly has my fulsome thanks for all the work she has done on them. These are important changes, and the fact that the Government have listened demonstrates not only the strength of her arguments but the strength of our ministerial team.

There is nothing more corrosive than the fear of crime, and we therefore have to be careful in how we use language to frame this debate. At the beginning of today’s debate, there were way too many statistics being bandied around for my liking, so I am going to start my comments with one fact. I was going to quote Mark

Twain, but I am not sure that the word “lie” is acceptable parliamentary language, so I will not talk about lies and statistics; I will just talk about facts.

One of the most important facts, and one that will help to stop an unnecessary fear of crime, is that this Government have put in place 20,000 more police officers. We now have over 149,000 police officers in England and Wales and the fact is that that is the highest number on record. That is unequivocal. I would like to pay tribute to my local constabulary, Hampshire police, and particularly to my police and crime commissioner, Donna Jones, because they have gone above and beyond what the Government asked for, which was around 500 new officers in Hampshire. More than 600 new officers have been recruited to Hampshire. Those are facts, not statistics, so hopefully we can all agree on them.

It is important that we do not use inflammatory language when it comes to crime, because people become unnecessarily concerned. I see that on the doorstep when people start talking about their fear of burglary, whereas the Home Secretary has rightly said that burglary rates have fallen dramatically. There are many other sorts of crime that we should be concerned about, so let us not make our residents concerned about things that have fallen dramatically.

As my right hon. Friend said, this Bill demonstrates the constantly changing shape of crime. People find new unacceptable ways to benefit from others, and we have to make sure they become illegal. Following some very high-profile cases, of which we are all aware, I very much welcome the introduction of a broader offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm. I also welcome the new aggravating factors that increase the seriousness of child sex offences where there is grooming, and of murder connected with the end of a relationship. There are important changes to be made.

There will be a duty on the College of Policing to issue a code of practice on ethical policing, which is particularly important for those of us who are proximate to the Met police—my constituency almost neighbours the Met.

There are powers for the courts to order the attendance of offenders at sentencing hearings, and to punish them if they do not attend—again, this follows some very high-profile cases. Obviously, refusing to attend a sentencing hearing can cause huge distress to families.

The Bill also has measures on knife crime. Basingstoke is a county-lines town, as we are a gateway to Hampshire. We have seen some horrific knife crimes involving young people, often from south London, and I am not surprised to see that knives account for more than 40% of homicides in the last year. The Government have introduced measures to increase the maximum penalty and to criminalise the intent to cause fear of violence, and these are all things that need to be better dealt with in law.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) spoke about the antisocial behaviour provisions, which will introduce new powers to lower the age limit of community protection notices to cover younger perpetrators aged 10 or above. It is sad that I recognise the measure’s importance, because my local police have talked to me about people under the age of 16 who are creating appalling nuisance and antisocial behaviour in my community. Extending community protection notices to that younger age group, and increasing

the upper limit of fixed penalty notices, will help to give the police the tools they need to deal with the real crime in our community.

I will now comment on two particular elements of the Bill, before suggesting a couple more that the Minister may want to think about. Although I understand the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, I think the measures on nuisance begging and rough sleeping will be more warmly received in my community than she suggests, because organised begging in our town centre, often by criminal gangs, and begging that causes a nuisance around shops and cash machines is a concern not only to residents but to retailers and business owners. It is important that we have measures in place to deal with these issues as robustly as possible, but—and this is an important but—they need to go hand in hand with effective measures to make sure we do not simply move the problem of rough sleeping either into our prisons or into other communities.

We ran a very effective programme in Basingstoke under the then Conservative administration that I hope the current independent administration will continue. It was started by then Councillor Terri Reid, who worked with Julian House, a well-known charity that, through its outreach work, supports rough sleepers into accommodation and into the help they need. If the Minister’s intention with this Bill is to marry together these provisions with effective support, I can see how it might work. This measure worked in my constituency because the money that was given by the Government to the upper tier authority was passported down to the lower tier one, and it could then work much closer to the community and to the problem, making sure that we have effective plans in place. The number of people now homeless in my community is extremely small indeed.

Tracey Crouch: I want to put on the record, for clarity, that the Bill contains separate provisions to deal with nuisance begging and with nuisance rough sleeping. Nuisance begging is absolutely an issue that blights communities, and people from across the House will agree that the provisions from clause 38 to clause 50 are definitely necessary—the question is whether that needs to be done in this Bill. Nuisance rough sleeping is addressed from clause 51 and it is entirely separate. The criminalisation of the rough sleepers is the issue here, not the nuisance begging, which is dealt with under entirely separate provisions.

Dame Maria Miller: Let me confirm that I was talking about rough sleeping. The antisocial behaviour action plan, which is cited in the explanatory notes, to provide the support that is needed is vague, and I hope that the Minister will reassure us that far more support will be given to local authorities if these measures come through, to make sure that they have effective provisions in place.

I will speed up, Mr Speaker. The provisions in the Bill on intimate image abuse relate directly to the Law Commission’s work in this area. Again, I pay tribute to it for bringing forward those provisions and to the Government for taking them up. They will start to complete the necessary legislation to protect individuals from intimate image abuse online. To have an intimate image published online without one’s consent is akin to rape and it is now being dealt with in the criminal law,

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for which the Government are to be applauded. I also thank Professor Clare McGlynn, at Durham University, who has done so much work in making sure that these provisions are as they should be.

There are a couple of issues where the Government might consider adding provisions into the Bill. I have already raised the first of those with the Home Secretary in my intervention: non-consensual intimate images not being removed online, even though they may have been part of a criminal case where somebody is now in jail. There are mechanisms for us to be able to remove these images, but it sounds as though some people are not removing them and that the law may need to be tightened further. Finally, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has suggested that this Bill may be a place to decriminalise abortion for women. We will come later on, perhaps in the remaining stages, to whether this Bill is the right place to do that, when there is perhaps not sufficient time to go through all the details. If that were to be the case, I gently suggest that perhaps the Government will want to look again at my sentencing guidelines Bill so that we make sure we continue to take incremental steps to modernise the way women are treated in the law on abortion. We have had provisions on buffer zones and telemedicine, and sentencing could well be a way in which we could make sure that women are starting to be treated in the way they should be: as patients and not as criminals when it comes to abortion.

4.13 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): This Bill presents a precious opportunity to address some of the big problems that exist within our justice system. Despite this Bill making some progress on the sentencing of serious offenders, it is frustrating that the Government are seemingly refusing to use it to fix those fundamental problems. I hope I am wrong or, at the very least, that this is just a starting point and the Bill will be improved during its passage through both Houses. I commend all the recommendations that hon. Members have made today.

Let me start with the positives. I am genuinely relieved that the Government have finally introduced legislation on the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has reported that nearly a quarter of girls who have taken a nude photo have had their image sent to someone else online without their permission. I and many others have called repeatedly for action on this issue. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (*Dame Maria Miller*) for her persistent work and successful campaigning, and I assure the Minister that she will continue campaigning until the law properly reflects what is needed.

I am also supportive of increased powers to ensure that offenders attend their own sentencing hearings. Sentencing should be a moment of justice for victims and families. For abusers and perpetrators to refuse to take the stand is morally wrong, as it denies closure to those they have harmed. The Government must ensure that the measures are balanced, but their priority should be to ensure that victims receive the outcome they need.

Now for the “needs improvement” section. I welcome clause 23, which makes grooming an aggravating factor when an offender is being sentenced for child sexual abuse. I hope victims will begin to feel that the jail time that their abusers receive reflects the devastation that the crime causes. However, this is just one step in sentencing. Grooming is already an offence—I know that because I have already changed the law on it. If the Government genuinely want more prosecutions, they need to invest in our police and courts, which have been utterly decimated in the last 13 years. Introducing an aggravating factor to an offence that is already on the statute book will not get sentences meted out unless we have the resources to make that happen.

Likewise, I welcome the principle of mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, but unless there are fully funded police, investigative and criminal justice services, just reporting it becomes a tick-box exercise; it will make people feel that they have done their duty, but there will be no back office to actually prosecute the people carrying out the abuse. I worry that the measure is seen as an easy solution rather than getting into the detail.

Similarly, requiring judges to consider the end of a relationship as an aggravating factor in murder cases is a good step, but we should go further. We need recognition of something that is the precursor to the murder of many women: stalking. Why not take the opportunity that the Bill presents to address that? I continue to call on the Government to take stalking as seriously as other forms of violence. The Minister can use the Bill to prevent murders by rolling out harsher sentences for the factors that lead up to them.

Now for the bad, I am afraid. I am genuinely outraged that the Government are taking such draconian steps towards criminalising rough sleeping. I support 100% the comments made by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (*Tracey Crouch*). I am genuinely baffled why the Bill treats homelessness as a “nuisance” rather than providing the help that homeless people clearly need. During the pandemic, the Government did amazing work getting every rough sleeper off the streets. Why are they criminalising them now?

Crisis has stated that anyone who is judged to look as though they are going to sleep rough and is capable of causing a nuisance could fall foul of the Bill. That is not how we make good laws. No one would voluntarily choose to sleep on the street or in a tent. People do it because they are desperate. They need support, not to be criminalised, especially when our criminal justice system is already at breaking point. In reality, the police will take them off the street and put them in a cell for a night, and then they will be back out again the next morning. That is not a solution. Will the Minister work with her colleagues on housing rough sleepers and providing them with a long-term route out of poverty, rather than criminalising them?

This Bill is a missed opportunity for some of the changes that are needed in the justice system. I am keen to support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (*Ms Harman*) in amending the Bill to remove parental responsibility from all those convicted of sexual offences against children. We must also ensure that the Bill repeals the ridiculous, archaic laws that criminalise people when it is expressly not in the public interest to do so.

I give my support to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and to what I believe will be the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), because women in 2023 should not be punished in criminal law for accessing abortion. I will be supporting the amendments that I believe they will be tabling to drag our laws out of the 19th century and into the 21st century, where women are entitled to support when making choices about their reproductive health.

Finally, I am surprised, relieved and delighted that the Home Secretary has announced that he will be adopting my legislation to prevent registered sex offenders from changing their name by deed poll. I pay tribute to Della for her campaign and to The Safeguarding Alliance, which has been working for years alongside me and other campaigners to make Ministers understand both the scale of this problem and the threat that it presents.

As I was coming down to London on Monday, I saw in the *Metro* a report of a teacher who had a relationship with a 15-year-old. He went to jail for three years because of it. He has now come out and changed his name, and he is working in a pop band. I believe that that presents a very real risk to other 15-year-olds. I really hope that the Minister will work with me and others to get the legislation right quickly, in order to protect everyone.

There are provisions in the Bill that are welcome, while others highlight weaknesses and areas that need to change. The issue is that the Government are bringing forward individual measures, rather than focusing on the much bigger problem—the lack of joined-up thinking around our justice system. There is much missing from the Bill that would ensure that the public were safe and that victims received the justice that they need, and I do hope the Minister addresses that.

The Conservatives can claim that they are tough on criminals, but when it comes to the practicalities of keeping the public safe from known offenders, I am saddened that, as it stands, this Bill is a missed opportunity. Please, Minister, do not just let this be PR and puff; let it be something that everybody can be proud of.

4.22 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I rise to support the Bill, which will help to make our constituents safer, including by imposing tougher sentences; imposing new measures to fight knife crime, including zombie knives; tackling violence against women and girls; and giving law enforcement agencies the powers that they need to respond to changing technology.

In the previous Session, we legislated to ensure that the most serious offenders serve longer in prison. Through this Bill, we will impose tougher sentences for child sex offences by making grooming an aggravating factor, and implement recommendations by introducing an aggravating factor for murder at the end of a relationship.

I wish to highlight the importance of judges imposing sentences that reflect the intent of this House. In 2022, we legislated to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving, yet sentences continue to be too short. The mum, sister and stepfather of my constituent Summer Mace were killed in an appalling incident, but the offender got a sentence of only 10 and a half years and could be out after seven years. Ministers and Parliament need to make sure that the sentencing guidelines actually do what we legislate for.

Turning to some of the specifics in the Bill, I particularly welcome the new power in clause 22 to allow judges to compel offenders to attend sentencing hearings, rather than their hiding away in their cells to avoid victims or their families and the powerful victim statements that are made. That abuses the victims and their families all over again. This is something that I supported and campaigned for after a case in my North West Norfolk constituency where an offender refused to attend the sentencing hearing when he was found guilty of sexual assault of a girl under the age of 13, and of intimidating a witness. Indeed, he failed to attend most of the trial.

The explicit statement that reasonable force can be used by the police and escort officer staff will ensure that the power to make defendants appear in court is very clear. However, as it is currently drafted, that provision applies only to offenders awaiting sentencing for an offence for which a life sentence must or may be imposed. That would not address the case from my constituency, as the maximum sentence for that sexual offence was 14 years. Abusing a child is an incredibly serious offence. I therefore urge the Minister and the Home Secretary to look at the provision again and expand the range of offences to which it applies, because it is important for all victims that offenders face justice. It is important that there is punishment if the requirement is breached and that, where the new power cannot be used—for example, if someone is so violent or disruptive that it is not possible—there will be an additional custodial sentence of up to two years. I fully support that.

One issue I want to raise relates to bail. I hope Ministers will consider, through this Bill, amending the Bail Act 1976 to allow the imposition of electronic monitoring in police bail conditions. In an Adjournment debate that I led on behalf of my constituents on the dangerous driving case I mentioned and unduly lenient sentences, I spoke about the offender, who in June 2023 was sentenced for three counts of causing death by dangerous driving. At the time of the crash, he was on police bail for a driving offence and was subject to a curfew. He also had several previous convictions for motoring offences.

Currently, section 3 of the Bail Act allows courts to impose electronic monitoring as a condition of bail, but electronic monitoring is not permitted under the conditions of police bail. When that offender broke his curfew and set out that night to drive, there was no electronic monitoring in place. Who knows whether, if it had been in place, that tragedy might have been avoided? One of the changes that my constituent and her family are campaigning for is to allow electronic tagging in cases of police bail. Their petition in support of the change is backed by more than 13,000 people. I ask the Home Office to look at whether it can use this Bill to introduce a change to help to reduce the likelihood of other offenders committing such appalling acts.

There are many measures in the Bill that I support. Those to tackle the scourge of fraud are very welcome, given that that is the most common crime and one that causes true misery for our constituents, especially for vulnerable and elderly people. In particular, banning SIM farms, which are used by criminals to send thousands of scam texts at once, will help to protect people, together with the initiatives being taken by mobile networks. Of course, it is sensible that the Government

[James Wild]

can respond to developments by updating the list of banned technologies and articles through secondary legislation, rather than having to wait for another criminal justice Bill—although they do come round rather frequently.

The Bill includes new powers to help make our communities safer, to cut serious crime and to tackle antisocial behaviour. However, I have outlined specific improvements that I would like, and I hope that Ministers will consider them carefully and bring them forward as the Bill continues its passage.

4.27 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): There are a number of measures in the Bill that we can all agree are very welcome, and I want to recognise that. However, there is a wider challenge for us all when we see such a deconstruction of our criminal justice system, given that parliamentary time is so rare and precious. Are we doing everything we can do through this Bill to tackle the challenges in our constituencies?

I am sad that the Home Secretary is not here. His approach to talking about knife crime will not go down well in my constituency. We are facing an epidemic of knife crime in our community. For many of my residents it is a sign of real concern that they see a lack not only of the police they want, but of the social fabric that we need, both to tackle knife crime and to prevent it in the first place. I am also sorry that our SNP colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), is not in his place. He talked about the Glasgow model. I would go further than a public health model; I would go for an education model to try to prevent these issues in the first place.

I ask Ministers to look again at what more we can do to tackle knife crime. It has risen substantially and I am afraid that my local police consistently seem stretched to the point where they cannot do the work I know they want to do. I put on record my gratitude to the police for the work they are attempting to do, but we all know it is not enough.

The same is true for antisocial behaviour. My office has taken to mapping out the many areas where we know there is persistent drug dealing, in the hope that at some point we might be able to use that information to effect change and progress. We hear from residents that, even when they report things and try to do everything we tell them to do to stop those problems, nothing changes. I look at the Bill but do not see the measures that will help them with antisocial behaviour.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) is not in her seat because I absolutely agree with what she said about rough sleeping. There is a rough-sleeping epidemic in my local community. Criminalising it—separately from begging—will not help us to deal with it, and, indeed, could be counter-productive. I hope that, as the Bill progresses, we recognise the overwhelming cries from those in our brilliant night shelters, who work on the ground to tackle rough sleeping, about how counter-productive that would be.

I put on record my gratitude for the work of Daniel Johnson, a Labour/Co-op MSP, on tackling violence against shopworkers. My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris),

has done brilliant work on that in this Parliament. We have a model for what works. We know that our shopworkers deserve better; they are trying to help us. I hope that we can finally agree that such legislation is needed.

In an outpouring of collegiality, let me also agree with everything that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) said, as well as with my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who is a powerhouse of changes in this place, as she has proved yet again. I agree with the case made by my right hon. Friend about the decriminalisation of abortion. I will focus on that in my speech because I will also table an amendment on that matter. I will set out why I believe we can take that way forward. I think there is growing agreement that the issue needs to be addressed.

Indeed, on 15 June, when faced again with the evidence of the continued prosecution, criminalisation and incarceration of women for having abortions, the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), challenged us by saying that it was up to this place to do something about that if it had a problem with it, particularly the difference now between the experience of women in Northern Ireland and women in England and Wales. He tried to argue that the House made a decision knowing that it would create a different regime for access to abortion in Northern Ireland. I disagree. As somebody who was heavily involved, I do not think that, when we voted, we deliberately wanted to give second-class status to our constituents in England and Wales as to their rights. But I also recognise the challenge that the Minister set us that day: to test the will of the House through a free vote on an amendment to a piece of legislation.

Let me clear: I intend to table an amendment to begin that process of testing whether an Englishwoman's right to choose should be confined by a piece of legislation from the 1600s. We know that abortion is a routine health procedure. One in three women in this country will have one in their lifetime. This Bill is the right place to act, because even if we see abortion as a healthcare matter, it is first and foremost a criminal offence that every one of those women is enacting before seeking exemption from prosecution.

When *Roe v. Wade* was repealed in America last year, many were quick to dismiss the idea that such attacks on women's basic rights were possible in this country—access to abortion was secure and reflected the settled will of the people—but in the last few months alone, we have seen what the Government have done on buffer zones, for which the House voted overwhelmingly. Those same voices are silent as the Government drag their heels on the implementation of buffer zones, which are the will of Parliament.

In the meantime, multiple women are awaiting trial, under a law that is older than Germany, for the offence of just having an abortion. Last year, six women were charged with having an abortion. Each of them could, in theory, spend the rest of their lives behind bars. It is not just about the high-profile cases that have gone to court and been in the press, and the prison sentences that the legislation drives; investigations into women have rocketed in the last few years, too. Police data shows that, since 2015, 52 women have been reported for having an abortion.

I am sorry to disagree with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), who is no longer in her place, but I genuinely feel that looking at sentencing guidelines alone will not do. It is having the offence in the first place that is driving those investigations and prosecutions. The cases that come to court are the tip of the iceberg of a culture in which we use a woman's reproductive capacity against her at a time when she is most vulnerable. Many people agree that that is wrong, but we in this House have yet to address it because we have always put decriminalising abortion in the "too difficult" box.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind): I have been listening very carefully to the hon. Lady. Can I ask her to explain why there is a sudden rash of prosecutions of women? It seems extraordinary. What is the catalyst that has caused it?

Stella Creasy: I wish I could tell the hon. Gentleman what I think is the cause for sure. There are a number of pressures—perhaps the move towards telemedicine or a renewed interest in the issue—but I hope we can agree that in the 21st century the idea that having an abortion in and of itself is a criminal offence is outdated and unworkable with a commitment to equality between the sexes. Indeed, we are increasingly seeing—I know this will shock him—any woman who has had a miscarriage or stillbirth being at risk of being dragged into a criminal investigation.

A young teenager called Megan suffered a stillbirth at 28 weeks. The police investigated Megan's involvement in her child's death for a year before the post-mortem confirmed that the pregnancy loss was due to natural causes. She faced that ordeal while dealing with the trauma of stillbirth, and it resulted in her needing emergency psychiatric care. She is not the only one. Another young teenager, unaware she was pregnant, delivered a stillborn child. Once this was declared, her hospital room was flooded with police officers—the presumption of foul play assumed before a post-mortem or a doctor's examination. Although sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 have become more widely known, it is section 60 that is most frequently used to charge an individual at initial stage, and that was originally written in 1643 to be used to prosecute where there was a suspicion of abortion. That is why senior obstetricians are now raising concerns that the provision, if it stays on the statute book, leaves bereaved parents exposed to intrusive questioning and investigation from the police.

For those who have suffered a stillbirth, the knock on the door that they need is from a counsellor, not a constable. If these cases were occurring in Northern Ireland, women would not face this pressure. That is why in 2019 MPs in this place voted to decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland. It is also why women in Northern Ireland now have buffer zones; they are part of a decriminalised process and protected as such. Crucially, when we know people wish to attack a woman's basic right to choose, in Northern Ireland the Secretary of State must uphold that human right to choose to have an abortion—safely, legally and locally. Those who seek to frustrate that access, whether through formal or informal ways, face a Government who know they will have to go to court if they do not overcome those barriers and protect the rights of women to choose. That is because that legislation is founded under the auspices of the convention on the elimination of all

forms of discrimination against women—a treaty that we technically have yet to ratify fully, but which expressly states that states parties should remove criminalisation of abortion and

"withdraw punitive measures...on women who undergo abortion".

The amendment that I will table this evening, which is open to all MPs to support—and which I hope I can convince my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North to co-sign—does not ask for something new or to set a new precedent. It is rooted in practice and evidence about what works when we are protecting the human right of women in the UK to choose. This is not untested because decriminalisation of abortion has already happened not just in Northern Ireland, but in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. We are simply asking for equality and for somebody in Government whose role it would be to uphold that right to access an abortion without the threat of punitive measures.

In tabling my amendment I want to be very clear, because I understand that there will be concerns, especially in the light of recent court cases: nothing in my proposal will change the time limits in the Abortion Act 1967. Indeed, my amendment would explicitly enshrine those limits in future regulations. We should all be clear that 90% of abortions in this country happen before 10 weeks and that those having late-term abortions often do so for the most heartbreaking of reasons—the fatal foetal abnormality that means that if we try to move the time limit, we force women to give birth to babies they know will die. After carrying a much wanted child, we would be criminalising them rather than medicalising this matter.

Decriminalisation is about taking away the threat of prosecution. It does not take away the principle of viability in accessing services, so I state here and now—and for the purposes to be repeated online and offline as we move through the issue—that a vote for decriminalisation is explicitly a vote against abortion up to birth, though some have tried to scare otherwise. It is not the case in Northern Ireland, and it will not be the case here. Neither is it a vote for no regulation: the removal of the criminal underpinning of our legislation would mean its replacement with a medical one that puts the health of women first and ensures appropriate professional delivery of services as well as clinical safeguards.

I know there are some who will never want this progress. I respect their views: I respect the fact that they do not believe abortion should be an option, and will fight for their voices to be heard in this democracy. Surely we all want positive sex education in all our schools and support access to contraceptives, which will reduce the number of abortions required. However, many more of us disagree that a woman should be forced to give birth, and recognise that having bodily autonomy is a human rights issue.

The Northern Ireland experience shows that it is possible to make progress but also means that we currently have a two-tier system, with women in the UK being given different rights depending on where they live. Why should the women of Birmingham, Bangor, Bradford, Bury, Broadstairs, Bournemouth and Barking not enjoy the same protection of buffer zones as the women of Belfast? If colleagues voted for those buffer zones in Northern Ireland, why would they not extend them to their own constituents? If colleagues were not in this place to vote for them in Northern Ireland, why would

[Stella Creasy]

they accept their own constituents being considered second-class citizens when it comes to their basic human rights?

Now is the time to recognise the damage being done because our criminal code does not allow a right to be accessed safely, legally, locally and equally across our nations. We know that this will be a long fight, that the wording may change and different variations may be put forward, but we also know that the time is now. Colleagues who agree—who do not want to see women prosecuted, obstetricians worried and stillbirths penalised in this way—should co-sign our amendment and say, “It is now an equal time to choose for all our constituents.”

4.41 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I am pleased to welcome the Bill, and many of the measures to tackle serious organised crime and antisocial behaviour that it contains. These are important issues that are often raised by my constituents in surgeries and through surveys, because they impact on people’s daily life and their sense of safety and belonging in their community. I pay tribute to the work of Sussex police, as well as the Government funding that has focused action on the town centre most particularly, delivering the safer streets that give people the confidence to be out and about, especially in the night-time economy. However, I will confine my remarks not to measures that are in the Bill but to one measure that is not in the Bill but might be.

If there is one place where everyone should feel safe, it is surely within the comfort and confines of their own home, but the reality is that thousands of vulnerable people across the country are terrorised in their own home by criminals who take control of that home and use the property for criminal purposes. That horrendous exploitation is known as cuckooing, where criminals target the most vulnerable, such as socially isolated people, those with learning difficulties or those dealing with addiction and drug use. They may initially befriend those people, or may simply threaten them. They are often violent, ultimately taking over the victim’s home to store drugs, grow cannabis and facilitate prostitution or any number of other criminal activities. The influence of cuckooing goes further and wider, because the neighbours of people whose homes have been invaded have to contend with disruption, antisocial behaviour and intimidation from the criminals who operate from that property.

Cuckooing happens across all communities in our country, including—I am very sorry to say—in my own constituency of Eastbourne, and it is a rapidly growing problem. Figures from Sussex police reflect that: in the past five years, there has been a tenfold increase in cuckooing. Understanding the impact on the victim in one local case—their powerlessness, despair and shame at having been so abused and exploited—must surely command further action.

Bob Stewart: May I ask my hon. Friend what the reason is for a tenfold increase in cuckooing in Eastbourne?

Caroline Ansell: I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for his question. I cannot explain the increase in Eastbourne, but I imagine that the increase is across the

land. There will be an increase and an uptick because it has been found to be a very effective way for criminal gangs to operate, and they move from home to home to evade detection. It is an absolutely vile crime, but one that clearly lends itself to the activities being pursued.

It was actually a real shock to me to discover that this hostile takeover or invasion—this taking over of somebody’s home—was not already a crime. However, I believe the Government recognise the need for it to be, because in the antisocial behaviour action plan, published just in March, there was a commitment

“to target the awful practice of ‘cuckooing’ or home invasion”

and a pledge or commitment to

“engage with stakeholders on making it a new criminal offence.”

Indeed, Emily Drew, who is the exploitation co-ordinator at Sussex police, substantiated that point when she said:

“It’s definitely hard to tackle cuckooing when it’s not technically a crime. There are lots of other tools and powers we can utilise and we can be quite creative with it but it does rely on perpetrators committing other offences.”

Hence the real challenge of making this a stand-alone and discrete crime.

Clearly the action plan was a very positive step forward, but at the moment the Bill does not include such an offence. However, in his opening remarks, the Secretary of State talked of “every possible support” and “additional powers” for the police. He spoke about people feeling safe in their homes, and about opportunities during the passage of the Bill to consider further amendments to cover some of the concerns raised by hon. Members. I very much hope that the Bill will provide the perfect opportunity to introduce a new criminal offence to outlaw cuckooing once and for all. I hope the Minister and the excellent ministerial team, with the Secretary of State, will bring forward such an amendment in due course.

4.47 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak to some of the amendments and proposals outlined in this Bill, and to echo some of the comments made by right hon. and hon. Members. One of the key things in it—requiring individuals who are facing a sentence to come up and hear their sentencing—is a step in the right direction. I am sure that provision is welcomed, and it is good to see that the Home Secretary and Ministers are listening to many of the bereaved families about the impact non-attendance has on them. They have spoken about how it is distressing, exacerbates trauma and essentially denies them the opportunity to address the perpetrators. However, I hope that the Minister, in responding, will address some of the concerns of campaigners and organisations, including Justice, which have highlighted that the use of force may have a disproportionate impact on BAME offenders and could also put custody officers and prisoners at risk. I hope that the Government will bear that in mind when they are looking at how to implement this power.

Bob Stewart: I totally agree with what the hon. Lady has said. Are we envisaging someone who refuses point blank to come into court to receive their sentence being forced into court by police officers and manacled to the dock? Personally I agree with that, but is that what we are envisaging?

Florence Eshalomi: This is where we need clarity, not only for offenders but for prison officers who are going to be dealing with those people and making sure no harm comes to them. There must be a clear definition of the use of force, recognising that this is a very distressing time for the families and those in the dock but also recognising that there must be appropriate use of force.

Many Members have highlighted the second area I want to focus on: the new proposal on the power of nuisance begging and nuisance rough sleeping. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) are not in the Chamber at present, but I agree entirely with their comments. There is no mention in the proposals of any support to address rough sleeping, yet we have a number of punitive measures that will only end up criminalising people who are already facing a difficult and challenging time. Those measures will do nothing to end rough sleeping and homelessness. Specifically, the penalty for nuisance begging or nuisance rough sleeping is one month of imprisonment. The measure might not work, either, because the Government have been honest in saying that there is a lack of capacity in prisons—there is just no space. That is evident in the Government's proposals in clauses 25 to 29 to transfer individuals to rented prisons abroad.

Short-term prison sentences are expensive, and studies show that they do not work in having a positive impact on re-offending. I am co-chair of the all-party group for ending homelessness, and our inquiry last year heard from many people who had experienced rough sleeping and homelessness. The key issues they highlighted were mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic abuse, alcohol and poverty. All of them are key drivers in forcing people to experience rough sleeping and homelessness.

Stella Creasy: Given that this is a Home Office Bill, does my hon. Friend recognise that one of the challenges we are seeing is an increasing number of people who are refugees becoming homeless because they are given such short notice that they are no longer going to be housed in hotels? Perhaps if we had a little more notice and planning we might be able to avoid some of those people sleeping rough, because we could work with them to make sure they were able to find housing or other accommodation in their new country when they have the status they need to be here.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter, because it is as if she is reading my mind. Our all-party group took evidence from a number of different organisations as well as London councils, refugees and people from the Homes for Ukraine scheme. We heard about people who had been housed and supported by various councils and host families, but who were now presenting to councils up and down the country as homeless with nowhere to go. The Government need a joined-up approach to addressing this.

We also have to recognise that people who are rough sleeping are also very vulnerable and are more likely to be victims of crime and antisocial behaviour, yet they will not report that to the police because of the stigma of being homeless.

Everyone needs a good-quality home to live in. It is central to our wellbeing and our physical and mental health, and it should be a basic human right. I urge the Minister and the Government to remove the clause in question and instead to work with local authorities, charities, shelters and organisations including St Mungo's, Crisis, Shelter, Homeless Link and a range of others, who are working hard to provide support to people so that everyone can find a decent home and keep it.

I also want to talk about the vetting, suspension and misconduct of police officers. This Bill presented a good opportunity to introduce reform in those areas. We have had various reports and studies on police conduct both in London and across the country, and the fact that seven of our police forces are still in special measures should alarm us. The duty of candour for police under clause 73 falls short of the wholesale review we need in policing. There is a requirement on the College of Policing to issue a code of practice to set out the actions to be taken by a chief officer. That essentially leaves the College of Policing to determine what

“acting in an open and transparent way” means.

One of the key areas cited in Baroness Casey's report was the defensiveness of organisations such as the Met police when faced with criticism. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) put forward a number of sensible proposals to look at reforming that, and they go way beyond what the Government are outlining in the Bill. They include automatic dismissal for a serving officer convicted of a serious criminal offence, automatic suspension of an officer charged with a serious criminal offence and automatic dismissal of a serving officer who fails their vetting. That would help restore some of the trust and confidence in our policing, because at the moment criminals see that those who are supposed to uphold the law are not within the law themselves and are facing criminal charges. That should not be happening.

We welcome some of the good measures in the Bill. Some of the measures on knife crime are good, but on their own will they not go far enough to address knife crime. One of the most difficult things I have had to do as a Member of Parliament is to meet bereaved families. I have sat in a family's front room and looked over their shoulder and seen a picture of the loved one they have lost—that young smiling face. I held my constituent's mum earlier this year after her daughter was brutally murdered at 4 pm on 1 May. She asked me, “Why?” She asked why she has to wait over a year to get justice for her daughter. There is nothing you can say.

Just introducing new measures and legislation on zombie knives and other knives will not address the chronic issue of knife crime that we see across the country. We need a full-scale, holistic public health approach. We need funding, education and a mental health approach to dealing with the root causes of knife crime. We cannot just lock people up to get out of this—that is not the solution. Those who have lost family members know that is not the solution, and they want to work with the Government to address this matter properly. I ask the Government again: instead of introducing yet another measure on knife crime, will they work with local authorities, youth services, councils and police forces up and down the country to have a wholesale public health approach to dealing with this pandemic of knife crime?

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

Hate crime has sadly risen, too. Earlier this year there was a horrific hate crime attack at the Two Brewers in Clapham in my constituency. We have seen a massive increase in LGBTQI+ hate crime. Someone being attacked simply for who they love is wrong. Again, the community feel that when they come forward to report such crimes to the police, their concerns are not taken seriously. Will the Government look at the inefficiencies in reporting and addressing those crimes?

A number of Members have mentioned retail crime and visits they have made to stores in their constituencies. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), I visited a Co-op store in my constituency. In the South Lambeth Road store, shopworkers mentioned a situation where the same offender had come to the shop 17 times. Shopworkers are going out to work every day knowing that they could be physically attacked and abused, and that is not right. I started my working life in Sainsbury's on Clapham High Street. Yes, customers could sometimes be aggressive, especially when the focaccia bread was sold out by 11 am on Saturday morning—it was Clapham High Street—but no one should have to tolerate abuse and physical abuse just for going to work. Staff on the frontline in our retail shops are being attacked day in, day out, and that cannot go on. The Government are not recognising that, and are saying that thefts under £200 will not be looked at. We need to ensure that the police have the resources to address this issue, because low-level antisocial behaviour escalates. In some cases, that physical and verbal abuse, God forbid, turns into a stabbing and an innocent shop worker being killed. We should not have that happening to our frontline workers. There are sensible proposals in the Bill, but I urge the Government to think carefully about those that will not have an impact in addressing the key issues of crime and antisocial behaviour.

5 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Conservative writer and statesman John Buchan said:

“You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass.”

Too often, our constituents are exposed to how fragile that thread is as they deal with the barbarity of crime. It is true that, as the new Home Secretary said, some crimes have fallen—burglary has certainly declined, as well as some other crimes—but too many of our constituents have a diminishing faith in the rule of law. Order delivers and depends on a secure sense of certainty shaped by shared values and, as communities become increasingly fragmented by social breakdown, those values are eroded. There are many reasons for that, but just two of them are the pace and character of change. We cannot admit 1.3 million people into the country in just two years and hope that communities will hang together. In some places, there is nothing to integrate into, even if the people coming would like to do so. We have to deal with the rapid pace of change and its effect on the character of community and the shared values on which we all depend.

There is another problem, which sadly is prevalent in the Chamber; I hear it prosecuted many times. That is to assume that the focus in criminal justice should be on

the criminal, not the crime; the cause, not the event. That implicitly limits—I would say that it reduces—our concern for victims as we perpetually ask why something has happened rather than what has happened. The effect of a crime—the event—is immediately felt, and the consequences of that event are measurable, so let us stop agonising about why, and deal with what and how, and what we will do about it.

What will the Government do about it in the Bill? There is much to be welcomed. The new crackdown on antisocial behaviour is overdue and insufficient but welcome. There is the concentration on knife crime and new offences for carrying knives. That, by the way, needs to be backed up with much more extensive use of stop and search—I hope we will hear that from the Minister when she winds up—because there is no point in having something on the statute book that says, “If you carry a weapon, you will be prosecuted” if we do not know whether people are carrying one or not. We know that stop and search works and we want to see more of it.

There are also sensible changes to the laws on vagrancy. Again, let us be crystal clear about those changes. The Bill says—this is not the hyperbole we have heard from some Opposition Members—that we will ban begging where it is causing a public nuisance such as by a cashpoint, in a shop doorway, on public transport, or approaching people in their cars at traffic lights. It will also introduce a new offence targeted at organised begging, which can be facilitated by criminal gangs to gain money for illicit activity—that is organised, orchestrated begging on a large scale. It will also introduce powers for the police and local authorities to address rough sleeping where it is causing damage, disruption, harassment, distress, or a security or health and safety risk such as the obstruction of fire exits or blocking pavements. That all sounds eminently reasonable.

Of course, those measures are not part of a bigger strategy on homelessness—I acknowledge and accept that—but my constituents tell me that they suffer from exactly the things that I have just detailed and want something done about it. The Government are to be congratulated for responding to those calls. The Government are right, too, to insist that criminals are in court when sentenced. We all saw recently that Lucy Letby was able to avoid meeting the families of her victims by cowering in her cell when she was duly sentenced.

There are things that are not in the Bill. I would have liked it to look at raising minimum and maximum sentences for all kinds of crimes. I would like more custodial sentences, not fewer, and not just for serious crimes. We have heard a lot about shoplifting. Let us imagine if we said to our constituents that the Government are increasing sentences for serious crimes, but a perpetual shoplifter will never go to prison; someone engaged in criminal damage by defacing or attacking a war memorial in our constituencies will not go to prison; someone involved in perpetual antisocial behaviour will not go to prison. That is not good enough, it is not what our constituents expect or want and it is not what the Government should do.

Richard Graham: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the power of community payback is enormous, visible and makes a huge difference to our communities? When those who commit petty crimes are seen to be

painting or gardening in city or town parks, the offence is commensurate with the justice mooted, and we can all benefit from that.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but it is a big mistake to assume that the principle aim of criminal justice is to avoid recidivism. That seems to underpin much of what the Government think. It is true that we want to stop people becoming perpetual criminals, but that is not the only measure of criminal justice. The purpose of justice is to punish. People want to see

“the infliction of an ill suffered for an ill done”.

For people’s faith in criminal justice to be maintained, they need to know that if someone does something wrong, they will suffer for it.

Similarly, imprisoning someone takes them away from where they committed the crime and thereby stops them from committing another. In the case of shoplifting, at the very least it provides respite for those plagued by shoplifters—often, the same families, groups and social networks are involved in that concentrated and organised shoplifting. It is not the person stealing the occasional thing; unfortunately, it has been institutionalised in certain criminal communities and among a certain kind of felon. We need to think about criminal justice in those terms. Community sentencing can play a part, but it is important that criminal justice is retributive. That argument is made to me perpetually by my constituents, but in their eyes, it seems to fall on deaf ears among the political elite. Protecting the public, punishing criminals and providing victims with a sense that justice has been done are all essential to maintain popular faith in criminal justice.

I know that others want to speak, and too many speeches in this Chamber are too long. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is no such thing as a political speech that is too short. So I will conclude with a different quote from a different character. C S Lewis said:

“I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can.”

We will never eradicate the wickedness of crime. No society ever has. But in tackling evil, first we must recognise it, and secondly be intolerant of it. To be intolerant of wickedness is not only the right thing ethically but would allow us to say with pride that we are defending the innocent against those who seek to make their lives a misery. Let us move forward with the Bill with a spirit of righteous intolerance of evil. On that note, I look forward to the new Minister, whom I welcome to her place, illustrating her vigorous intolerance of all that is wicked and criminal.

5.9 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for his contribution, but I feel I have to pick up on his point about stop and search.

As I know from my own constituency, done badly, stop and search can have a lifetime impact on trust in the police. I know men of my age who can still remember when they were stopped and searched frequently and badly. It absolutely has to be intelligence-led and done respectfully, so that any young person—or any person stopped by the police—knows their rights and is treated properly, because not everybody carries a weapon. There is

a point to it when it is well-targeted, but we have to keep monitoring the police so that the number of stop and searches and the number of weapons found are proportional. Across London—I know my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) will find this as well in her constituency—people caught with a weapon will often hide it in the bushes or somewhere else because they know it will be found by stop and search. If it is used badly, it does not work; if it is used well, it does have a place in policing. It cannot be got rid of completely, but it must be done respectfully and properly.

Given the current challenge the police are facing, particularly in London, in terms of trust with the community, we need to be really careful. In my constituency, I watch the statistics closely for who is stopped and searched, and the proportion of knives caught. It is important that we all keep an eye on that. We are at a point of disagreement, but I hope we can disagree well on this issue. The tone of the debate has been like the old days—we are actually discussing the matters in the Bill.

I want to focus on a number of issues, starting with that important matter of public trust in policing, which we know is currently a real challenge. We have policing by consent in this country and that is a prize worth fighting for. In my constituency, over a very long period of time, before my election 18 years ago and since, we have seen that lack of trust and challenge played out viscerally at times. Nationally, we had the shocking cases of police officers Wayne Couzens and David Carrick. They were serving officers and continued to be in employment despite previous incidents that were clear red flags.

I strongly commend to the House Baroness Casey’s review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture in the Metropolitan police. It sets out clearly the scale of the problems and is a seminal piece of work, but it will only be a seminal piece of work in reality if it is actually taken on board. I therefore welcome the commitments made by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, to tackle those issues, and his strong acknowledgement of the systemic problems in the force he now leads. The leadership has to come from the top, but it needs to be root and branch from below as well. We need to have confidence that the police can report issues among their colleagues—the duty of candour is an important element. The idea that things are hidden from senior management, or that senior management will not deal with them, needs to be in the bin now. Sir Mark Rowley needs power to his elbow to continue to deliver what he is trying to do. I am very concerned about how we got here and there are still lessons to be learned.

Very many years ago, I became a Home Office Minister. I had responsibility for the vetting and barring service. Building a picture about an individual police officer and vetting is still not being applied to the police. I served as a Home Office Minister for the three years from 2007 until the general election in 2010. Colleagues may remember the Bichard report, published in 2004 after the tragic murder of two young girls in Soham. The importance of recording and aggregating inappropriate and concerning incidents and behaviours carried out by people in professional roles, or indeed anyone, was not being managed well. Someone could commit a crime in one area—or not even commit a crime, but come to the

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

attention of the police force in that area—and then move to a different area and repeat the same actions, and there would not be an overall picture of what that person had done.

As the Minister responsible for the then vetting and barring scheme, since subsumed, alongside the Criminal Records Bureau, into the Disclosure and Barring Service, I helped to shape that picture, focusing particularly on people working in education and health settings and bringing together and changing the rules governing the way in which people were supported. But that picture building also plays a much wider role. I know, having dealt with it in such detail at the time, that if it is used and shared properly, it can prevent opportunities for more serious crimes to be committed.

It is a tragedy and an irony that that type of intelligence gathering, which is now well established in many professions, including education and healthcare, had clearly not been happening in policing. The vetting system alone was different. Someone could be vetted and passed to become a police officer in one area, but in another area the vetting would disbar him or her from that force. Actions could be registered on people's files and records as employees in one force, and in another force—or, indeed, in the same force—the accumulation of those actions did not lead to those people losing their jobs.

Before Wayne Couzens was convicted of rape and murder, six incidents of indecent exposure were linked to him, and in a previous job he was known as “the rapist” because of how he made women feel. David Carrick's offences spanned a 17-year period—almost as long as I have been in the House—with reports to the Met first made in 2000. Here we are in 2023, more than 20 years after the tragedies in Soham, and that picture building and intelligence gathering across police forces has still not been happening. There is a great deal to be done to build trust between the public and the police, and it is clear that immediate progress needs to be made on the issues that I have mentioned.

I want to say something about the Home Office's recent review of police officer dismissals, in particular its recommendation that misconduct hearing panels should be chaired by senior police officers supported by a legally qualified panel member and an independent member. Previously the panel would have been chaired by the legally qualified panel member, supported by the other two members, in order to ensure, rightly, that those chairing misconduct hearings had the appropriate knowledge and skills and were removed from any actual or perceived conflict of interest in the case. I fear that the change in the make-up of the panel threatens public confidence in the transparency and independence of the proceedings.

For example, a police chief or a police and crime commissioner might be required to make a statement immediately following a police incident, something we regularly see on our television screens and read about in the media. After that, the officers involved could be subject to a disciplinary hearing. How could that police chief then chair the panel objectively? There would be a clear conflict of interest.

The Bill creates the right of a chief constable to appeal against a decision made by a misconduct hearing panel. The rationale for that is that police chiefs should

have a right to determine whom they employ in their forces. On one level I completely understand that, and, as I say, all power to the elbow of Mark Rowley in wanting to get rid of bad officers in his employment. However, it adds another layer of proceedings—another potentially lengthy and resource-draining element.

Policing is not a regulated profession, which is extraordinary when we think of comparable professions. As the IOPC points out in its response to the Home Office's review of the process of police officer dismissals,

“Police disciplinary proceedings have their origin in the employer-employee relationship between a constable and their chief officer. However, that relationship has been overlaid incrementally by a statutory regime intended to promote public confidence. As has been noted in various legal judgements, the legislative regime that has resulted is very complicated.”

In regulated professions, the professional body deals with the public interest in fitness to practise issues, which means striking off people from the professional register when that is appropriate, while employers deal with breaches of the contract of employment, which means dismissal or some lesser sanctions. In the absence of a fitness to practise model in the police, a neat solution would be to separate findings relating to misconduct from the sanctioning element. A panel—chaired, I suggest, by an independent member—could find an officer guilty of misconduct and make a recommendation regarding an appropriate sanction, but the police chief would then make the decision to retain or sack that officer on the basis of the independent findings.

We all know that confidence in policing is the foundation of our system and that policing by consent is something we should prize. It is essential for my constituents in Hackney and for people up and down this country that we take concrete steps to address the problems and fix the long-standing systemic issues. I think there is an opportunity to do that in policing. I can see why the police will have lobbied the Government to have the right to chair misconduct proceedings, but I think there is a way of resolving that and keeping the independent oversight while giving police chiefs the right to sack people who have done the wrong thing.

I also want to touch on something I mentioned in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) in relation to shoplifting. Shoplifting has increased 25% in the last 12 months alone, with offences under £200 rarely being enforced. I recently visited the Gainsborough Co-op in Shoreditch to talk to the staff there, and I thank them for hosting me. I have also spoken to the trade union USDAW. It was interesting and sobering to talk to the member of staff at the Co-op who is responsible for collecting the information about shoplifting across the Co-op group. A lot of evidence is collected. We have heard examples of people going in and sweeping up food, with the same person often making several visits a day; they know when the security guard is on a break and go in then. They case the joint and steal repetitively. They are also increasingly aggressive, and staff tell me that they now go behind the tills more often.

The staff now wear cameras to try to record video evidence. They collect video evidence and they collect evidence from staff, who have to take time out of their duties to report it. They tell me that they are assiduous in doing that because they see the importance of trying to tackle the issue. The Co-op then pulls together that

data—USDAW tells me that it is the same for other stores—and presents it to the police en masse to try to get a conviction, yet so little is taken up. A police officer will not necessarily attend an individual incident. I understand the pressures on the police in my borough, where there are lots of things going on. There always has to be a priority, but shoplifting is so often down the list of priorities that it is a real tragedy for those working in those shops.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady and I see eye to eye on quite a few of the points that have been raised today. She mentioned a Co-op store, which is part of a wider group that clearly has a few more resources than independent retailers do. Does she agree that we really need to change not just the mindset in policing but the law to ensure that all crimes are treated equally, particularly when it comes to shop crime and its impact on retailers?

Dame Meg Hillier: The right hon. Lady and I are perhaps surprised to find ourselves in such agreement, but absolutely. I will finish highlighting what the Co-op does, because I think it plays into what happens in smaller stores.

The staff pull together enough information to make it evidentially strong enough to take through the prosecution service and into court, but even then they often struggle to get any interest—and of course, if the stores clamp down in one area by putting more security into a shop where there has been a particular issue, the criminals just move to the next property. We have to deal with this problem area-wide, which is why it needs to be a police matter and not just dealt with store by store. Crucially, as the right hon. Lady says, if the Co-op, Tesco or Sainsbury's clamps down on a particular store or stores in an area, other shops are left with less support. They are often small corner shops with a lone shopkeeper, and the fear for them is palpable. It is really worrying. If they know that the police are not going to come, they just have to back off and their goods are stolen.

The Co-op that I visited has lost £155,000-worth of goods in the first six months of this year. For a small shop, that is the difference between existing and not. We rely on those local shops, and in lockdown we needed their support. Now we need to support them, and this needs to be a higher priority for the police. The Government could also be doing more. This is something that my own party is keen to look at. I am a Labour and Co-op Member of Parliament, so I am particularly keen to see this dealt with. I was struck as I talked to the staff in store by how helpless they feel when someone pretty much jumps across the till to take cigarettes and booze. They have to hide things, and they have to stock dummy products, which is inconvenient for customers. Of course, customers sometimes go into one of these shops and find that the goods they want to buy are not there because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) said, the shop has just had a large-volume raid.

Shoplifting needs to be taken much more seriously. Nobody should go to work and expect to be attacked. Everyone I spoke to had suffered an incident of shoplifting. Even if they stepped back and were not violently attacked, it is still very damaging psychologically. No wonder we see such turnover among shop workers.

Sir John Hayes: Does the hon. Lady agree that perpetual shoplifters of the kind she describes, who intimidate people and make the lives of shopkeepers and shop assistants a misery, should be banged up?

Dame Meg Hillier: Again, I find myself breaking out in agreement with the right hon. Gentleman.

If the sanction is too low, people will keep doing it. As with county lines, it is clear that criminal gangs are often using and exploiting vulnerable people to do their dirty work. Those vulnerable people get caught, but we do not get Mr Big. Shoplifting is becoming an epidemic in many of our areas.

Florence Eshalomi: One of my conversations with shop workers was about the mental health impact of being attacked and abused day in, day out. A number of them were thinking of changing profession. We might think they have support, but the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) mentioned that, in most circumstances, smaller shops have just one person in the store. Does my hon. Friend agree that their safety has to be paramount and that we need more action?

Dame Meg Hillier: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Like her, I have spoken to shopkeepers and it is heartening that they want to do a good job. They said the problem is that, after a shoplifting incident, not only do they go home with it in their head but they have to take time out to record it all. This is what one said to me, and it was really heartfelt: "It stops me doing what I'm here to do, which is to help customers." He was so proud of his job, and he wanted to help customers. Nobody should be forced not to do their job well. Frankly, there is a real issue here, and there needs to be a strong signal that there will be action on the ground, with the police working with the retailers. The big retailers can help, but action needs to be area-wide. We need to take a completely different approach to shoplifting.

I commend the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall on knife crime. She highlighted the utter tragedy that she and I have experienced too often. It is not right that our young people feel unsafe roaming the streets. They should have the right to roam, but instead they and their parents are constantly worrying about knives on the streets.

Just banning zombie knives is not enough, because people will hide them. As with county lines, people will find a way. An 11-year-old in my constituency was recently asked to hide a gun, and when the gun went missing—it was taken from him—he had to pay back the person who had asked him to look after it. That is a classic example of grooming, and the same thing will happen with knives, which are not always held by the criminals themselves. Those who want to get hold of a dangerous weapon can do so all too easily, even if it is banned in law. That alone is not enough for somebody who is determined to do this.

We need to take a much more holistic public health approach to knife crime. I was in the Home Office when my party was last in government. The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and I are proud of our service in the Home Office, which is a great Department to be in, but it is also frustrating. At that time, we were trying to work with accident and emergency departments to get the data so that we could track what was happening, to make sure we had a more holistic approach. This is

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not just a crime issue; it is about making sure we are helping and diverting young people, who are often drawn into this activity not because they want to be but because, for young people living in certain areas, it is safer to be part of a gang than to step away. It is hard to resist that pressure at times, and those innocent young victims need as much support as other victims.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We can all reflect on where other parts of the state drop the ball on this issue, for young people in particular. Tragically, as she will know from her constituency—I have spent a lot of time with families in central London who are grieving because they have lost their children, their nieces or their nephews—these children get trapped into bonded labour, basically. They are treated like slaves. Somewhere along their journey the state, whether it is social services or the Department for Education, has failed. These kids may have been kicked out of school. That is where we need early intervention to stop the rot setting in.

Dame Meg Hillier: I absolutely agree on that, and we need resourcing for that early intervention. Something we look at on the Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, is what I call “cost shunting”. A classic example of that would be where mental health services get cut and the police end up picking up mental health patients and having to divert resources there. We could have early intervention to support young people so that they are not caught up in this. I am not blaming young people, as they themselves are not a problem—the young people in my constituency are amazing and are going to be great leaders of the future—but some of them, sadly, get sucked into this. That little bit of money going in early can prevent a lot of challenge for young people.

Many years ago, a police chief in Lambeth, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), did a bit of work to analyse the tragic knife crimes of that year and a clear pattern of victims emerged, one that often related to their being in care and to challenges in the education system. I give credit to Hackney’s gangs intervention unit, which finds the young people who are at risk of getting involved or who are involved. It then finds a way to divert them out of that path, through rehousing and education, and supports the family in doing that. This is a real challenge and so many parents want to talk to me about it. They do not want a uniformed police officer coming to the door if they know that there is a drug or gang issue in their area, because they do not want the young person in their family, often their son or daughter, to be targeted. We can talk about that issue.

Frankly, it will be cheaper for the Home Office to put money into early intervention than deal with the aftermath—the victims, the deaths and, later, the prison system, which goes to the Ministry of Justice budget. We need to break the government spending silos, looking across them with a mission statement as the leader of the Labour party has suggested. No longer can we look at individual silos; we need to find a way of tackling these wicked issues.

On fraud, the PAC has been looking at the issue for some time, and it is a failure of the system that we have such a poor response to it. The PAC looked at fraud in

2017 and again this year. Outlawing SIM farms is all very well, but victims continue to be let down. This is like the tip of an iceberg; it is as though the Government had to put something about fraud in the Bill so they went for SIM farms. Is that going to solve anything, given that most of the crime is overseas? When we looked at this again this year, the Committee concluded that fraud is

“everyone’s problem but no one’s priority”.

The Bill backs up that premise. Some 41% of all crimes currently committed are frauds; we are talking about 3.8 million instances of actual or attempted fraud in the year to June of last year. Such little progress has been made in the past year, with fraud increasing and victims paying the price. The cost of fraud to individuals cumulatively is £4.7 billion. We all want to boost the economy, so if we stop fraud, we could have £4.7 billion being spent in our economy. I am not being flippant, because this has a huge impact on the individuals who get hit, sometimes to the tune of several thousand pounds. For many of my constituents, even £50 or £100 is enough to tip them over the edge in a month, so this is a really big concern. Of course, this is about not just financial fraud, but other fraud.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend is talking about fraud. The Home Affairs Committee has just started an inquiry on fraud and we learnt that only about one in seven people who are the victim of a fraud report it, because of the shame and stigma attached. Is she as concerned as I am that people are not reporting fraud and so this is the tip of the iceberg?

Dame Meg Hillier: I absolutely am. I recommend to my right hon. Friend our report of this year and, I am sorry to say, our back history of reports on this issue, because things have moved so slowly that people might as well read the 2017 report as not much has moved on since.

I am going to come on to the issue of how reporting works, because the Bill misses an opportunity there.

Sir John Hayes: The right hon. Lady may recall that when I was a Home Office Minister—we are all sharing our Home Office histories here—we set up the National Cyber Security Centre and the national cyber-security strategy. We have made significant progress, but she is right to say that, as with shoplifting, fraud and cyber-crime are at epidemic levels. Part of that is about the way we constructed systems that are interdependent, interconnected and interoperable. Sometimes that adds to vulnerability, so we must change culturally how we go about doing business and interacting.

Dame Meg Hillier: I do not dispute what the right hon. Gentleman says, but there is a danger that that lets the Home Office off the hook. In the five or six years during which the Public Accounts Committee has been looking at the issue, fraud has got worse. Indeed, I was dealing with some of the issues when I was a Home Office Minister, and we are seeing a growth in the crime but not a growth in the action in response to it. That is not surprising, as the volume and complexity of cases are overwhelming police forces and Action Fraud, the civil body to which people report such crime.

The point that the right hon. Gentleman makes about interdependency is valid. Because the Home Office is dependent on the banking, technology, telecoms and retail sectors to fight fraud, its response has been slow and sluggish, relying on voluntary agreements with organisations in those sectors to deliver change. Frankly, those agreements have not delivered enough. The banks were reluctant to give evidence at all to the Public Accounts Committee—I suggest to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), that she pushes the banks to give more information—and when we suggested publicly reporting fraud levels against the banks, they were apoplectic. We ended up recommending slightly time-delayed reporting as a way of keeping institutions on their toes, so that customers could vote with their feet and know exactly which banks were on top of dealing with fraud. We think that the different sectors where fraud is happening could do more.

Over 70% of fraud has an international element, so whatever we do domestically will not resolve the situation unless we have better relationships with overseas criminal justice agencies. This is immature in the Home Office currently, as we concluded in our report published earlier this year, and the matter is not helped by the lack of capacity in the UK. Only 1% of police are dedicated to fraud, yet it represents 41% of crime. The Home Secretary said that percentage balancing was not possible, but we can all acknowledge that if 1% of police officers are dedicated to fraud and 41% of crime is fraud then the balance is out of kilter.

Some 20,000 new police officers are being recruited, which is a welcome step, but only around 2% of them—some 380 officers—will be focused on fraud. The Public Accounts Committee looked at new officer recruitment; recruiting fast can mean that a lot of junior staff are recruited, not the specialists that are needed, so there has been a missed opportunity. I will not go into that further, as it is outside the scope of the Bill.

Public communications could be improved by the Home Office, working in partnership with others, as campaigns can be effective. When the Committee looked at communications this year, there were 13 public campaigns running about fraud, but fewer than 10% of citizens were aware of any of them. We raised the matter five years ago, when the Take Five campaign was run by the National Crime Agency. However, five years on, that campaign is still being evaluated, so it is not working very well.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North raised the issue of fraud not being reported by people. Only 300,000 cases were reported to Action Fraud by the public, which given the overall numbers is not very many, and another 600,000 were reported by business and industry. Of the 900,000 cases reported annually, fewer than 15% end up with further action and only 1% result in a criminal justice outcome. Action Fraud is set to be replaced in the new year, yet the Bill does not mention the victim experience, which is a missed opportunity. I hope that will be probed further by members of the Bill Committee.

It is sobering that the time taken by law enforcement agencies to take on and tackle fraud is often longer than the sentence that the fraudster receives, so something is going wrong. We need a concerted effort to deal with this wicked issue, which cuts across many areas.

The measure relating to intimate images is welcome. I pay tribute to my previous constituent, Emily, who has now moved back to the United States, who worked tirelessly over a period of years to shift the dial on the issue, after she was filmed naked without her consent. I held an Adjournment debate in April 2018 calling for exactly this issue to be addressed and made an offence. New section 66AA sets out three offences of taking or recording intimate photographs or film, including an offence of “intentionally” taking a photograph or recording a film that shows another person in an intimate state without that person’s consent or a reasonable belief in their consent.

This is a moment to pay tribute to Emily Hunt, who bravely named herself, took on the system and was a force of nature in making sure the issue was tackled. We could not understand why the crime of taking such a photograph was not identified in law. At the time, the fact the person who had taken it had not published it was the issue, but this measure has now been introduced and it would have protected Emily. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) highlighted what happens to many young teenagers, particularly teenage girls, so this measure acts as a protection. In addition, we need to ensure we educate people that such behaviour should not happen. As the Bill makes progress, I hope some of those issues will be picked up in Committee.

5.39 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to accept the Home Secretary’s invitation to get behind this Bill, because there is much to commend in it. The process is an iterative one, as it builds on so much work that the Government have already done on crime and on the criminal justice system. I was honoured and pleased to serve on the Public Bill Committee that considered the Domestic Abuse Bill, enacted in 2021, and an example of a further improvement in the Criminal Justice Bill is the addition of an aggravating feature to reflect the crimes of men whose control of their partners ends with the heinous crime of murder.

As I say, this is very much an iterative process, and there is much to like in the Bill, such as the way it bears down on drug crime; the way it bears down on knife crime; the way it bears down on sexual offending, and sexual offending against children in particular; and the way it bears down on serious organised crime. The one area that I emphatically support is the Bill’s requiring those criminals—they are cowards—who have the nerve, having committed a crime, not to face up to their victims, to attend their sentencing hearing.

As a proud daughter of a police officer, I welcome the focus on police standards, and I note that, for the vast majority of policemen, there is nothing worse than misdemeanour and criminal activity in their own ranks. I know that the vast majority of police will very much welcome that focus.

There is no such thing as a minor crime. Crime is a violation of that feeling of safety and security that we all deserve. My constituents in Hertford and Stortford certainly deserve that sense of security going about their daily business and their daily lives. Antisocial behaviour is a scourge on our communities and one that we have concerns about in Hertford and Stortford. I wish to pay tribute to my local police as well as to

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Chief Inspector David Cooke and all his team. They have used closure notices and closure orders, which are very useful tools.

What has been raised with me by my local police—I have also raised this with Ministers—is that we have a bit of a revolving door with closure orders. A closure order can be issued by a court, and it is very effective. The community breathes a sigh of relief, as it has respite from the problems that they have been experiencing for a period of time, but, at the end of that order, the same occupants can go back into the same property, or a similar property, and the community is left absolutely distraught—in fact even worse than the first time, because they have had a sense of relief but then the problems have recurred. Antisocial behaviour is something that we need to bear in mind because it is a blight on local communities.

The provision to extend the power to issue and to apply for closure orders to registered social housing providers is very welcome, because that helps to give extra responsibility to those providers, and it will, I think, encourage them to take the matter seriously to try to avoid that revolving door element and look for more permanent solutions, which will be hugely beneficial to local communities.

As I say, this is an iterative process, and there are opportunities in this Bill to create other criminal offences. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), who is not in her place, raised the issue of cuckooing, which I would also like to suggest as a separate offence. Very often criminals use properties for illegal activity, and this action is not victimless, because often they move into a property—the better term for it is actually a home invasion—where there are vulnerable people, who are used as a vehicle for criminal purposes. Those people are often physically or mentally vulnerable or have addiction problems. They are real victims, and they need to be protected. Society needs to say, “We do not accept this.”

In order to measure, name and deal with a crime we have to accept it as a crime. This cruel and cynical activity should be criminalised as a separate offence. There are different offences we can use to tackle cuckooing, but those would generally be drug offences or antisocial behaviour offences, which do not reflect the gravity of the crime and the fact that there are victims. We should be saying, “We don’t accept it and we don’t tolerate it. We want to measure it and know the scale of it, so we have to name it and make it a separate offence.”

Along the same lines, another horrific crime that has no separate offence is spiking, which has been mentioned already. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has done a lot of work on the issue already and I know he will continue to do so. It beggars belief that someone would go out and prepare to administer toxic, noxious substances to another person—usually, but not exclusively, a woman—often for sexual or control purposes. Here again we currently rely on other offences, but we must name that offence. We must see it, we must convict it and we must sentence it as the crime it is.

I sat on the bench as a magistrate many times. I saw the victims of offences and I saw how much it means to them to have their day in court—to be able to give their evidence and to have the crime that has been perpetrated

against them named and recognised and sentenced. It means a huge amount to them, and it should mean everything to us. We often hear that the punishment should fit the crime but, in the case of cuckooing and spiking, it is my assertion that the crime should fit the crime and that they should be separate offences. I hope that Ministers and the Government will look at them carefully.

5.47 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) and to hear her mention the issue of spiking, as several others have done. I will not speak for quite as long as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who I think managed 40 minutes, but there is enough time to mention two or three quick points of interest to the House.

This is, after all, a debate on issues of huge importance to all our constituents, issues of safety and justice. Much has been said from all parts of the House that many of us can agree on. I particularly enjoyed the speeches from my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has done great work on spiking. She, I, the former Home Secretary my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham, and others are completely aligned in our proposal to the Ministers on the Front Bench and to the Home Secretary that this is not just a great opportunity to follow through on some of the things that are already in the Bill—for example, the importance of criminals attending their sentencing, preventing sex offenders from changing their names to confuse the register of sex offenders and other very good initiatives—but a historic opportunity to make spiking a separate, specific offence defined in law and to send a very clear message to a lot of people. This is not the first time that I have sung this tune, Mr Deputy Speaker. As you and others will be aware, we had debates in my name in January, two ten-minute rule Bills in January 2022 and June of this year, and a Home Affairs Committee report in April this year. They have all recommended the creation of a separate offence of spiking.

It now falls to the new Ministers, whom I warmly congratulate on their appointments—especially new the safeguarding Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris)—to seize the moment and bring the change to life. The reason it matters so much is partly that, rather like the with Vagrancy Act 1824, we need to update legislation to reflect modern practice and language. We need to define the term “spiking”, bring together elements of two separate existing acts—one of them Victorian—and ensure that the police record complaints and accusations, help to collect evidence, and refer cases to the CPS when appropriate.

However, behind all that is the straightforward truth for anyone listening to the debate: we all know, or know of, at least one person who has been spiked. That includes

several Members of this House or members of their families, as well as so many of our constituents. Almost all those cases have not been reported or recorded. Let me give three quick examples of spiking that we do know about.

The first is an example sent to me this morning by a colleague whose friend, a male in his 60s, was here in London on business. He dropped

“into a pub near his hotel and had his drink spiked.”

The guy who spiked the drink

“supposedly ‘helped’ him back to his hotel where the assault and rape happened.”

The individual who was raped was not a gay, so it was particularly traumatic. Our colleague from this House says that the individual thus abused

“is mostly over it now”.

That is just one example of an incident that has not gone anywhere near the police, let alone the courts.

There is, of course, an infamous example from Manchester that has come to light and, indeed, gone on to court: the case of Mr Reynhard Sinaga, who raped more than 50 men under the guise of being a Christian befriending those who were sleeping rough in the evening. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) has mentioned his constituents Mandy and Colin Mackie, who created Spike Aware UK after their son Greg’s tragic death following a spiking.

All three examples are relatively unusual, partly because they have come to light, but also because they are all male on male. However, we know—both anecdotally and through research done by Stamp Out Spiking, for example—that the vast majority of cases are man on woman, especially in the night-time economy and particularly among university and college students, although by no means exclusively. So there is a key element of violence against women and girls in the whole business of spiking, which is another reason tackling it is so important.

Sceptics tend to ask, “So how many spiking crimes have been committed?” That is an almost impossible question to answer, not just because there is currently no offence of “spiking”, but because proving attempts or committed acts of spiking is hard, and the presence of drugs in the body fades quite fast. That only emphasises why legislative change is necessary: once spiking is an offence in its own right, those who have been spiked will get more support from the police, the CPS, the NHS and night-time economy venues. That is why many police forces, including Gloucestershire constabulary—my local force—and its chief constable, and PCCs including Gloucestershire’s excellent Chris Nelson, recognise that making spiking an offence in its own right matters. It will enable proper data collection, encourage victims to come forward, and drive technical changes to capture the evidence more effectively, and, crucially, it should result in an increase in simple messaging and a decrease in offences.

If we can achieve all that through some crisp drafting by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, we will have done many people a great favour.

5.54 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham).

This is an important Bill that highlights the Government’s commitment to improving our justice system and making our communities safer. I would like to focus the majority of my remarks on one aspect of the Bill that I am pleased to see has received so much attention, which is antisocial behaviour. Members across the House might well represent different parties or political beliefs, but I am confident that I can safely say that we will all have received complaints from our constituents about antisocial behaviour in one form or another. Although it is formally considered to be low-level criminality, the reality is that, left unchecked, antisocial behaviour causes frustration and misery to many, many law-abiding citizens; it is undoubtedly the area of criminal behaviour about which I receive the greatest amount of correspondence. I therefore particularly welcome clauses 65 to 71, which extend the maximum period of certain directions, reduce the minimum age for community protection notices and allow for the closure of premises by registered social housing providers. I am confident that those provisions will all bring tangible benefits to my constituents and those of hon. Members across the House.

I am also glad to see the proposals for reviews of antisocial behaviour by the local policing body, which I know are supported by the excellent police and crime commissioner for Thames Valley, Matt Barber. It can often be difficult to know where exactly responsibility lies for tackling antisocial behaviour—whether it is with the local authority or the local police force, or whether a particular act might straddle the responsibilities of both—as I highlighted in Home Office questions in May. Proposed new section 104A in clause 71 provides the opportunity to make real progress in resolving such difficulties, and as the PCC for Thames Valley, Mr Barber, told me, it should provide more power to enact change and really stand up for residents.

Tackling antisocial behaviour does not mean always acting after the event, though. Indeed, one of the most effective crime-fighting tools is to prevent crimes from being committed in the first place and to divert those at risk of offending to more meaningful pursuits. In my constituency of Aylesbury, we have some excellent local initiatives to provide activities for young people to help prevent them from becoming involved in criminality. I saw that for myself just last Friday, when I spent the afternoon with the Aylesbury neighbourhood community policing team, led by Sergeant Clare Farrow. Two of her PCSOs, Lee Abrahams and Rachel Matthews, joined me at Southcourt baptist church in Aylesbury, where they help to run a weekly boxing club alongside the pastors and other members of the local community. The club has 100 young people on its books, and engages boys and girls from all parts of Aylesbury’s very diverse community. For some children it has helped to build confidence, for others it has brought resolution between bullies and victims, and for all it has provided a constructive activity, keeping young people off the streets and away from the temptation to become involved in criminal behaviour.

So dedicated are PCSOs Lee and Rachel that they even give up their own time to go and help at the club when they are not on duty, and this service has rightly won them and their colleagues the community policing award for Thames Valley in the category of problem solving. It is problem solving that is key to successful neighbourhood policing, which needs special skills and talent. The social

[Rob Butler]

enterprise Police Now recruits officers specifically for that type of policing; I was pleased to meet one of its undoubted success stories, PC Elliott Jones, who has been working in Aylesbury for the past year. Spending just a few hours with that neighbourhood team was genuinely inspiring, and I thank all the neighbourhood teams in my constituency for their superb work.

Mindful of the time, I would like to touch briefly on a couple of the other measures outlined in the Bill, given my previous experience as a magistrate and at His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris)—who I am absolutely delighted to see on the Front Bench, having served with her on the Justice Committee—can help to provide a little more detail on these measures, either now or at a later date.

I absolutely recognise the reasons for the Government's introduction in clause 22 of powers to compel attendance at a sentencing hearing. I entirely understand the anguish that has been caused to victims of crime when the perpetrator of the offence has simply refused to return to the dock, demonstrating, frankly, utter disdain for the harm that they have caused. But I am pleased that the power to produce the offender in court remains at the discretion of the judge, because it is the judge who will be best placed to decide on the individual circumstances of a case. I would be keen to hear more from the Minister about how that might operate in practice, particularly if an offender refused to leave prison to go to court in the first place. I am aware of cases where forcing somebody to leave his cell and get on to the van would have taken a very considerable number of prison officers. While one can reasonably say that that prisoner should be forced to hear his sentence and face justice in person, the reality is that the prison officers involved are taken away from their usual duties and responsibilities. That could—indeed, likely would—impact the normal regime of the prison, which in turn would prevent other prisoners from engaging in the work, education and training that can reduce their chances of reoffending. It is important that we get the balance right, and I am keen to hear how we will make sure that we do so.

Turning to the transfer of prisoners overseas, I am pleased that clause 28 makes provision for His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons to inspect overseas prisons. However, as a former member of the independent monitoring board at HMP/YOI Feltham, I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister outlined how she envisages conditions being monitored on an ongoing basis. The role of IMBs is not necessarily as well known as it should be, perhaps even in this House, but to quote the IMB website,

“IMB members are the eyes and ears of the public, appointed by ministers to perform a vital task: independent monitoring of prisons and immigration detention. They report on whether the individuals held there are being treated fairly and humanely and whether prisoners are being given the support they need to turn their lives around. This can make a huge difference to the lives of those held within these facilities.”

A critical element of that role is that IMB members can turn up at any time, unannounced, and go to any part of the prison they wish with their own set of keys. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what equivalent provision will exist for overseas prisons.

There is much else in this Bill that is important, including measures to respond to changing technology used by criminals, such as 3D printers. As someone whose own car was stolen by thieves accessing the vehicle by intercepting the signal from an electronic key, I particularly welcome clause 3. However, I do not wish to detain the House any further: I conclude simply by welcoming the Bill, and the many ways in which its provisions will make the people of my Aylesbury constituency safer and more secure.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman to wind up the debate.

6.1 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Over the past 13 years, our criminal justice system—once the envy of the world—has crumbled as a consequence of Tory mismanagement, but I pay tribute to the police and the court and probation staff who work hard in such difficult circumstances. Victims in our country are left traumatised, waiting years for justice only to be let down again; trials are delayed for years on end and victims pay the price, with record numbers withdrawing from their cases. The Crown court backlog now stands at a record high of almost 65,000 cases. There is a crisis in prison capacity, to the point where convicted criminals are having to be let out early or are even not being sentenced in the first place, despite the Government's fantasy plans to send prisoners aboard. The Home Secretary talks about powers, but can the Minister tell us what discussions with credible partner countries have taken place to make that fantasy a reality?

Simply put, this Conservative Government have failed in the first duty of Government: to keep its citizens safe. This Bill is further evidence of that continuous failure, and while it contains some measures that we on the Labour Benches welcome, it is the absences that are most glaring. The Bill contains no assurance at all that the existing systems in our country are ready to cope with the many changes it will introduce, as the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) recognised in her speech.

Time and again, this Government have failed to deliver the prison places we need. They have once again pushed back their deadline for delivering all 20,000 places, this time shifting their own target from 2025 to 2030. According to the most recent debate, only 8,200 places are due to be delivered by 2025, a shortfall of nearly 60%. With 10 Justice Secretaries and eight Home Secretaries in 10 years, this Government have focused on fighting each other instead of fighting for justice, and it is the British people who have paid the price. There have been repeated urgent warnings going back years: the 2020 prison population projections predicted a significant rise to 98,700 by September 2026, and the National Audit Office also warned in 2020 that

“demand for prison places could exceed supply between October 2022 and June 2023.”

After that warning from the NAO, the Government introduced a number of measures through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 that added even more pressure to the capacity crisis. I was the shadow Minister on the Public Bill Committee at that time, and I raised my concern with the Minister, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—he

is just taking his seat—who is now the Policing Minister. If the House will indulge me a little as I quote myself, in Committee I put it to the Minister:

“The Opposition would welcome further information from him about the impact on the prison system... The impact is to be felt very shortly indeed, and at a time when our prison services are recovering from the exceptional operational difficulties of the pandemic... Given all the additional prisoners that the system will have to cope with in not just seven or eight years’ time but as early as next year”—

this was last year—

“how will the Government ensure that our prisons do not become even more overcrowded and unsafe?”—[*Official Report, Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Public Bill Committee*, 8 June 2021; c. 422-3.]

So there it is: we were raising serious concerns, but Ministers fobbed everyone off with the assurances that all would be well. However, we know that the building programme is now well behind and our prisons are absolutely stuffed. It is no way to run a Government.

As the Prison Reform Trust has said:

“This lack of strategic approach means that the prison service has been forced to operate in an almost perpetual state of crisis. To cope, it has pursued short-term expediency over effective long-term planning. This has included a reprieve of prison accommodation which should have been decommissioned decades ago; the use of police cells; the rapid construction of temporary cells”—

and—

“a staff recruitment scheme working flat out to keep officer numbers stable”.

Indeed, it is only now that prisons are completely at full capacity that we have seen any sort of acknowledgement from the Government, and then only out of sheer necessity, not because they have some sort of new commitment to prison reform.

The best the Government can do is a series of half-baked ideas that do nothing to address the very serious and immediate issue of convicted criminals who should be in prison being out on our streets instead because there are not enough cells to put them in. I know most of those ideas are contained in the Sentencing Bill, but as we have heard, this Bill contains the provisions relating to the transfer of prisoners to foreign prisons. However, these provisions will make absolutely no impact on the current crisis because we do not have a deal in place with another country. It is nothing more than gesture politics.

Reducing demand on the prison system is also dependent on a robust probation service that can supervise and work with probationers to reduce crime, but there is a capacity crisis there too. Probation delivery has been seriously undermined by the failed structural reforms of this Conservative Government. The disastrous transforming rehabilitation reforms have left probation, in the words of the Public Accounts Committee,

“underfunded, fragile and lacking the confidence of the courts.”

The probation inspectorate has found

“a critical lack of frontline staff”

that has led to “excessive caseloads”. Recent research has found that less than half of probation practitioners believe they have a manageable workload. The probation service needs ambitious and transformative support from Government, but this Bill is yet another missed opportunity. While the extension of polygraph conditions and the changes to multi-agency public protection

arrangements are welcome, it is an insult that these are all that is on offer from a Government who have driven probation into the ground.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said in her opening speech, there are a number of measures in the Bill that we actually support. First, I would like to refer to the speech by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who felt the need to be blunt with her own colleagues when addressing the outdated Vagrancy Act. She is right that aggressive rough sleepers need support, and that issuing prevention orders does nothing to address the underlying problem.

We back the powers to compel attendance by offenders at sentencing hearings, and I pay tribute to Farah Naz, Cheryl Korbel, Ayse Hussein and Jebina Islam for their tireless campaigning on this issue. However, it will be no surprise to the Government that we support this measure, since we have been calling for new laws to be introduced on this since April last year.

Let me give hon. Members a preview of another request that we similarly invite the Government to borrow from us. We would like to see the Bill amended so that offenders who have sexually harmed children and are sent to prison as a result lose the ability to control their own children from behind bars. This is a long overdue measure that will ensure all children are safe from these dangerous predators, including their own parents.

We have had a good debate, and before concluding I would like to refer to some of the other speeches made by our colleagues. I was pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) celebrating today, and I welcome the fact that her long campaign to stop sex offenders changing their names has come to fruition. She also went on to address all manner of other things including action on the sharing of explicit images.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, spoke of a campaign for a specific offence of spiking. She spoke of her Committee reports on policing and the work needed to build trust within the community, and I am pleased to see that she has the cross-party support she wants.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) said too many statistics had been bandied about but then went on to give some of her own—but she claimed they were facts rather than statistics. Yes, the Government might have gone some way towards replacing the police that they had cut over all those years, but it is the job they are doing that matters and we need more of our police out on the streets.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about the epidemic of knife crime in our community and the need for so much to be done, and the need for a public health approach and prevention as well. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) talked about the proposals for offenders to face their sentencing in court but rightly questioned how that would work. She joined in the concern about rough sleepers and made the point that they are more likely to be a victim of crime than to commit crime. And we would of course all expect a long and comprehensive speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney

[Alex Cunningham]

South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), covering everything from policing by consent to misconduct and shop crime to fraud.

In this Bill, and indeed in the Sentencing Bill, there are a number of clauses that will lead to more people being imprisoned or being imprisoned for longer and we support many of them. However, it beggars belief that such proposals are put forward without any certainty whatsoever that the Government will be able to actually provide the prison places needed. It is no good posturing on law and order when the criminal justice system is crumbling as a result of 13 years of mismanagement by this Conservative Government. This Bill is yet another failure of this Government's record on justice, but we will work with Ministers to improve it where we can.

6.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): It is a pleasure to close this important debate on the Second Reading of the Criminal Justice Bill, a Bill that puts public protection and community confidence at its core. It has a strong empirical basis, building on the detailed work undertaken by the Law Commission, by Baroness Casey into misconduct in the Metropolitan police, by Clare Wade KC into domestic homicide and coercive control, and by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

It consolidates the significant progress this Government have made since 2010 and it was disappointing to hear the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the shadow Home Secretary, only rely on the statistics from police recorded crime when she knows as well as I do that the Office for National Statistics says that the correct measure is the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which provides—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Farris: I will not because I have little time. That survey provides a more reliable measure of long-term trends than police recorded data.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Laura Farris: If we use the correct measure, the regrettable conclusion for the Opposition is that like-for-like crime is down by 56%.

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Farris: Violent crime is down from where it was in 2010 by 52%, and domestic burglaries are down by 57%. If we compare—[*Interruption.*] If we compare where we were in 2019 to today—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Laura Farris: Domestic abuse, a sensitive category of crime, has fallen between 2019, before the pandemic, to today by 16%. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Even the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has to understand that the Minister is not giving way.

Laura Farris: My time is limited and I apologise for that.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister will know that the time is not limited. We do have time and she has named me. I do understand that she has the right not to take an intervention but she will also know that, having named me, as a courtesy to the House, she would normally do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not strictly a point of order for the Chair. The right hon. Lady understands the procedures extremely well.

Laura Farris: The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said that this Government have failed in their duty to keep citizens safe. It is regrettable that His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, Andy Cooke, takes a different view. He has said:

"England and Wales are arguably safer than they have ever been."

In the limited time I have available, I will address some of the points that came up today. I will respond in writing to those whose speeches I cannot address. Under this Bill, we are taking the fight to serious organised criminals, cutting off their capacity to churn out new firearms, mass-produce illegal drugs and perpetrate fraud with devices using multiple SIM cards. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) elegantly put it, we are designing crime out. We are cracking down on some of the most pernicious harms, which are often hidden from view. We are developing recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, and we are developing the package of measures announced by the Prime Minister in April by creating an obligation in law to treat grooming as an aggravating factor in sentencing.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on the name change measure. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), who introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on that issue. I will just pick up on the point about mandatory reporting, which the House will know was the subject of a principal finding and recommendation of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. I hope that the hon. Member for Rotherham agrees that the measure is a good step forward.

I will briefly address two other issues. Making murder at the end of a relationship an aggravating factor, recognising that the moment of maximum danger for many victims is when they tell him finally that they are leaving, is not the only thing we are doing in that space. Yesterday, the Ministry of Justice announced a consultation on whether coercive and controlling behaviour or the use of a knife or weapon that is already on the scene should become aggravating features in any murder case. I pay tribute to Carole Gould and Julie Devey for their campaign on that.

Finally, I will address the point that was raised about whether the measures we are taking adequately answer the findings of Baroness Casey in her report into misconduct

in the Metropolitan police and our handling of it. The measures in the Bill are not the only ones we are taking. We are also acting to ensure that any officer who cannot hold appropriate vetting clearance can be removed from office and that a finding of gross misconduct will automatically result in summary dismissal, and we are giving chief constables the right of appeal following a misconduct hearing if the conclusion is that one of their subordinates has not been subject to an adequate sanction.

The depth and breadth of this debate highlights the need to stay ahead of criminal ingenuity through enhanced supervision, interception and disruption, and by cutting criminals off from the tools of their trade. We are developing legal principles that find their roots in the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023. We are cracking down on crime at every level. From antisocial behaviour all the way to serious organised crime, it blights our communities and targets the most vulnerable. I therefore commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Criminal Justice Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on 30 January 2024.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No.83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Question agreed to.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Criminal Justice Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

TRADE UNION AND LABOUR RELATIONS

That the draft Code of Practice on Reasonable Steps to be taken by a Trade Union (Minimum Service Levels), which was laid before this House on 13 November, be approved.—*(Scott Mann.)*

The House divided: Ayes 280, Noes 199.

Division No. 9]

[6.18 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afrayie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian

Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
Gray, James
Green, Chris

Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lever, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason

McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alec
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 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
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles

Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Joy Morrissey and
 Mark Jenkinson

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter

Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Furniss, Gill
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter

Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Reed, Steve

Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughtier, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Sarah
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Tonia Antoniazzi

Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael

Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evnnett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David

Question accordingly agreed to.

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

TRADE UNIONS

That the draft Strikes (Minimum Service Levels: Border Security) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 203.

Division No. 10]

[6.32 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah

Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca

Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 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
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Joy Morrissey and
 Mark Jenkinson

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Furniss, Gill
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame

Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick

Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Tonia Antoniazzi

Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinene, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Everitt, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert

Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen

Question accordingly agreed to.

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

That the draft Strikes (Minimum Service Levels: Passenger Railway Services) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

The House divided: Ayes 281, Noes 201.

Division No. 11]

[6.45 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott

Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman

Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Rebecca Harris*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris

Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 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
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Joy Morrissey and
 Mark Jenkinson**

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas

Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella

Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Furniss, Gill
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah

Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
 vote cast by Marion
 Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
**Christian Wakeford and
 Tonia Antoniazzi**

Question accordingly agreed to.

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

That the draft Strikes (Minimum Service Levels: NHS Ambulance Services and the NHS Patient Transport Service) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 7 November, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until tomorrow (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

That the draft Recognition of Professional Qualifications and Implementation of International Recognition Agreements (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 17 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Sir Chris Bryant and Liam Byrne be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Dan Carden and Fabian Hamilton be added.—(*Rebecca Harris, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Policies relating to the climate and nature crisis

7.2 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I rise to present a petition on policies relating to the climate and nature crisis.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the UK Government needs to significantly strengthen its manifesto and policies with respect to the climate and nature crisis, as called for by 2000 business professionals and leaders; further that there needs to be a rapid scale up in investment, and support essential training for the transition; further that there needs to be a more robust plan to restore nature and halt further decline by 2030 which would involve a National Plan for achieving nature targets and robust regulatory frameworks enabling our rivers, seas, food and farming to thrive; and further that there needs to be an end to new fossil fuel developments in the UK including new licensing rounds and approvals for oil and gas exploration, in line with calls from the UN Secretary-General, climate scientists and the IEA.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitions and take immediate action to ensure that these three areas are underpinned with robust policies and regulation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002877]

Energy bills support

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Linlithgow and East Falkirk in relation to energy bill support. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a rising cost of living crisis, with energy bills spiralling. There is a great deal more that I believe the Government should be doing to support people, such as an energy bill rebate or an emergency social tariff. However, the very least that should be done is that the Government should signpost the many good schemes that energy companies are running to give support. My constituents therefore “request that the House of Commons urge the Government to publish accessible information on support available from all energy companies so that those who are struggling financially maximise their chances of surviving the cost of living crisis.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that whilst the Energy Cap has decreased, many people are still experiencing extreme difficulty paying energy bills for a number of reasons including the lack of a UK Government Bill Energy Bill Support Scheme and the increased financial pressure from the cost of living generally; notes that whilst there is widespread, legitimate criticism of energy companies many are providing some financial support to consumers in such circumstances but this is not widely known.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to publish accessible information on support available from all energy companies so that those who are struggling financially maximise their chances of surviving the cost of living crisis.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002881]

Tattoo Artists, Body Piercers and Cosmetic Clinics: Licensing

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

7.5 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Earlier this year it was announced that Wales was set to become the first UK nation to introduce mandatory national licensing for what we call special procedures: tattoo artists and those working in body piercing, semi-permanent makeup, acupuncture and electrolysis. The licensing regime in Wales is being introduced under part 4 of the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017. Happily, section 180 of the Health and Care Act 2022, passed by this place, gave the Secretary of State the power to introduce a licensing regime in England. I am really glad that we are now doing that and that our Government are taking the issue seriously.

In this very short debate, I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to speed up the introduction of that regime in England, something that the Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, called for when it published a report on body image back in 2022. I want to mention my hon. Friends the Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), who did good work on that regard when they were on that Committee.

As we are all well aware, non-surgical cosmetic procedures such as Botox, dermal fillers, chemical peels and aesthetic procedures such as tattooing and body piercing are soaring in popularity. The beauty industry is valued at an estimated £3.6 billion in the UK. That boom has been fuelled by sales on social media and in beauty shops on the high street. However, while these procedures are popular, they carry risks that must be managed to protect both those who undergo the procedures and those who provide them.

At present, healthcare professionals such as doctors, nurses and dentists who carry out non-surgical cosmetic procedures must be trained and insured as part of the requirements laid down by their own regulatory bodies or Royal Colleges. However, there is no set training for beauty therapists and other non-professionals, something that is a cause for concern and an issue that many respected practitioners have campaigned on for some time. It is, after all, in their interests; as the sector has boomed, there has been a rise in people being physically and mentally harmed by poorly performed procedures. The aesthetics sector has been described to us by some, in part, as the “wild west”, which clearly is not ideal for anyone, patient or practitioner.

Further to that, a survey carried out by the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons found that 69% of its surgeons have seen patients with complications following temporary fillers. Again, that outlines the need for the licensing scheme to be introduced and enforced. An estimated 900,000 Botox injections are carried out in the UK each year, with 3,000 complaints registered in 2022. The public need to be educated on the risks; they cannot assume that someone who is carrying out an aesthetic treatment is trained. It goes without saying that people should take the time to find a reputable, insured and qualified practitioner, if they decide that such treatments are for them.

To my mind, the licensing scheme is an important step towards better outcomes for the industry and consumers and, I hope, towards removing rogue practitioners from the industry. Practitioners must have adequate training to deal with complications and to minimise them in the first place. For instance, if a blood vessel is blocked while a patient is undergoing a procedure, it could easily block the blood supply to their eye. I was contacted with the horror story of one woman who was unable to open her eyes for 16 weeks following botox treatment.

Wales opened its 12-week consultation on its licensing scheme in January of this year. The scheme aims to reduce infections, eliminate poor working practices and create a central public register for licensed practitioners and approved business premises. That is important as the industry continues to increase in popularity. The Welsh chief medical officer said at the time that he was “very pleased that these impending changes have been widely welcomed by practitioners in Wales, with many already volunteering to meet the new standards.”

One tattoo shop owner who has been working with the Welsh Government on the new qualifications said—this was widely reported—that:

“The increase in quality of tattoos in the last decade has been exponential so the hygiene needs to be raised. This is all positive for the industry and helps shake the image of it being dark and shady. It’s reassuring for those getting tattooed as well.”

I obviously very much agree with that statement, which shows why we need further legislation—or regulation off the back of legislation—in England to protect both clients and practitioners. In answer to a written question earlier this month, the Welsh Government confirmed that the aim is for their statutory licensing scheme to come into force in the summer of 2024, when it will initially apply to the four special procedures specified in their 2017 Act: electrolysis, body piercing, tattooing and acupuncture.

As I say, I was pleased when the Health and Care Act 2022 introduced powers for the Secretary of State to establish a mandatory licensing scheme in England, following calls for greater regulation of non-surgical cosmetic treatments—not least from my Select Committee. It is important that the scheme is introduced sooner rather than later, which we emphasised in our report on body image.

It was positive when the consultation in England finally opened at the beginning of September this year with pretty much the same intentions as the Welsh piece of work. However, concerns have been raised with me by those in the industry that the consultation in England has been far too heavily biased towards medical input rather than input from those in the cosmetics industry, which makes up a large part of the sector. As part of our body image inquiry in 2022, the Health and Social Care Committee recommended that the introduction of licensing for non-surgical cosmetic procedures be made a priority and introduced by July this year. The Committee also suggested that a safety taskforce be set up to bring stakeholders together, but I understand that the Government decided not to follow that route. The National Hair and Beauty Federation says that it is concerned that the Government have not reached out to an adequately broad range of stakeholders. Why have the Government not pursued the route recommended by the Select Committee?

In the pre-consultation phase, it was felt that more medical organisations than beauty organisations were consulted, which the NHBf has suggested caused a bias towards the medical sector. That is creating concern that routes into aesthetics via the beauty sector will therefore be restricted, which will have obvious consequences for many legitimate and reputable businesses. It also creates the risk that the new regulatory regime may drive some practices into the underground market rather than increase quality and standards across the industry, which is what we are aiming to see. The NHBf also said in September that it had written to the Government twice this year regarding the new licensing scheme but was yet to receive a response. Maybe that has been updated since.

When implementing mandatory licensing, we need to ensure that we establish a framework that demands a higher standard of care and proficiency from all practitioners. Further to that, another issue that needs to be addressed by the national scheme is procedures carried out in tattoo and piercing studios in England, which are currently subject to regulation by local councils. As there is no national scheme, we currently lack the reassurance needed. Practitioners need to contact the local council where their premises are based to get a tattoo, piercing or electrolysis licence. They must then register both themselves and the premises with the local council. However, registration is a fairly simple process, there is no requirement for the provision of proof of qualifications, and local authorities have few powers to refuse a registration. The current licence with local authorities covers tattooing, semi-permanent skin colouring, cosmetic piercing, electrolysis and acupuncture.

Local councils do, it must be said, conduct regular inspections of premises to ensure that they are compliant with health and safety laws, and there is a requirement for every tattoo artist to be licensed by their local council. To remind the House, tattooing without a licence or tattoo certificate is illegal. However, the fact that licensing is determined by local councils in England means it differs on what standards must be met across the country by those who apply. For example, some councils demand that all practitioners have access to their own sink, while others are happy for shared sinks, which risks cross contamination—posing a health risk. A new compulsory licensing scheme would ensure that both clients and practitioners are adequately protected, and practitioners would have to abide by the same rules across England.

The purpose of registration with councils is to protect the public from the transmission of blood-borne viruses such as HIV, hepatitis B, hep C and other infections, and to ensure that the health and safety regulations are followed. I think a national licensing scheme would increase this protection. As I have already set out, although section 180 of the Health and Care Act enables the Secretary of State to establish a licensing scheme, it is yet to be fully enacted. The consultation process closed a month ago today, and the advances to implement this hugely important scheme have been slow in England. When does the Minister think the Government will respond to the consultation?

There are four key priorities that must be addressed in the new licensing scheme to make sure that there is adequate protection for practitioners and clients. The first is the design and implementation of the national

licensing scheme for all premises, as well as practitioners of non-surgical cosmetic procedures, to ensure that those who practise invasive procedures are competent and safe for members of the public—our constituents. Secondly, all practitioners must hold the correct insurance to provide these procedures. Thirdly, there needs to be official guidance on the training and qualification expectation of all practitioners, such as the knowledge and application of infection controls and first aid training should things go wrong. Fourthly and finally, we need a system that effectively records adverse incidents and public awareness raising so that all cases that go wrong can be tracked. I think such a system would dramatically improve safety standards. It would also ensure that members of the public are better equipped, as they would have better tools and knowledge surrounding the procedures and the practitioner that they were using.

The Government did assure the Joint Council for Cosmetic Practitioners, the British Beauty Council and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health that they were committed to the licensing of the non-surgical aesthetics sector in England, so I ask the Minister when we can expect to see further action, following the consultation that I have mentioned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. My council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, has a policy in relation to piercings specifically. It has initiated a piercing guidelines policy to make both piercers and those who get piercings aware of the guidelines and policies that, in its word, “must” be followed. Does he agree that there could be more discussion of providing this information—in local schools, for example—because many people who get piercings are under 18 years of age, and are often naïve to the guidelines and hygiene policies that piercers must follow? Educate them early: does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Steve Brine: We have enough debates in this House about some of the things that we teach in schools, and I can but imagine some of the responses we would get to this, but in my view education can never be a bad thing. There is nothing wrong with tattooing and piercings. It is not my personal choice—I do not know about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—but if people are going to do it, I think they should go with their eyes, or any other part of themselves, wide open; and that is why the hon. Gentleman’s point on education is well made. *[Interruption.]* Did that amuse you, Mr Deputy Speaker?

In closing, would it be possible for the Minister to outline the timeline, even in rough terms, for the introduction of the licensing scheme? Finally, I understand that it is complicated and a bit like peeling an onion—the more you take, the more you find—could the Government outline which procedures will fall under the new licensing scheme? On that, I will close; I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing this important debate and reiterate the Government’s commitment to improving patient safety in this area. We recognise that for some time, there have

[Maria Caulfield]

been concerns about the lack of regulation of these procedures, both here and abroad, the dangers they can pose to consumers and the long-term impact when they go wrong. As my hon. Friend pointed out, we have heard many horrific stories, both in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall, about what can go wrong when procedures are done poorly or consumers or patients experience side effects that they were not expecting.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, there are existing regulations for body piercing and tattooing, which I will touch on in a moment. However, we take this area so seriously that the Health and Care Act 2022 gave the Secretary of State powers to introduce a licensing scheme for non-surgical cosmetic procedures in England. The scheme we intend to introduce in England will be more extensive than the Welsh scheme that my hon. Friend mentioned; it will cover more than the four areas outlined in the Welsh Government's recent piece of work. Obviously, we have just held our consultation, and at the moment we are looking to see whether the scheme will also cover some of the existing powers around tattoos and piercings that are enforced by local councils.

We want the licensing scheme that we intend to introduce to support people in making an informed choice, and to ensure that when they make their choice, they experience safe care for any non-surgical cosmetic procedure. We want the scheme to address three areas, the first of which is to ensure that services are administered by suitably trained and qualified practitioners. That does not necessarily mean regulated healthcare professionals, but it does mean that anyone who undertakes procedures must be trained and qualified to do so. We also want practitioners to hold appropriate indemnity cover, so that they and the patients they are treating are covered should something go wrong, and to be operating from premises that have appropriate standards of hygiene and cleanliness.

As my hon. Friend said, we have been working closely with many professionals from a variety of backgrounds to start the process of introducing the licensing scheme. The cosmetic procedures sector includes a vast and expanding range of treatments and techniques. We want to future-proof regulation so that we cover as many emerging techniques, treatments and procedures as possible—we do not want to be revising regulations on a regular basis—and cover a wide range of practitioners and businesses. We want those businesses to thrive—they contribute to our economy and provide a very popular service—but we need to make sure that they are safe and well regulated, so that those undergoing procedures are safe and can make informed choices about treatments.

In introducing the licensing scheme, we need to make sure that we consider all eventualities. There are a number of factors to consider, from who undertakes the procedures to the types of procedures that are covered and who undertakes inspections once the regulations are introduced. Through our engagement, we have developed proposals on which treatments are to be included, who should be permitted to perform them, and whether age restrictions need to be introduced for certain procedures.

As my hon. Friend said, we rolled out an initial consultation, which closed at the end of last month. We received over 12,000 responses from across England,

which is a pretty significant number of responses to a Government consultation; we do not normally get so many. To reassure my hon. Friend, 43% of those responses were from aesthetic practitioners and about 40% were from the various regulated health professionals, so there was an even mix of practitioners and regulated healthcare professionals. We received a fair balance of views, and we are working through the responses at speed. I thank everyone who responded, because the consultation will inform how the regulations are developed.

Over the next 12 months, we will work through the consultation responses and set out exactly which procedures will be covered by the regulations; the education and training standards that will be required of practitioners; the types of premises that will be allowed; the types of licence fees that will be introduced, if any; and who will enforce the regulations to ensure that they are complied with.

That will take time—we estimate that it will take most of next year—but I can assure my hon. Friend that it is crucial. Like him, I thought that we would be able to get this done pretty swiftly, but once we start to unearth which procedures should be covered, who should be doing them and the types of premises they should be operating from, it is a can of worms. It is really important that we take the time to get this right, so that we have a really robust, extensive and safe regulatory licensing scheme in operation across England.

My hon. Friend touched on tattoos and piercings. As he said, those are regulated by measures such as the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992 and the Local Government Act 2003, as well as legislation specific to geographical areas of England. The existing legislation gives local authorities the power to register practitioners and their premises, and to take enforcement action if practitioners are not abiding by byelaws. He is right that that varies across England, but the measures local authorities undertake do reduce the risk of transmission of blood-borne viruses such as HIV and hepatitis B and C. The Department has a model byelaw template—if local authorities want to introduce that in their local area, they can contact us for it—to try to get as much consistency as possible.

We are looking at whether tattoos and piercings should also come under the non-surgical cosmetic procedures regulations. We are engaging with those sectors to see whether we should have one wide piece of legislation and regulation, or a dual system, because many tattoos and piercings practitioners feel that that works quite well for them right now. We have not ruled out a change, but it is important to note that, as the legislation stands, there are already regulations for tattoos and piercings, which should be being enforced by local authorities up and down the country.

I want to touch on cosmetic procedures abroad, because that is becoming more of a topical issue. As costs rise and procedures are often cheaper abroad, it is so important that we make sure that people from the UK travelling for non-surgical cosmetic procedures are informed about the risks and do their research before they travel. While excellent healthcare is available internationally, we are aware of tragic cases—even cases in which people have lost their lives—arising from treatments outside the UK. Our team are actively engaging with international partners to consider how best we can support people considering travelling abroad for such

treatments. Having a safer, regulated system in England will help inform people that, if they are travelling abroad, the country involved should be operating to the same standard as the licensing scheme we are intending to introduce in England.

I absolutely understand the urgency with which my hon. Friend wants to see the licensing scheme come forward. That is why we introduced the power in the Health and Care Act, but this is a complex area. We need to decide who will undertake these procedures and which procedures will be covered, and to future-proof so that we cover as many as possible. We also need to look at the premises that practitioners are operating from and who the regulator will be. It could be the Care Quality Commission, local government, the Nursing and Midwifery Council or the General Medical Council, which all have a role to play in this. There is a lot to decide before the legislation and regulations come before us.

I can assure my hon. Friend that we will be working to respond to the consultation early in the new year, and we will then set out the framework for the legislation. We will conduct a further consultation on that before

finally announcing it, because, as he said, there are concerns across the sector. There will also be an interim period so that, if we introduce mandatory training for practitioners, there is time for those operating in this space to take on qualifications and training, to upgrade their premises or to look at which procedures they undertake. We want to ensure that those who can practise safely have the time to develop their skills and upgrade their premises accordingly. I assure my hon. Friend we will consult again so people will be fully aware of the changes coming through.

I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and his Select Committee to make sure that we have an extensive scheme of regulation across England as quickly as possible, but also that it is robust and meets the needs, most importantly of patients, but of the sector as well.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 November 2023

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Nuclear Test Veterans: Medical Records

9.30 am

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered nuclear test veterans and medical records.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Vickers.

British nuclear test veterans have now rightly received medallic recognition for their service, and for that I am very grateful to the Government, but the Minister must know that behind their proud smiles, those veterans are really struggling. They—and sometimes their wives, widows and descendants—have reported making repeated requests to gain access to the results of their blood or urine testing samples which they recall being taken during the nuclear testing programme. Sadly, many confirm that their service medical records do not include the test results, and they just do not understand why. The issue is relevant to the current health concerns of many veterans and their descendants and the treatment they need for anaemia, leukaemia and rare genetic conditions. That is why it is so important for them to access the information urgently.

As the Minister will know, nuclear testing veterans first raised the issue of health problems in 1983. In 1985, the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, ordered a health study by the National Radiological Protection Board, which in 1988 reported that there was a “slight risk” of veterans getting leukaemia. The report was only seven pages long, and it was criticised by veterans as a whitewash. It was repeated, with similar results, in 1993 and 2003. Further, it has been reported in recent days that the 1988 scientific report was altered on the instruction of officials.

The link between radiation and illness is now well established. In 2007, genetic research found that nuclear victims had the same rate of DNA damage as clean-up workers at Chernobyl. In 2011, a Ministry of Defence health study found that 83% of survivors had between one and nine chronic health conditions, and further surveys of nuclear veterans report that miscarriage rates are three times higher among their wives and that their children have 10 times the usual number of birth defects. However, despite the clear health risks and the apparent causal links to the conditions experienced by many nuclear testing veterans, very few war pensions are approved unless veterans can clearly show information proving risk and the impact on health. Such information would include, for example, blood and urine samples demonstrating high levels of radiation exposure, but information from successive Defence Ministers or potential record holders has been inconsistent and unclear on

whether there were tests, whether records were kept, where they were kept and whether records are now accessible for searching.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and on all her successful campaigning work on this issue. I have a constituent whose late husband was one of the test veterans who served in Kiritimati, or Christmas Island. She wrote to me a couple of months ago and said:

“On landing back home after an arduous journey at the young age of 20 or 21 years old, he started to regress into bed-wetting...None of the politicians that are now in the House could possibly know what it was like to be ordered to be guinea pigs for the so-called good of the country.”

Given what my constituent writes, does the hon. Member agree that some of the illnesses and symptoms were mental as well as physical?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree with his comments. It is not just physical conditions that impacted on these veterans; there were indeed profound mental health concerns reported afterwards as a result of what they experienced.

My constituent’s grandad, John Morris, is just one nuclear testing veteran who has suffered and who has been trying to locate the relevant information so that he can apply for a war pension. He was a Royal Engineer and served on Operation Grapple on Christmas Island, and he witnessed four nuclear explosions. He told me that one day he and his colleagues were told to sit in the open air with their backs to the explosion. Shorts and shirts were the norm, but on this day they were told to wear Army-issued sunglasses and find a cloth to put over their eyes. They were then hit with a flash 1,000 times brighter than the sun. His hands became an X-ray, as he could see every bone and every joint, and he was then hit with the heat blast. It was so intense that the palm trees scorched, as did the men’s backs.

On his return from service, John’s first-born son tragically died suddenly at four months old due to birth defects that John believes were linked to radiation. John himself has since been diagnosed with cancer, and at age 26 he developed pernicious anaemia, a blood disorder linked to radiation. John gave multiple blood samples during his service, but they cannot be found on his main medical records. When he asked for details of the blood test, he was told:

“Everything you have received was all that was held in your Army personnel and medical file.”

John’s story is matched by countless similar battles for test and medical information by other nuclear veterans.

My first simple question to the Minister is this: were blood and urine samples taken from nuclear testing veterans, and was a record kept of those samples? To help in his analysis, I will share with him the information that I am aware has been archived on this basis so far. First, there are publicly available documents—limited documents, notes, forms, official instructions and guidance—that are accessible in the National Archives. They highlight a range of pertinent references that suggest blood and urine test data was collected from servicemen and that this information was stored and analysed.

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

For example, documents show that the MOD had a director of hygiene and research who organised blood tests of personnel and kept a “master record” of results. They note orders from the Air Ministry and War Office telling unit medical officers to arrange repeated

“blood testing of personnel working regularly with radioactive sources”.

They detail the medical forms used and the instructions on how to duplicate and store them. They point to Army blood tests being copied from Atomic Weapons Research Establishment records to be put in soldiers’ main medical files. They show that pathologists attached to the weapons trials were told to create a “special health register” to log the data. There are countless other documents ordering the testing of servicemen at various nuclear trials.

It seems clear that blood and urine tests were routine, that they existed as formal documentation and, indeed, that a register and master record were kept; yet to my knowledge the register and master record have not been released, nor has specific documentation relating to each individual, bar one or two exceptions. It should also be noted that thousands of the released documents relating to this period reference the AB and ES series of files, which I understand were withdrawn from the National Archives for a security review in 2018, with no expected date of return.

Secondly, the Minister will be aware of a freedom of information request made to the Atomic Weapons Establishment in September that uncovered a list of 150 documents currently held by the AWE. Three are in the public domain, but the remainder are not. These documents include titles such as “Blood Examinations Personnel Proceeding to Christmas Island”; “Message from AWRE Christmas Island To AWRE Aldermaston reference Blood Count Irregularities from”; and the rest is redacted; “Blood Counts at Maralinga”; and “Dose Record Grapple Z—record of 4 urine samples”. There are many more documents referred to in a similar vein. Again, these documents seem to clearly point to the existence of blood and urine test results.

The Minister might be as perplexed as I am as to the location of such sample results and why they have not been released to veterans. Indeed, the Government’s responses to such questions over the last few years have certainly sown a great deal of confusion. For example, in 2018 it was stated that:

“The Ministry of Defence is unable to locate any information that suggests that Atomic Weapons Research Establishment staff took blood samples for radiological monitoring at the tests.”

Then in November last year, it was stated that:

“The Atomic Weapons Establishment holds copies of the results of urine radioactivity measurements and blood tests for a small number of individuals where these were included in scientific documentation on the nuclear weapons trials.”

In December last year, the opposite was again indicated:

“We would also like to take this opportunity to confirm that AWE does not hold the medical records or the results of blood and urine tests for current or ex-servicemen.”

That merry-go-round of confusion goes round and round, month after month, with every question asked and response received.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate, which is of particular interest to my constituent Steve Purse, whose late father served at Maralinga. Steve and his young son have rare genetic conditions and Steve has described the distress that he experiences over the uncertainty as to his late father’s medical records and whether those can be disclosed. Does the hon. Lady agree that the primary outcome of this debate needs to be greater certainty for people such as Steve about what the answer to that question is?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I know his constituent very well: he is a very lovely man and has fought long and hard to achieve recognition for veterans and their families and descendants. Unfortunately, veterans themselves have not undergone an extensive health study into the effects of the radiation to which they were exposed, let alone their descendants in relation to the impact on future family members. The Government certainly need to address that to give people such as Steve the certainty that he will receive the support that he requires if it is needed in the future. At the moment, he is not receiving such support, sadly.

The Minister himself has stated that it is likely that the blood tests are simply categorised in scientific data at the AWE. That may of course be the case, but for that data even to exist in the first place, the sample results had to come first, so what happened to them? I truly intend to be helpful to the Minister in getting to the bottom of this puzzle. I have no doubt that he wants to help veterans and their families to receive the information that they need. To that end, I have a number of questions that I would like him to answer.

First, can the Minister review the security classification for the 150 FOI documents that I have mentioned, so that they can be released for public view? Will he release the AB and ES series of files and, if not, explain to the House why they are to be withheld? In response to a recent question to the Defence Secretary, I was informed that all classified documents retained by the Ministry of Defence under a Lord Chancellor’s instruction or a national security exemption are still available to be searched on request. If they are indeed searchable, despite being withheld documents, can the Minister confirm that the person making the relevant search request will be notified that that information is being withheld and will be given the reasons why?

Is the Minister specifically aware of any blood test and urine sample information that is being withheld under a Lord Chancellor’s instruction or a national security exemption? He will be aware that many blood and urine test samples were taken under old Air Ministry orders and that the AWRE was not legally required in 1959 to share or disclose documents on request, as would be the case under current legislation. Can he confirm that those historical records are being searched when a subject access, FOI or similar search request is received?

The fact remains that blood and urine test samples were taken from many servicemen at nuclear test sites and the archive documentation suggests that they were formally documented, so what happened to the documents? Where are they now, and why in so many cases are nuclear veterans and their families unable to access their personal medical data? That data is vital for their

war pension applications and for an understanding of the conditions that they suffer. If I have one request for the Minister today, it is to give those men and their families the medical information that they need, while they are still alive. They simply need to know where their test sample data is. I say to the Minister this. If it is not available, be open: explain what happened to it, when it happened, why it happened and on whose instruction.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, setting out all the issues. I would just like to add weight to that point about simple transparency. If the information is there, can the veterans and their families see it? If there is a reason why they are not able to see it, can that be explained? I really hope that the Minister will accept either of those routes and give an explanation to my hon. Friend today.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and for all the work that she has done over the years to support nuclear test veterans. They are very appreciative of her efforts. On her point about transparency, that is the key to today's debate. All that these men are asking for is the truth. They want to know where their test results are and if they cannot access them, they want to know why. They deserve nothing less than the truth for the service they have provided to this country. I hope the Minister will do all he can to honour their requests.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to speak during the debate.

9.45 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is indeed a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on setting the scene so incredibly well with detail, passion and understanding. We are indebted to her for that. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. He has been a dear friend during all my time in this Chamber, since I came here in 2010. I look forward to his response because I believe he understands the issue of the veterans well. I think we are all keen to have the response to the questions that have been asked and the commitment that we seek.

I recognise the critical contributions of veterans and civilian staff to the UK's nuclear deterrent testing programme in the late 1950s and 1960s. It is great to hear that so many veterans have now received their medals for that service. This debate is not about those medals, but that is one of the recognitions we have sought over the years and at least that has been agreed. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is not here, but he has been active and instrumental in that over the years; we thank him for his contribution. I also look forward to the shadow Minister's contribution as well. He understands the issues of veterans well and has been assiduous in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber in relation to the issues under focus.

There are 20,000 British servicemen, many from Northern Ireland and some of whom are my constituents, who took part in numerous nuclear tests. To this day, none has received any compensation for illnesses they believe

were caused by radiation and other side effects from the impact of the testing. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles set the scene at the beginning, where they were told to put their sunglasses on and sit down, shirtless, never knowing what was coming. That horror of what they endured, unknowingly until it was over, illustrates very well their issues.

Many have stated that those health issues passed down genetically to their children. In some cases, many lost their children at a very young age. I am a fan of "Call the Midwife"—we probably all are—and one of the stories last year or at the end of this year was that of a veteran who had been subjected to that and the effect it had on him, his family and, of course, his baby yet to be born. Sometimes, TV programmes illustrate very well pertinent stories out there in real life. They portrayed that extremely well and gave me a personal feeling and an insight into what was happening as well.

While numerous veterans have since obtained copies of their medical records, what the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles referred to, and what we all seek, is an open-doors release of all those medical records; that important data so people can ascertain where the problems started and where they came from. Many recall having certain tests done, which were not recorded on the records they received. I find that hard to comprehend. I am not saying there is, but we are all asking: is there a cover-up? Is there a determined commitment to not releasing that?

I know the Veterans Minister well. I trust him and find him an honest and sincere person, so I do not for one second believe that there has been any deliberation to make that happen. The Minister is always diligent in his work, and he has stated that there has been no cover-up of medical records, so I take it at face value that there has not. I therefore suggest that we should release all those medical records—all that information—to each and every one of those veterans and their families, without their requesting it. We have an obligation to look after them.

We are here as elected representatives on behalf of our constituents—I am representing those of Strangford and across Northern Ireland. Although we should have every faith that what the Minister says is the truth, there is clearly still a question to be answered about where the missing information is and who has access to it. I say to the Minister: make it clear, release all the records and let the people see what is going on; then there will be no mystery, stories or thoughts about what is happening.

Many medical records that remain incomplete hold vital information needed to claim war pensions. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles made it clear that the records have implications not just for veterans' health today but for their pensions. If somebody has served their country well, we have a real obligation to look after them fully. I know that is the Minister's intention, and I have absolutely no doubt that he will say that in his response, but we need action, not just words.

Although the Government remain committed to do all they can to locate the records when they are applied for, there is unfortunately a disparity in the records that our veterans receive. I again urge the Government and the Minister to ensure that all efforts are made to locate

[Jim Shannon]

missing records that hold vital information about the health conditions that veterans may be suffering because of nuclear war testing. That is what the hon. Lady wants, what I want and what everybody else here wants. That is our request as elected representatives on behalf of our constituents. Let us get the answers.

9.51 am

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) not only for her sterling work in securing and opening this debate, but for her continued campaigning for justice for all our nuclear veterans.

For decades, our nuclear veterans, their families, campaign groups, journalists and MPs have relentlessly pursued truth and justice for those brave servicemen who bore close witness to the most devastating weapon this country ever produced. Those men were part of an experiment that secured our safety but devastated them and their families. The Minister is well aware of the countless testimonies from those willing to speak about the harm that radiation exposure has caused to them.

Cancer, heart, skeletal, dental and skin problems, difficulties conceiving, depression, personality changes, chronic headaches, mental ill health, rare genetic conditions and birth defects passed down through generations were all prevalent after taking part in those tests. That is the enduring, painful legacy of the tests those men were subjected to. Many of them still feel responsible for that pain, but they are not responsible; the Ministry of Defence is. It is the MOD that sent them to the blasts without any understanding of the protection they needed. Men stood in their shorts and vests, and were simply asked to turn their back on nuclear blasts that contaminated the land around them and instantly killed all wildlife there.

Litigation, petitions, information requests and pleas have all been sidelined by Governments who have stated that they cannot prove that those men were irradiated, and that the scientific evidence needed to prove the link between their and their families' unexplained ill health simply does not exist. Who on earth would seriously keep up the denial that nuclear blasts do not have a negative impact on the human body? The veterans rightly suspect some kind of cover-up. Susie Boniface at the *Daily Mirror*, in her long campaign for the truth, has repeatedly uncovered evidence that would indicate such a cover-up—most recently, evidence that the National Radiological Protection Board report had been tampered with by officials, and past UK-Government commissioned research that contradicted the conclusions of international scientific research.

My constituent and dear friend Jack Taylor was involved in Operation Antler near Maralinga. He has files full of documents and pictures from his time there and also, sadly, mountains of dismissive letters from various Secretaries of State and Ministers. For him, like many of the nuclear veterans, it is not just about compensation; it is about recognition, truth and justice. It breaks my heart that my dear friend and others who did their duty to our country—as Jack says, a duty that has kept the world safe for decades—should be treated

in such a despicable way. There is nothing worse than knowing you are telling the truth and those in authority keep telling you that you are wrong. It remains a stain on this country.

The common theme through the decades that veterans and their families have been fighting for justice is inconsistency from Government on whether the servicemen had blood and urine tests prior to and after the nuclear tests. If they did, where were the records kept and how can they be accessed?

A recent freedom of information request has shown that such records do exist, but, as usual, full details will not be released because the AWE says that it is too expensive. That is why the veterans, exhausted but not defeated, are exploring fresh legal action, but they should not have to. The veterans and their families know that full access to their medical records will show they were exposed to radiation that caused them ill health. They are therefore owed compensation.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that the question is one of openness and transparency from the Ministry of Defence. Those brave servicemen, including my constituent Dennis Brooks, served this country and contributed to the safety of this nation over many decades, and they deserve answers. Many of the families and brave servicemen are now advanced in years. It would be lovely if, before they pass away, they received the answers that they and their families and children have waited so long for. The Government surely have an obligation to deliver that for the families.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention—I could not agree more. Given the anger and frustration that the families and the veterans who are still with us today feel, the Government's answer that it will cost too much is an insult to the veterans and their families and everything that they have been through.

The UK remains the only nuclear power to deny compensation to its bomb test veterans. Does the Minister seriously think that the US, Canada, France, Fiji and Australia are all wrong to give their nuclear veterans compensation? Why must our nuclear veterans here have to continually fight every single step of the way? We often hear that the Government's ambition is for us to be the best place in the world to be a veteran, but it is clear that that ambition does not extend to our nuclear veterans.

9.57 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I want to start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for securing this debate. This place is often at its best when we put aside partisanship and resist the temptation to parrot party political lines, and instead help to shape Government and Opposition thinking through both understanding and shared experience. The work that she has done on this issue—I have been pleased to work with her, as she knows—has been illustrative of exactly that spirit.

In that spirit, the Minister knows that on the basis of a cross-party campaign, which I began long ago when Labour were in government—that shows how long ago it was—we secured, as a result of the intervention by the then Prime Minister, the former Member for Uxbridge

and South Ruislip, a medal for nuclear test veterans. Many were able to receive them before Remembrance Sunday, and this very day a reception is being held for veterans to recognise their contribution. But much, much more needs to be done.

It might be said that any age, including ours, will be gauged by how it perceives its inheritance—what it gained from those who came before us—and what it gives to the future—what we bequeath to those who will be born later. When we think of what the veterans did and the effect that it had on all who came later, including all of us, we can truly value their contribution. We have made progress, as I have said, and today the Office for Veterans' Affairs is holding a reception to recognise the 22,000 nuclear test veterans who risked life and limb long ago in the course of their duties, facing a radioactive smog and searing nuclear heat that altered their lives forever and changed their DNA.

Many have now passed, of course; this was a long time ago, before most of the people in this Chamber and I were born. We are dealing with a declining number of people, but of course their families were affected too because of the profound character of the effect that it had on them—it has been passed from generation to generation. That is why this issue of records is so salient. It is not just about the overdue recognition that I have described. It is about understanding our responsibility to those who this policy affected in the most dramatic of ways and dealing with—I hesitate to use the word—what looks to me like a cover-up.

By the way, no party in this House has not been involved in that because Governments have come and gone since the nuclear tests. One of the few things that has united them wholly is their unwillingness to play straight by nuclear test veterans. Indeed, I mentioned a moment ago that I first went to a Labour Defence Minister to raise the issue of the plight of nuclear test veterans when I was a Back Bencher in the late '90s. After that—as you know, Mr Vickers—I served in government and was able to persuade the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, to grant an ex gratia payment to the test veterans, which I know was warmly received. He is now Lord Cameron of course, and so has gone from being the Prime Minister to David to Lord Cameron during the period of our campaign. I would be interested in the Minister's view on whether it is time to refresh that payment by the way. It was £30 million and that was quite a while ago, so perhaps we could have the Minister's view on how he intends to maintain that fund, given the effect on the veterans' descendants.

The publication of records from 70 years ago is being withheld on what are, in my judgment, highly questionable grounds. I say that and I use the term “cover-up”, which is not one that I would deploy lightly, because the MOD, as the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles said, initially denied that there were records at all. For years, we were told that these tests were not done, or at least if they were done, the records were missing. Then it was revealed that there were records but they were not to be released. It has been only through freedom of information requests that we have discovered that blood records do indeed exist held at the Atomic Weapons Establishment.

FOI requests determined that those blood and urine samples were taken after the first bomb test and that the samples were analysed. We know too that these tests were flagged as missing as early as 1959. In more recent

years, replies from the MOD have varied from stating that there was no information held about blood tests, to revealing the existence of hundreds of bloods tests, to claiming that no one who had a blood test was individually identifiable.

There are many questions for this very diligent, experienced and honourable Minister to answer. If there are tests, how many are there? Where are they held? Was the analysis done, and if so, does it still exist in a way that can be scrutinised? Were the records generic or particular—were they maintained and named to individuals? Those are all matters that I know the Minister will want to make this Chamber aware of without delay. If he cannot provide chapter and verse then, knowing him, I know that he will write to Members and answer those specific questions.

Repeated requests have revealed that many of the files have been closed using the Lord Chancellor's instruction, citing national security exemptions. I would welcome a clarification on this from the Minister, including at what point, if any, Ministers have ever been made aware that blood tests exist for veterans, which may prove or disprove their claims of having been harmed by radiation.

My constituent Douglas Hern died recently. He was the person who first inspired me to take up the cause of nuclear test veterans 20 years ago. He was one such individual sent—in boyhood really, barely a man—out to the south Pacific, to journey close to nuclear explosions. He was told to turn his head and wear a hat and sunglasses. Can you imagine such a thing, Mr Vickers? Can you imagine the horror of that? It lasted with him forever, and it is why he campaigned so vigorously. I speak today not only as patron of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, but for Douglas, and for his family, whom I was happy to meet after his passing, despite the sad occasion. He had lost his wife, Sandie, about a year before; they were dear friends of mine. It was through Douglas that I learned of this injustice. It is why I took up the cause more than 20 years ago, and why I maintain faith that this Government and this Minister will finally make these records available, so that we can do right by those that did so much for us.

10.6 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on securing this vital debate. I also congratulate her on her ongoing campaign for the rights of nuclear test veterans. Many people all over the country are very grateful for her work. When I was on the Labour Defence team, she introduced me to a group of veterans, their families and campaigners. Their stories were both compelling and moving, and I thank her for that.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), who until recently was our shadow Minister for Veterans. I know I speak on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who also served with her, when I say that she was an excellent shadow Minister for Veterans. Throughout my time on her team, I knew that her main focus was on our veterans, and I should like to thank her personally for her service.

[Chris Evans]

In Islwyn, we have a strong history of supporting nuclear test veterans. I am proud of the fact that up until 2011, the Welsh branch of the Nuclear Test Veterans Association marched through Risca every year from 1993. The standard now proudly stands in St Mary's church in Risca. As a much younger MP, I was always honoured to attend the event. I am pleased to report that when I visited the church last summer, the standard was still there in all its glory. It is hung from the ceiling—a constant reminder of what our nuclear test veterans went through. I am proud of the fact that Britain has a long, cherished and celebrated history honouring the valiant efforts of its military personnel, recognising their unwavering commitment and readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the safety and security of the nation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles mentioned in her passionate speech, nuclear test veterans have been recognised for their service, with a medal run off the production lines in August ready for Remembrance Sunday. There is still, however, a feeling of unfinished business, as many Members here have already mentioned. The heart of this matter lies in the historical quest for answers by those who, in service to our nation, participated in or witnessed nuclear testing. That testing took place between 1952 and 1973 in Australia and around the Pacific. Around 40,000 individuals left their families and homes to play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of civilians and military personnel. Without their contribution to the development of a nuclear arsenal, Britain would never have been able to carry out Operation Hurricane—the detonation of a plutonium bomb in the Montebello Islands. That allowed us to become the third nuclear power.

The weapons that resulted from that test are still protecting us today, yet amidst our fight to maintain and hold that arsenal, we have often overlooked those whose lives have been affected by their participation in those tests. Access to medical records is fundamental to the health and wellbeing of veterans. These records contain critical information that can aid in diagnosing, treating and managing health conditions arising from exposure to radiation through nuclear tests. It is important to note that many veterans and their families believe that their exposure to these weapons and the radiation has affected the health of not only the veterans themselves, but their children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. To shed light on their own health and that of their loved ones, the veterans are asking that blood and urine tests taken while they were serving their country are released. This is not just an issue for our veterans; it will play a critical role by helping us to understand the effects of radiation poisoning.

Some claim that when they have had their medical records back, crucial information has been missing or redacted. When queried, the Ministry of Defence has implied that the tests never took place. One veteran was able to narrow down the dates he gave blood to an extremely specific period due to being in medical isolation at that time. If these medical records cannot be found or veterans receive incomplete medical records with key information redacted, we must ask whether there were failures by the MOD to properly log and store the veterans' information. That is certainly not an isolated case. Another veteran says the veterans group has

“uncovered over 200 archive documents which clearly show that the veterans were required to be tested for both blood and urine samples...before they went out to the South Pacific to engage in the nuclear testing, whilst they were there and when they came back”.

In the words of one veteran:

“If those tests were done where are they now?”

American veterans involved in nuclear tests have been able to access their medical records and have received rightful compensation for the essential work they completed. These measures include, but are not limited to, a national day of recognition for their service and priority healthcare. Our veterans are not even asking for a day of recognition, but simply for their own medical files. Is it right that British veterans who carried out the same work as their American counterparts have been deprived of the same recognition and support?

The lack of medical records has placed our veterans in an impossible situation. They find themselves denied access to their own medical records—crucial documents that hold the key to understanding and addressing potential health issues arising from exposure to radiation during nuclear tests. That denial leaves them stranded, unable to make informed decisions about the health of their families and to access appropriate, fully informed medical care.

The recent awarding of medals by the Government is no less than what the veterans deserve. However, I cannot help but feel that without granting these veterans the right to view their own medical records, it is a superficial act. A military medal is respected around the world, but we must not allow that medal to become hollow by treating those in receipt without the respect they deserve. Access to those medical records is not just a matter of principle; it is their right. It is essential for their wellbeing and testimony to our respect for their sacrifices.

Access to any medical record is a moral issue. The nuclear test veterans have fought a long, hard and—yes—painful campaign. As many now reach their twilight years or have already left us, let us give them the justice they deserve by granting their simple request.

10.13 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and an honour to be part of such an important and powerful debate, standing with many colleagues from across the House who are concerned that they see an injustice. I join in the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who has been a tremendous advocate for the nuclear test veterans—and persistent. I fear that often persistence is what is required in this place, no matter how strong and compelling the case being made. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for his support and work on this issue, too. He is right that this House is at its best when we join together.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested that “Call the Midwife” was the relevant cultural reference for the debate. I feel it is more of a horror story and a horror film, because when we actually listen to the stories of what happened to our constituents and what is happening to their families, it feels like something out of the Hollywood playbook. It simply

feels like it could not be true, and yet we know it did happen. It happened to citizens of this country, and the effects are still being felt generations later.

I will share the experience of my former constituent Albert Swain, known as George, who is 91. He lived in Walthamstow on his return from the Pacific for almost 50 years. He has now left, but his daughter is still my constituent. In 1957, he was serving on the aircraft carrier HMS Warrior during Operation Grapple X. This was a test of the hydrogen bomb, which was more than 140 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Albert worked in the galley, but during the test he was told to come up to the deck to witness the explosion—told to put himself in harm's way. He was not given any special protective equipment, and despite turning his back on the explosion, he says that he still remembers seeing his bones through his flesh when the weapon was detonated. His colleagues on the ship said the same thing.

Since his involvement, he has now received his medal, and it is right that we thank these people for their service. But our debate today is about whether we have truly honoured them for the sacrifice they have made of their health, which is what we are now seeing. Albert's family are concerned about the medical implications of that day for him. He has had skin cancer on his face, he has been blind in one eye for about five years, and he has always had anxiety—the psychological problems, the mental health issues that were mentioned earlier.

More worrying, Albert's children have had medical issues that they are desperately concerned are related. One daughter had two miscarriages; another lost a baby two days postpartum. All his granddaughters have gynaecological problems of some sort, and one grandson has scoliosis. We know that exposure to ionising radiation can lead to heritable mutations, meaning that the family will never be sure, unless somebody investigates, whether what is happening to them is because of what happened to George.

Let us think for a moment of 40,000 families in this country thinking the same thing, and then ask ourselves whether what we are having to ask today is really enough. I know the Minister has heard the calls for the evidence from the blood and urine tests to be released. It says something about us, does it not, that we are now dealing with quite an elderly generation—as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings has said, some have now passed away—and yet, rather than tearing down the barriers of the challenges that they may face, these still exist.

Surely in this day and age, knowing what we know now about what has happened to these people, we should not be waiting for people to make requests for their own medical information. There should not be a question about whether data can be released, or a freedom of information request is sufficient; we should be humbled and horrified enough to get that information to them and proactively investigate the healthcare concerns that they and their families may have.

Surely the very least we can do is to recognise the problems that are happening—the stories being told across the country of the people affected by what happened to their grandparents, but who still today are struggling to get information. It is surely a mark of shame on us—I know the Minister will share their concern—that veterans are having to consider legal action to get their medical records, and the compensation and answers

they deserve. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings is right: Governments of all colours have played their part in this tragedy. Surely now is the time to stand up and be what these people were—the best of our country, the best of our people—and do the best of service for them.

I hope the Minister will do more today than just ask whether the data is available, or even if people are making compensation requests. We have to offer those families the help and support they need if they are facing these experiences. We have to offer the proactive approach that I think everybody here agrees needs to happen. I know the Minister will want to do this, so my question to him is, what does he need from us to make that happen? He will have heard the stories. He will think of somebody like George standing on that deck on a bright day, seeing his bones through his skin, and not even realising that generations later it could affect his grandson in the way we fear it might have. He will want to do right by George, and all the others. What does the Minister need from us to make sure not just that those records are released and compensation is given, but that we have the inquiry we need to get to the bottom of what happened to those people, and determine what we can do to put it right?

10.19 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on the way she introduced the debate. I congratulate her on being persistent, calm and very clear about what justice looks like, what the veterans of those British nuclear tests deserve, and what can be done about it. This is not the only debate where she has done so; she has done that over many years. She speaks for many hon. Members, from Government and Opposition parties, when she makes the very simple case for justice, for transparency, and for an understanding that those people involved in the tests are currently being denied. I thank her for that effort.

I echo the thanks to the “Fleet Street Fox”, Susie Boniface of The Daily Mirror, for her persistent and dogged campaigning. If it were not for her arguing for the column inches, articles and time to investigate over many years, this issue would not be as loud or as prominent as it is today. Many people owe to her journalism the justice that I hope they will get in future.

Sir John Hayes: I entirely endorse that. I described my constituent Douglas Hern as having inspired me. Had that *Mirror* journalist not cajoled and informed me over such a long period, I do not think I would have maintained this campaign with quite so much vigour. He is entirely right to pay tribute to her.

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I also echo the thanks to my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for her time in the shadow Defence team, and welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), who is shortly taking over that role. I am merely a stand-in today, but I should like to add my thoughts and experience in Plymouth to those shared today.

[*Luke Pollard*]

Our nuclear test veterans served our country with pride and distinction. They made a vital contribution to the creation of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent, which continues to keep us and our NATO allies safe today. It is a contribution that our nation should be proud of, and for which our nation owes a huge debt of gratitude and honour. That is not an abstract honour. When those words are used it is like a fog that descends, but I do not think it is. I think that debt of honour is a promise for action. Just as our Armed Forces Covenant says that no one who served should suffer disadvantage because of their service, it is clear that these veterans are suffering disadvantage because of their service.

Those of us who argued for the armed forces covenant and a sense of decency and respect for those who have served and serve today, should honour that with action. Defence Ministers should work to ensure that, as much as possible, transparency and respect are shown to those nuclear test veterans and the lasting consequences their families have suffered. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) put it clearly when she talked not only of the test veterans but their children and grandchildren. This is not a cohort that deserves justice before they die, although they do. This is a cohort whose experiences in the Pacific will last generations to come, if we do not provide that clarity and understanding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) described it as unfinished business, and he is right. It is business that this Minister and this House can do something about. As has already been referenced, there are reports that nuclear test veterans are considering suing the Government to access their medical records if they are not forthcoming. It should not take legal action to access the truth. Indeed, the words that some Ministers have used around this legal action suggest that that is the only way to get the truth, because there is nothing that Ministers can do in the meantime—or nothing that they want to do.

That does not sit well with me or Members of the House—that this group of veterans must be prepared to pay for lawyers to get at the truth. What does it say about our democracy that that is the only way for them to access the justice that they deserve? Reasonable questions have been asked of the Minister in this debate. I want to echo a few that have been put so far. What discussions have he and his colleagues had with the nuclear test veterans and affiliated veterans' groups about access to the requested medical records? This is not just about parliamentarians on both sides of the House asking those questions. There are groups of determined individuals out there, making that case consistently, calmly and coolly.

When was the last time the Minister met that group, and when is he planning to meet them next? If those medical records are being withheld, is there a good reason for doing so? It was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) that it is around cost. If it is around cost, it is about money. All of us understand that money is about where we put our political priorities. It is clear that there is a political priority and an interest from Members on both sides of the House to resolve this. If it is about cost, can the Minister help to unblock that?

What support is in place for the war pension applications from nuclear test veterans who have not received their full service medical records so far? And how does the awarding of a medal—that medallion recognition—tie in with their campaign? Does the Minister regard the medal as a full stop at the end of the campaign, or does he regard it as a platform that shows how we, as a nation, recognise that service and must now do more to resolve the final issues with that group?

Labour is proud to give its full support to nuclear test veterans' campaign for their medallion recognition. It is important, and has support from both sides of the House. As a party, we are proud that the Leader of the Opposition was the first political leader to meet the nuclear test veterans, back in 2021, as part of that campaign. However, it should not have taken decades for a medal to be awarded to the 22,000 veterans who served during Britain's nuclear tests.

Everyone who served—those alive and those who have passed—deserves recognition for their service during the tests, but it is not just about receiving the medal; it is also about how those medals are received. At present, many nuclear test veterans receive their medal through their door in plain packaging in second-class post. They deserve better than second-class post. They deserve better than a medal arriving in the post. They deserve a proper ceremony.

I helped Mr Tony Carpanini, an 88-year-old constituent of mine, to receive his medal after he struggled to get it from the Ministry of Defence. He said, "If I had received the medal 60 years ago, it would have meant a lot more, but it is much better late than never." Mr Carpanini is right about his medal, but so many people he served alongside will not be able to get that medal because they are no longer with us.

We must learn from the experience with medals and offer the experience of justice that many people are seeking in this debate. The strong sense of injustice with which Mr Carpanini left me is something that we have heard in interventions from both sides of Westminster Hall—from people standing up for their constituents. The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) spoke about his constituents; the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), who is no longer in his place, spoke about his constituents; and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) spoke about a person in his constituency. This affects all our constituencies. If we divide 22,000 veterans by 650 Members of Parliament, there are enough in every constituency to make every single MP do something about this. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it very well when he asked for the doors to be opened and for that relationship with data to be published. "Make it clear; release all the records," is how he put it. That is a strong ask, and I encourage the Minister to look at it.

Returning briefly to the medal ceremonies that have been so missing, I would like the Minister to join me in congratulating Councillor Alan Dowson in Peterborough—whom I met on a visit to Peterborough with Andrew Pakes—Fred Thomas in Plymouth and Catherine Atkinson in Derby, who have been organising medal ceremonies in their communities because the Government did not provide a medal ceremony for nuclear test veterans, notwithstanding a knees-up in the Office for Veterans' Affairs today. There should be a ceremony for every

veteran to receive their medal after so long being denied it. What Fred, Catherine and Alan are organising is a ceremony in their own communities, asking the mayor or lord mayor of their local council to present the medal to those veterans, to say thank you for their service on behalf not just of a grateful nation but of a grateful community.

The Minister could do something really quite special with that, even if he says no to many of the requests we have heard today. He could encourage every local authority to hold a medals ceremony to award those medals to nuclear test veterans in their community. Councils do not know how many nuclear test veterans there are in their community. I do not know how many there are in mine in Plymouth, but I know that they are everywhere. The census showed us that there are veterans in every one of our communities. The best thing about that, which will not get me in trouble with the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), with the Minister or with the Chancellor himself, is that it will not cost the Ministry of Defence a penny. We can encourage our friends in local authorities to do this; they want to do it to recognise the service of those people in their communities.

Sir John Hayes: Of course, the descendants too, because I hope that the medals can be awarded posthumously to descendants such as those of my constituent Douglas Hern. I will get that medal for his descendants—so the Minister had better agree it now, or we will have to have a disagreement.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman is right: it should be about those people who are descendants of nuclear test veterans. I believe that the terms and conditions of the applications make provision for those people who are no longer with us to have that medal awarded posthumously. That in itself, though, provides a set of principles that we should apply equally to their service elsewhere. In this debate we have heard from Members across the House, just asking questions. We have heard fair questions asked today on behalf of constituents who just want to understand the truth about what happened to their blood and urine tests and why the “truth” in the statements from the Ministry of Defence has changed so often over time. If the Minister cannot give us answers to those questions today, will he set out a journey that he and his Department can go on which will provide comfort and confidence to the families and to Members from both Government and Opposition parties that the Ministry of Defence takes this seriously, and give a general sense that direction, clarity and understanding can be achieved even if all answers cannot be offered?

I conclude by going back to the start of what I said. I am proud that my party stands with our nuclear test veterans, but proud also that hon. Members from both sides of the House stand with those veterans. They served our country with pride and distinction, and we owe it to them to be transparent about the risks they faced and the lasting consequences that their families have suffered. The Minister could do more, and I hope that he will be able to give peace of mind and a sense of justice to those who are affected by our nuclear testing programme.

10.31 am

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for bringing this debate and for her tireless championing of the cause of nuclear test veterans. We all have nuclear test veterans in our constituencies. Many of us served with them during the initial parts of our service life; and some of us have nuclear test veterans in our own families.

We will certainly never forget the tens of thousands of service personnel scientists and civilians from the UK and her allies who participated in the British nuclear testing programme between 1952 and 1967. The test programme over 15 years represented the largest tri-service event since the D-Day landings. By equipping the UK with an appropriate nuclear capacity they helped to keep the Cold War in the fridge, preventing a third, potentially devastating, conventional war. With the threat from nuclear armed states escalating, their contribution continues to keep us safe today.

We have had some powerful contributions from Back Bench Members today. In addition to the contribution from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who speaks for the Opposition, we have heard from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Members for Islwyn (Chris Evans) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I will try to respond to the points they have made in the time available, but if I am unable to do so I will certainly write to them.

When it comes to health effects, we should remember at all times that the UK atmospheric nuclear test programme experimented on weapons; it did not experiment on service personnel. Tests were carried out to contemporary radiological standards, as shown by the documented safety measures and monitoring that took place at the time.

Over the past six decades there have been four big independently conducted and analysed longitudinal cohort studies of the population at risk. The results have consistently demonstrated that cancer and mortality rates for the nuclear test veterans are similar to those serving contemporaneously in the armed forces who did not participate in the testing programmes. It is important to emphasise that those are big epidemiological studies. The results show that the cancer and mortality rates are in fact lower than for the general population. I am not going to pray that in aid, as we would expect that to be the case, given what is called the healthy worker effect, but it should give some reassurance to those who served. In corroboration, a study of mortality among US military participants in eight above-ground nuclear test series events between 1945 and 1962 was published last year. The study population was 114,270 individuals over 65 years. No health effect from participation in the tests was evidenced. In July last year, Brunel University published the results of its study into the number of chromosomal abnormalities in nuclear test veterans and their children compared with a control veteran group. It found no significant differences.

Those studies are important because, perfectly understandably, veterans may ascribe illness or abnormality to dramatic past experiences, such as witnessing a nuclear

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

mushroom cloud, but the highly compelling evidence we have from both this country and abroad strongly suggests that they should be reassured in respect of their participation in nuclear tests between 1952 and 1967. Based on the peer-reviewed evidence, furthermore I think that we should all be responsible and measured in the language we use, even as we rightly advocate for our constituents and call for transparency, on which more anon.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: On the point the Minister made about the United States tests, President Biden said in July this year:

“I have signed laws that support veterans who developed cancer and other medical conditions stemming from our World War II nuclear program.”

What science is he relying on that we are not relying on?

Dr Murrison: I am relying on the evidence that was published last year—the study of 114,000-plus veterans who have been followed up over 65 years. I cannot account for the remarks of the President of the United States. What I can do is rely rigorously on the scientific peer-reviewed evidence. Today we have heard a number of harrowing accounts from constituents, and I have my own, but at the end of the day the hon. Lady will appreciate that policy has to be based on a rigorous examination of the evidence. I believe that is what has been done in this country and, I suspect, by predecessor Governments of all political persuasions. That is the only basis on which we can proceed. May I tell the hon. Lady, who spoke powerfully, that we need to be careful about unduly alarming people who have served the country in the way we have been describing. That is not in any way to say that their concerns should be downplayed or, indeed, that we should not be transparent in the evidence we produce. I will come on to cover some of that.

I have to say that the narrative that someone is hiding files, presumably under consecutive Governments, is curious. To answer the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles, I am not aware that medical records or test results have been withheld for national security reasons. I have asked again, and it has been confirmed, that the Atomic Weapons Establishment does not hold medical records for any former service personnel. It does, however, hold historical technical and scientific documentation about the UK’s nuclear testing programme in its archives. This was published as recently as September through a freedom of information request, as has been mentioned in today’s debate.

In response to the request for any documents containing the words “blood” or “urine”, the AWE returned a report containing the subject headings of 150 items. Those were reviewed and it was found that three particular documents referencing blood and urine tests were of interest. One referred to an anonymous blood test, another contained four anonymous urine tests and the last identified one individual’s blood tests. Following a request, that information was provided to the individual’s next of kin. I have looked at the subject headings and asked officials to look again at the 150 files with a view to placing those not already available to the public in the public domain. I have also asked to see them myself.

I hope that helps the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. I share the House’s desire to make transparent that which can be made transparent. I hope this will put the matter beyond any possible doubt. To answer the hon. Member for Strangford directly, recently my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs said categorically:

“There is no cover up”.—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 220.]

Indeed, I cannot see why there would be.

No personal health records are withheld from living veterans. Any medical records taken either before, during or after participation in the UK nuclear weapon tests that are held in the individual military medical records in the Government archives can be accessed on request by submitting a data subject access request. I must say, however, that any records that were made would be up to 71 years old. They would be paper, poorer-quality and perishable—not at all the auditable, searchable medical and technical records that we are used to today. Absent or incomplete records should not be taken as evidence of some sort of conspiracy.

We know that when a group of nuclear test veterans initiated a claim against the then Government in the early 2000s, the then Government denied that exposure took place and said that there were no health consequences as a result of being present at nuclear test sites. I cannot answer for the then Government but evidence since strongly supports the claim that there have been no health consequences.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for drawing our attention to the Brunel study. Having read it, he will understand that an element of that report says there is concern about the DNA building block SBS16 and that there was a mutation, particularly in nuclear veteran families. I appreciate that the bulk of the report said that there was no evidence of a substantial difference in genetic material between the test and control groups, but there is evidence that there is something. It also highlighted a disproportionate number of birth defects in the families of nuclear test veterans which could not be explained by genetic testing.

That rather suggests that before we completely close the door to the idea that there has been a health impact, as the Minister perhaps suggests we should, we might need to explore those angles. After all, the researchers themselves said that they cannot rule out with any confidence that that is a random variation.

Dr Murrison: It is difficult to prove a negative, but the overall conclusions of the researchers from Brunel University are clear. In the interests of transparency, it is worth pointing out that it was a fairly small study and also the first part of a series of reports that we anticipate from Brunel University. We will have to see what transpires, but the headline response published in July last year should be reassuring for those who believe that their exposure between 1952 and 1967 caused generational problems to their families.

I turn to the subject of compensation raised today, albeit fairly briefly. With respect to that matter, the Department published its policy on ionising radiation back in 2017. The statement was validated by the independent medical expert group, which provides evidence-based medical and scientific advice to the Ministry

of Defence, ensuring that our decisions reflect both contemporary medical understanding on causation and the progress of disorders. In its sixth report, published in September 2022, IMEG again reviewed the evidence, including the findings of the fourth report of the longitudinal study. It concluded that no changes to the Department's policy statement were required on the basis of the evidence available.

However, nuclear test veterans who believe that they have suffered ill health due to service still have the right to apply for no-fault compensation under the war pensions scheme, which applies to anyone who served before 6 April 2005. War pensions are payable in respect of illness or injury as a result of military service, with a benefit of reasonable doubt always given to the claimant. Decisions are medically certified and take account of available service and medical evidence, and they also carry full rights of appeal to an independent tribunal. Additionally, there is a range of supplementary pensions and allowances payable, including for dependants. Each case will be considered on its own merits.

Some specific concerns were raised about the handling of individual medical data. I can confirm that there is a formal complaints procedure under the Data Protection Act 2018. On requests made for medical data under the freedom of information legislation by relatives of deceased veterans, I hope hon. Members will appreciate that I am unable to comment due to ongoing legislation.

Sir John Hayes: We now know that tests were done, presumably because there was a view that there might be an effect of the exposure to radiation, otherwise there would not have been blood and urine tests. Veterans' inquiries about that were, as the Minister put it, "curiously" not answered on earlier occasions. So the question remains: why, who and when? Which Ministers—they may still be in this House or possibly the upper House—refused to provide that information, on what basis and when? The Government can presumably provide that information now with a degree of notice.

Dr Murrison: There is a list of 150 files of data that the Atomic Weapons Establishment said in September that it holds, and they contain reference to blood and urine. I have a list here; it is in the public domain and I am perfectly happy to give it to my right hon. Friend. What I am not clear about is what the bulk of those files actually say and what is in them. All I have are the subject headings. Some of them are pretty anodyne, to be honest—they are proceedings of various symposia, which presumably are available elsewhere—but some are tantalising and refer to test results. I would like to see what those documents look like. I have not seen them so far, and I certainly intend to examine them myself. More than that, I think it is reasonable for officials to trawl through them again to be absolutely clear why that which is not currently in the public domain—which I suspect is quite a lot of this—is not, and why it should not be.

There has to be a very good reason why this data is not in the public domain. Clearly, these tests happened overseas, and there may be very good reason why this material was not placed in the public domain, but it is now up to 71 years old, so given the level of public interest, it seems reasonable at least to ask why these documents, so tantalisingly put before us through the Freedom of Information Act in September this year, are

not in the public domain in their entirety. I undertake to find out why that is. Wherever I can possibly do so, I will ensure that that material is placed in the public domain, with the usual caveats. For example, if there is personal information in them, which I do not expect from what I have been told, there are clearly some restrictions on the publication of that, but if it is simply sheets and sheets of dosimetry and urine and blood test results, I cannot see why that should not be available. I will certainly make it my business to examine that in the days ahead if that is of any help to my right hon. Friend.

The Government are committed to doing everything we reasonably can to support our nuclear veterans, as indeed we are for all our veterans. That includes acknowledging the profound contribution they have made through medallic recognition. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for majoring on that. He knows very well that last November the Prime Minister announced that all nuclear test veterans will be eligible for a commemorative medal. To date, some 1,600 veterans have received the medal, whose design features an atom surrounded by olive branches. I am delighted that, as he said, there will be a reception today at Admiralty House, which I will attend, co-hosted by the Secretary of State and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. We will witness a further 15 nuclear test veterans receiving their honour.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked why the medals are not presented formally. I understand where he is coming from and note that lords lieutenant sometimes undertake medal presentation ceremonies, but I think that, in this case, there was an imperative to get medals out of the door so that veterans could have them by Remembrance Sunday, and we have achieved quite a lot of that. As far as we could make out, that was the wish for the bulk of the veteran community. In general, however, I would support the hon. Member's contention that it adds to the expression of gratitude represented by a commemorative medal if it can be presented personally. That will not be the wish of every veteran—of course it will not—but it will be for many, and, in general, I support point made by the hon. Member.

Our appreciation of the contribution of nuclear test veterans does not stop there and, indeed, the hon. Gentleman rightly said so. We are also investing in projects to further our understanding of the experiences of all who were deployed between 1952 and 1967, which will include funding for academics to record the life stories of veterans across the UK. I hope that colleagues will join me in encouraging all members of that unique community who reside in their constituencies to come forward and share their front-row experience of one of the defining operations of our time.

10.51 am

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank everybody for their contribution to today's debate, which has been very good and collegiate. I extend special thanks to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). It is very rare to make good friends with someone on the opposite Benches, but he and I have been very friendly and active on the issue of nuclear testing veterans; he has done long-running work over the years as a champion of those veterans. He said

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

that although we may have been united in our campaigning activities, the Governments over the decades have not been united, or have been united only in their failure to recognise what testing veterans suffered.

Various colleagues made references to the compensation and support provided to other countries' nuclear testing veterans; for example, in America, nuclear testing veterans have received a day of recognition, medical care, compensation and access to their full medical and testing records. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about the need for an inquiry, not only for testing veterans, but for their descendants. In the UK, we have never had a detailed health study or research project into the effect of radiation on nuclear testing veterans and their descendants. The Minister made reference to a number of papers that were produced, but the veterans were not provided with the full suite of information required to determine what outcome was needed. Indeed, international studies have come to different conclusions. However, they found excessive radiation in nuclear testing veterans, and that it had overall implications for their health over time.

I have no doubt that the Minister's intentions in this debate are very honourable, but he made some confusing comments. For example, he stated that the Atomic Weapons Establishment does not hold any medical records—that is his firm belief—but he went on to say, in response to the question about the 150 documents that were referenced in the freedom of information request, that test information was in there, and was provided to the next of kin. That suggests to me that the AWE did hold test information on individuals, and that as a result of the FOI request, it had to issue those results to a veteran's next of kin. Would the Minister like to respond on that point?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady is right. I understand that one out of the 150 documents references an individual by name. I do not know why that is; it could have been a mistake. That is why I have asked to see those 150 files myself and, in particular, the three that were pulled out of the 150 as being particularly germane to this debate.

I shall be interested to see what the reason is. I apologise to the hon. Lady, but in the time available to me, the AWE has not been able to tell me why, in all the data that they hold, one person in one case is personally identifiable.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I appreciate the honesty of the Minister's response, but I am sure he can understand the frustration in this debate, and of course in the wider country. Every response that we receive is different. One suggests that there are medical records; the other suggests that there are not. We just want to know the truth. I understand that he has undertaken to review the 150 FOI-request documents, which is very much appreciated. Perhaps he will report his findings to the House, but there are numerous other documents that we know exist—for example, the AB and ES files that have been withdrawn from the National Archives. If he could commit to putting those in the public domain again, we would be grateful.

As for other documents that may or may not be available, the Minister referenced the fact that the documents are very old. Veterans have been campaigning for access to their records for over 70 years. He said that many of the documents will be in paper form, and that there might not be an auditable trail. I find it very hard to believe that in one of the greatest militaries in the world, there would not be a system for accessing particular documents. Will he look into that as a matter of urgency, and perhaps conduct an inquiry on the location of those historical documents and report back to the House? As I said in my opening remarks, if the documents do not exist and he knows that they do not exist, it is up to the Government to be open and honest, and to explain what happened to the documents, on whose instruction they were destroyed, and why.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered nuclear test veterans and medical records.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Grey Squirrels

11 am

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I will call Virginia Crosbie to move the motion and then the Minister will respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate. I call Virginia Crosbie.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered control of the grey squirrel population.

Thank you, Mr Vickers, for the opportunity to hold this important debate on control of the squirrel population. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison)—a fellow atomic kitten. It was while we were visiting nuclear reactors in Finland recently that we discussed this important debate.

In the 1909 poem “An Appointment” by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, he described the red squirrel as “proud” and “wayward”, bounding and springing around the trees with a

“fierce tooth and cleanly limb”.

He finished by saying:

“No government appointed him.”

Just two years after he wrote those words, American grey squirrels were introduced to Ireland and, as has been the case across much of the UK, this hardier and more aggressive species took over, pushing the red squirrel out and threatening its very existence. Although no Government appointed the red squirrel in Yeats’s poem, it is clearly up to our Government to reappoint red squirrels, a much-loved native species, to their natural homes. Grey squirrels are a menace to British biodiversity. They have proven perilous for our native red squirrel population.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Ards Red Squirrel Group is full of fantastic volunteers who work tirelessly to protect the future of the red squirrel in my constituency of Strangford, particularly at Mount Stewart. The organisation is led by the National Trust Mount Stewart ranger team, and they are in constant contact with local landowners to monitor red squirrels and eradicate any greys that venture in. Indeed, the issue is the very presence of grey squirrels; grey squirrels are the Hamas of the squirrel world. Does the hon. Member agree that there should be greater integration between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and local red squirrel groups in the devolved institutions to ensure that they have the means necessary to preserve and expand the red squirrel species throughout Northern Ireland?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He is a keen advocate not only for his constituents, but for the red squirrel population. I particularly thank him for drawing attention to those who work so hard on this issue. He mentions co-operation with DEFRA on red squirrels. It is absolutely key to all aspects of biodiversity that we see such co-operation.

In the UK, there are now an estimated 280,000 red squirrels. That is just 10% of the grey squirrel population. I am fortunate that many of those red squirrels reside on my island constituency of Ynys Môn in north Wales,

which has been grey squirrel free since 2016. An estimated 60% of the Welsh red squirrel population thrive in woodlands such as the Dingle in Llangefni, Penrhos on Ynys Gybi, Newborough forest and the National Trust’s Plas Newydd. I was thrilled to be invited by Dr Rajkumari Jones to become an honorary member of the Red Squirrels Trust Wales, and to be shown around Pentraeth forest by red squirrel champions Rob Macaulay and Dr Craig Shuttleworth.

In 2018, a review of the population and conservation status of British mammals noted a significant decline in UK red squirrel populations over the preceding two decades everywhere except Scotland. The report identified that the decline was due to diseases such as squirrel pox and adenovirus; competition with grey squirrels for resources; deterioration in habitat quality; and a failure to implement effective measures to control grey squirrel populations. Grey squirrels cause millions of pounds-worth of damage to our woodlands by gnawing the bark off trees. That can lead to the loss of particularly vulnerable tree species, such as beech. That in turn creates a decline in the fungi and invertebrates reliant on those trees. In some cases, the damage caused by grey squirrels reduces the value of timber to the extent of disincentivising investment in the creation of new woodlands. The estimated annual cost of grey squirrel damage to trees is £37 million, and the estimated cost to the whole economy of grey squirrels is £1.8 billion.

This Government have taken steps to control the grey squirrel population and protect red squirrels. As we have seen, the Environment Act 2021 includes a legally binding target to halt species decline by 2030. The England trees action plan, published in May 2021, states that we will act now to build resilience in our woodlands by improving the management of grey squirrels, including by updating the grey squirrel action plan. We are now two years on from the Environment Act and 30 months on from the England trees action plan, but the updated grey squirrel action plan has yet to hit our bookshelves. The current plan provides advice to landowners on controlling grey squirrel populations on their land. Provision is also made for countryside stewardship grants to help landowners control the squirrel population.

I was pleased to see that the promised species survival fund was launched earlier this year, and look forward to red squirrel projects receiving support when the results are announced. The Government recognise that this issue is bigger than just giving grants to landowners. To achieve our 2030 target and our 2042 ambition to grow native species populations by 10%, we need focused, sustainable and joined-up action, and we need it soon.

Let us consider the various ways that the targets can be met. The first is through the traditional methods of grants to landowners, to support trapping and shooting of grey squirrels. Although that is effective, it is not always expedient. The Forestry Commission squirrel control plan reminds us that

“the time required to cull high-level populations must not be underestimated, nor should the total period over which a high culling effort will be required”

and

“even after populations are reduced, the time to sustain lower population levels can remain as high as it was previously, despite fewer animals being culled.”

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

Put simply, squirrel migration may simply displace the problem, and smaller populations are harder to hit. Trapping and shooting are also unpalatable to many people, and there are other more effective methods that need to be considered. I recommend the excellent report “Saving the Red Squirrel: Landscape Scale Recovery,” edited by Bangor University’s Craig Shuttleworth, along with Nikki Robinson of the Red Squirrels Trust Wales and Peter Lurz from Edinburgh University. Its production was supported by my local authority, Anglesey County Council.

That publication looks at alternatives in depth, and I would like to highlight some of the proposals reviewed. One is the reintroduction of pine martens as a method of biocontrol. Those native creatures have been largely extinct in England and Wales since the early 20th century. They prey on squirrels and, because grey squirrels are slower, larger, more populous and spend more time on the ground than their red cousins, they are easier prey for the pine marten. As non-native species, grey squirrels also lack the instinctive anti-predator response to pine marten scent that makes our red squirrels run for cover at one sniff.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 pine martens in Scotland. That may be in part why red squirrel populations are healthier north of the border. Pine martens have been reintroduced in various areas of Northern Ireland. In recent years, controlled studies have reintroduced them to parts of Wales and the Forest of Dean.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Member is elucidating comprehensively the various options open to us. Does she agree that we need Government and wider society to accept that either we allow the grey squirrel population to proceed as it has in recent decades, which will eventually lead to the annihilation of the red, or we significantly control the greys to preserve the native red squirrel species?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member. He makes the point effectively that this is teamwork, and urgent. We need to use all the resources at our fingertips and beyond to control this terrible situation.

The study suggests that reintroducing pine martens has a positive impact on reducing grey squirrel populations and enhancing red squirrel populations. However, that approach will not work in isolation. Pine martens live in forested areas and dislike the urban environments that grey squirrels thrive in. Increasing the extent and quality of woodland areas will help, but it is unlikely that we will see pine martens set up home in city parks any time soon. Also, although pine martens may reduce grey squirrel populations in one location, that may not be the case in another ecosystem, where there are alternative sources of prey.

Another option is immunocontraception—in other words, the use of fertility control methods to reduce grey squirrel numbers. A similar approach has been used to control goat populations on the Great Orme in north Wales. DEFRA has invested £300,000 in supporting research and development on fertility control methods for the squirrel population. It has supported proposals led by the UK Squirrel Accord, which is a coalition of more than 40 forestry and conservation organisations.

A recent project in the Elwy valley in Wales modelled the likely impact of putting contraceptive-laced food in hoppers, accessible only to grey squirrels, using a placebo in place of a contraceptive. There are a number of possible issues with that, including the cost of developing the infrastructure and the risk of hoppers being accessible to other species or of contraceptive-laced food getting into the paws of other species, but it is certainly part of our potential armoury. When comparing contraception and pine martens, one could argue that although the public might prefer pine martens as a more natural solution, the grey squirrel might well prefer taking the pill to facing off against a hungry pine marten.

Finally, there is a new piece of technology: the gene drive. It works on the principle of selective inheritance, whereby pregnant females would produce only male offspring. Although it has many potential benefits, there are also potential downsides that would need careful consideration. Gene drive technology is really in its infancy and has not yet been researched on squirrels. There may be the risk of the technology jumping between squirrel species or of males becoming frustrated at the shortage of female squirrels, resulting in an increased level of tree stripping. It will also require heavy investment. It is unlikely that gene drives will offer a practical answer to the problem within the next decade, but I would support the Government looking into the technology as part of the longer-term solution.

There are a couple of other things that would really give red squirrels a helping hand. The first is a squirrel pox vaccine. Grey squirrels are carriers of this debilitating virus, but they rarely contract it, and squirrel pox outbreaks among red squirrels are generally linked to grey squirrel encroachment on their territory. Squirrel pox kills red squirrels 17 to 25 times faster than it kills greys, and a single outbreak can wipe out an entire local red squirrel population. It is a horrible disease, similar to myxomatosis in rabbits, with deaths often resulting from starvation as squirrels become unable to feed themselves. Had a recent outbreak of squirrel pox on the mainland reached Ynys Môn, it would undoubtedly have devastated the red squirrel communities on our island. A vaccine developed in 2009 resulted in severe side effects in red squirrels, and no further vaccine research has been carried out since 2013. The Wildlife Ark Trust is now leading on fundraising to develop a vaccine, and several countries are listed as supporters on its website, including Germany, Spain and Ireland. It would be fantastic to see the UK listed alongside them.

The second thing that would help red squirrels would be to develop and enhance the natural habitats available for them through programmes such as the landscape recovery scheme. This issue needs large, landscape-scale proposals to significantly reduce or eradicate grey squirrels in a way that trapping and shooting cannot do.

I am asking the UK Government to show support for our native red squirrel and back the different measures that can be used to help them thrive. They should support programmes to reintroduce pine martens to our woodlands, continue to work with the Squirrel Accord on the development of contraceptive schemes, invest in gene drive research for long-term and large-scale results, provide funding for research into a squirrel pox vaccine, and facilitate programmes that will increase and improve red squirrel habitats through further rounds of the landscape recovery scheme. *Diolch yn fawr.*

11.12 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): It really is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to follow my fellow atomic kitten, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie). She and I usually engage in debates on the subject of nuclear, because without it there can be no net zero or the exceptionally well-paid apprenticeships and jobs that the industry brings, but today I have discovered that our constituencies have something else in common: we both have red squirrels.

Like my hon. Friend, I am concerned about how we are dealing with grey squirrels. As I have said before here in Westminster Hall, when Beatrix Potter wrote her best-selling and globally celebrated book in 1903, she based her famous character Squirrel Nutkin on a red squirrel from St Herbert's island on Derwentwater in Keswick, which is in my constituency. However, I really worry that such a book could not be written today, because sadly, the sight of red squirrels has become so rare. It is doubtful whether an author such as Miss Potter could become so inspired by the trials and tribulations of Squirrel Nutkin, Tinkleberry and their many cousins.

There are multiple reasons for the demise of the red squirrel—perhaps our most iconic native animal—not least the impact of humans and the loss of the red squirrel's habitat. But, to give credit where it is due, I commend the Government, and specifically the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for the Environment Act 2021 and the environmental improvement plan, which details, across 10 goals, how we will halt nature's decline and, most importantly, create more habitat, which is the single biggest action we can take to help nature recover.

Red squirrels need more trees. We all need more trees, because trees alleviate flooding and filter pollution. Trees provide fuel for our homes and power for our communities. Trees shade the ecosystem beneath them and, in a warming world, that has never been so important. Trees are home, shelter, breeding site and larder to so much of our wildlife. Trees sequester and store carbon, and they support a timber sector that employs 32,000 people, providing us with sustainable construction materials, posts and beams, panels and boards, furniture and fittings, and card and paper. As the former Minister for trees, I know just how tree-mendous the largest of our plant species is, and I want to put on the record my appreciation for all those people who research, plant, protect, care for and harvest trees and work with timber.

During National Tree Week, I hope we can all take a moment to celebrate the diverse and varied forestry workforce and everyone who cares for and appreciates trees. Most importantly, we should all plant a tree—the right tree in the right place for the right purpose. For anyone planting many trees, there is a variety of different funding opportunities from DEFRA and, thanks to Anna Brown at the Forestry Commission, we have a much speedier process, too. Despite the brilliant England trees action plan, the vast amount of public and private policy and funding support, and the overwhelming benefits that I have set out, unless we tackle the impacts of deer and grey squirrels in particular, we will fail to meet our 16.5% tree canopy cover target by 2050. That means we will fail to provide the habitat that nature needs to recover.

Grey squirrel damage accounts for the loss of thousands of trees all over the country and millions of pounds of damage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn set out. More tragically, grey squirrels carry the incredibly infectious squirrel pox disease but remain unaffected. Yet, it is fatal for red squirrels. Put simply, where there are live greys, there will be dead reds. Unlike red squirrels, grey squirrels are not native. They are invasive and will outcompete the native red in size, breeding rate and general hardiness for habitat and food.

In Cumbria, and no doubt wherever red squirrels remain across the UK, the existence of red squirrels is testament to the volunteer efforts of conservation groups, which work tirelessly to control grey squirrel populations. The volunteers undergo training and follow strict risk assessment procedures. They secure the appropriate insurance and land access agreements. They will be up at the crack of dawn using their own vehicles and equipment. I would like to recognise the passion and determination of these volunteers across the UK and encourage more appreciation for their dedication to conservation. I am fortunate to have many such volunteers and organisations in and around Copeland, including the West Lakes Squirrel Initiative, Copeland Red Squirrel Group, Ennerdale Community Red Squirrel Group and Keswick Red Squirrel Group. They are all part of the Northern Red Squirrels community, and there are many other groups across Cumbria.

I am pleased that DEFRA has committed to a robust and effective grey squirrel action plan, which will seek to control numbers, but I would like some assurance from the Minister, who is a most competent and capable Minister and is most familiar with the countryside, about when we will have a published plan. Does she agree that, in red squirrel strongholds and, I would argue, all Forestry Commission sites, there must be a zero-tolerance approach if we are to provide the red squirrel with a chance of survival and prevent the vast and visible damage to woodlands and the flora and fauna that are so dependent on increased tree coverage?

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and look forward to hearing an update from the Minister on the progress being made on the oral contraceptive and the world-leading research in the development of gene editing. Could she also touch on any plans to reintroduce red squirrels in areas where we feel their survival could be more favourable in future?

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. First, I must thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) for securing the debate and for giving all five Members in the room who are passionate about red squirrels the chance to talk about the subject and everything the Government are doing to ensure that the precious red squirrels survive and thrive. I must thank my hon. Friend for the great deal of work she does in her constituency to champion those creatures. I also thank the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who has done an awful lot of the bones of the work on the framework for the grey squirrel action plan. I must note how much she has done and how passionate she is. Her work has genuinely helped along the whole programme a great deal.

[Rebecca Pow]

I do not know whether you have seen red squirrels, Mr Vickers, but I have seen them up close and personal at a place called Snaizholme in the Yorkshire dales. Once seen, they are never forgotten. I am a massive Beatrix Potter fan as well, so Squirrel Nutkin had a big impact on my childhood. Once one has engaged with red squirrels, one becomes passionate about saving them, as I think is the case with the Members in this room.

This debate is about grey squirrels in Great Britain and their huge impact on the red squirrel. We must remember that grey squirrels are often people's only interaction with nature and wildlife, particularly in urban areas, so we need to tread with care over the subject of controlling them. It is clear that they are an invasive, non-native species to our islands, introduced into this country only in the late 19th century and becoming quickly established across Great Britain. We are only too aware now of the creature's negative impacts on wildlife and habitats.

Expanding grey squirrel populations represents a huge threat to the reds. We have an estimated 2.7 million grey squirrels in Great Britain and they are outcompeting the poor little red squirrels for food. They transmit the awful squirrel pox, which has been touched on, which is fatal to our native species. As a result, grey squirrels have displaced red squirrels throughout much of Great Britain, leading to fragmentation of their populations. We believe there are currently fewer than 39,000 red squirrels in England and 287,000 in Great Britain.

The issue is about more than that, however. Grey squirrels are not only having an impact on the populations of red squirrels, as has been clearly outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland; they are also having a huge impact on trees, the timber industry and the deciduous, ornamental forests. That is because they strip the bark, and managing woodlands and trying to deal with that is a real challenge.

A recent report by the Royal Forestry Society suggested that the cost of the damage is about £37 million a year in lost timber value in England and Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland is right in saying that the timber industry is an important industry that we want to expand. Trees are also important for carbon capture and climate mitigation, but there is also the cost of replacing the trees that squirrels have killed. The World Bank has forecast that the global demand for timber will quadruple by 2050 and that includes in the UK. That is why it is even more important that we can, first, produce as much as we can at home, and secondly, that the crop we plant is sustainable. We have made commitments to that in the environmental improvement plan.

Damage from grey squirrels can also act as a disincentive to planting trees because of the costs of coping with the animals, and that is currently blocking the growth of the domestic timber supply chain. That really needs to be tackled. If we want to have a much more sustainable domestic timber trade, we need to reduce pressure from this invasive, non-native species.

Grey squirrels have an impact on our coniferous forests, which largely supply our timber, but they also have an impact on deciduous forests as well. Once a tree—beech, for example—is destroyed, fungal diseases can take hold, which is another threat to the trees. Clearly, we have to do something about that.

In the light of the significant environmental damage inflicted by grey squirrels, they have been listed as a species of special concern under the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019—there is similar legislation in Scotland—which is an important tool in managing the impact of that invasive species. A refreshed GB invasive non-native species strategy was published this year, which sets out the challenges and what we need to do. It supports other national strategies and provides an integrated approach across Great Britain. Obviously, we need to know what is happening in Northern Ireland as well, and I am pleased to say that it is very much part of the Squirrel Accord.

To get to the nuts and bolts of today's debate, we have a grey squirrel action plan, championed by DEFRA, which sets out our actions to manage the squirrels in England. I can assure Members that that will be published shortly. It is a refreshed five-year plan that will concentrate on advice and incentives for land managers, more collaboration and partnerships, and funding and research as appropriate.

I want to thank the volunteers whose role is critical, as has been highlighted by many in this room today. We will also encourage our land managers to take action. If they are part of the countryside stewardship under the woodland element, they can access the squirrel management supplement. There is funding to help, which many landowners have taken advantage of, and I encourage others to do so.

I have already mentioned the Squirrel Accord, which is chaired by Lord Kinnoull. I recognise his valuable work. Northern Ireland is involved in that, too. We are co-ordinating across all the nations and exploring different methods of management.

Both of my hon. Friends mentioned immunocontraception and the idea of encouraging squirrels to take contraceptives through bait that is taken orally. It is put in the food, and research work is well under way. There is still a way to go, but that valuable work is going on. We have to carry on doing that work and we are committed to that.

My hon. Friends also mentioned pine martens, a natural predator of the grey squirrel. They have been released in the Forest of Dean, where they are being monitored for a programme, quite near where I am in Somerset. That is a useful and interesting study and there will be opportunities there as the population of pine martens grow. Work is still under way on gene drive technology, which can alter genes and eventually help us control the grey squirrel.

Work has been done on developing a vaccine against the horrible squirrel pox, but it is not looking overly promising, to be honest. Work has been stalled for some years, so we prefer to concentrate research efforts on the contraception, which looks more promising in the long term. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn asked about that, so I hope she is happy with that response.

We have 22 large-scale landscape recovery schemes. The second round is opening and there are opportunities there, as well as through the nature recovery projects, to create the right kinds of habitats for our wonderful red squirrels.

I hope I have demonstrated that there is a lot going on across Government. A lot of it has been escalated since my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland was involved in DEFRA. I thank my hon. Friend the Member

for Ynys Môn for the extremely valuable work that she has been doing. The action plan will be published very soon. We are committed to controlling those pernicious grey squirrels.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Housing in Tourist Destinations

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing provision in tourist destinations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. Returning to the Back Benches after two and a half years, I am very grateful that the very first time I apply for a Westminster Hall debate, I get one. I do not know what I have done to deserve it, but I am grateful for the opportunity. I could have chosen to speak about a number of issues affecting my constituents on my first occasion back in Westminster Hall, but housing has to be at the very top of that list.

Housing has long been an issue of concern in Cornwall, but it has without doubt become a crisis in recent years. It is the biggest challenge facing us today, especially in our coastal towns and villages. I am aware that Cornwall is not the only area to face this challenge, and many tourist areas across the UK face similar situations. I am pleased to see so many hon. colleagues present for the debate.

Without question, Cornwall is by far the best part of the United Kingdom. That is why so many visitors descend on us every year, to sample the delights of our duchy. I have always counted myself incredibly fortunate, not only to have been born there but to have lived there my whole life and to get to live for 52 weeks of the year somewhere that many people pay several thousand pounds to spend a couple of weeks each year. Visitors of course provide many economic benefits to Cornwall, but also bring many unintended consequences, with essential parts of our infrastructure being overstretched. The biggest impact that we see from tourism, however, is on our housing.

Let me make it clear at the beginning that this speech is not anti-tourist or anti-tourism. Tourism is vital to the Cornish economy. It is estimated that one in three households in Cornwall gain at least part of their income from tourism, and many thousands of businesses throughout the supply chain rely on visitors. But there has to be a balance, and there is little doubt that in recent years that balance has tipped too far. In providing accommodation for tourism, the impact of the number of second homes and holiday lets is proving damaging to many local communities.

We have seen many instances of local businesses and public services—ranging from hotels to our schools and hospitals—being unable to recruit key staff, with the lack of available housing given as the main reason why they cannot recruit or why people cannot move to start work. The impact is also felt in the cost of housing for local people, whether to rent or buy. With prices pushed up due to the inflated demand caused by tourism, the average price of a house in Cornwall is now £340,000, which is almost 20% higher than the UK average, and yet the typical wage in Cornwall is almost 30% lower than the UK average. The result is that too many local people are simply priced out of the market.

[*Steve Double*]

The situation in the rental market is only slightly better, with rents typically being 10% above the UK average outside London. It was therefore good news that the local housing allowance will be unfrozen and increased, as announced by the Chancellor in last week's autumn statement, and that will be welcome news in Cornwall. The impact of all that is that too many people, especially our young people, have found it impossible to remain in the town or village that they were born and grew up in. Too few properties are available, and they will almost always be unaffordable.

Wider impacts might not be immediately obvious. For example, parish councils are increasingly responsible for more local services. One that contacted me only last week, Mevagissey Parish Council, is an excellent example of one such local council that is trying to do more for its community but is increasingly having to do so with less.

Local councils that do not have the general power of competence are restricted in what they can spend local taxpayers' money on. If there is no specific statutory authority, the council can use what is called free resource. The free resource is calculated by multiplying a sum per elector by the number of electors, with the sum being set every year by Government. With an increasing number of residential properties being repurposed for holiday homes or second homes, there is a consequential reduction in the number of electors and, hence, a reduction in the free resource limit, meaning that parish councils and communities like Mevagissey are increasingly limited in what they can spend their funds on, leading to cuts in services that are often vital for those communities.

To put that in context, I have some statistics, provided by the Office for National Statistics, on the number of second homes or empty properties in communities in my constituency. In Newquay, the surfing capital of the UK and a very large town for Cornwall, 12% of properties are second homes; in St Goran parish, which is renowned for its Cornish gig club, the figure is 19%; in Mevagissey, the second most productive fishing port in Cornwall, the figure is 24%; and in the river port of Fowey, the figure is 28%. Twenty-eight per cent of properties are second homes in Fowey.

It is difficult for local authorities to calculate the numbers of holiday lets, but the numbers will be significant additions to these figures. As a flavour of the scale of the issue, CPRE estimated last year that short-term holiday listings in Cornwall grew by 661% in the five years to September 2021.

I have met Airbnb, our largest short-term letting accommodation provider, on several occasions to discuss how it, as an industry leader, can operate in a more responsible way, because there is a worrying trend, particularly since the pandemic, of landlords finding it far more profitable to put their properties on the holiday rental market over the summer season, leading to a significant rise in the number of no-fault evictions in March and April each year in our coastal communities. That results in many local people needing to find somewhere to live and often having to move out of the community in which they have been living, with all the upheaval that that brings to family life.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and for securing this debate. He has been very vocal about

short-term lets. He wrote to the Minister recently to ask about the introduction of a use class for short-term lets and associated permitted development rights. We had a consultation, which was open until 7 June this year, on that subject. It is now nearly six months later. Does he agree that six months is more than enough time to consider the results of that consultation?

Steve Double: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. I will be coming to that point towards the end of my speech, but I thank him for raising it at this point.

I am confident that the Government's landmark Renters (Reform) Bill will go some way to addressing this, but we need to look closely at the detail of the Bill to ensure that its measures will have no unintended consequences.

To put all of this in perspective, there are currently 18,989 live listings in Cornwall on Airbnb and other platforms. The vast majority of those properties were built to be someone's home and are now no longer available for local people to live in. By comparison, in October 2023, there were just 895 available residential listings in Cornwall on Rightmove. Those holiday rentals are overwhelmingly in the coastal communities and tourist hotspots we are discussing. As I said earlier, we are not against holiday lets. Tourism is vital, but there needs to be a balance. We need more housing that is genuinely affordable to local people, particularly for our key workers.

The situation in Cornwall is serious. It is difficult to understate how bad it is. The perfect storm of increased demand, rocketing prices that outstrip average wages and a growing population has led to record numbers of people being on Cornwall's housing register. Last week, there were 26,136 people waiting to be housed in Cornwall. Then there are those households that are currently without a home: sadly, 857 households in Cornwall are in temporary accommodation, and 438 of them are families with children.

The answer is not just to build more houses. Cornwall Council, under portfolio holder Councillor Olly Monk, has done an excellent job since the Conservatives took the lead in 2021 in accelerating house building: it has built 5,442 houses during that time, 1,322 of which are affordable and earmarked for people with a local connection. But over the past 20 years, Cornwall has had above-national average levels of house building, so our experience shows that we cannot simply build to meet the ever-growing demand. When a market is broken, we need the Government to intervene, and there can be little doubt that the housing market in Cornwall is currently broken.

I applaud the fact that the Government have taken more steps to address the situation than any other Government, often with some enthusiastic support from me and my Cornish MP colleagues. They have taken steps to close the business rate loophole, which allowed second home owners to claim that their properties were holiday lets and therefore qualified for small business rate relief. They thereby paid neither council tax nor business rates and contributed nothing to local services.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which received Royal Assent at the end of the previous Session of Parliament, makes provision for local authorities to charge double council tax on second homes. People who own second homes and do not rent them out to

local people should rightly pay more to make up for the fact that those properties have been removed from primary occupancy. That was the right thing to do, and the Government did it. Cornwall Council is keen to apply the provision as soon as possible because it will bring in an anticipated extra £20 million a year. The register of holiday lets is also welcome, as it will for the first time give local authorities a full and accurate picture of exactly how many properties in the communities they serve are being used as holiday lets. Knowing how many holiday lets there are is the first step towards being able to better manage their number in a community.

The Government have consulted on giving powers to local councils to require a change of planning permission when homes are taken out of residential use and converted to holiday lets. I know that measure is controversial for some of my colleagues, but for me it is simple: if planning permission was granted to build a house to be somebody's home and the new owner wishes to change its use to a holiday let, which is essentially a business use, a change of use should be required. We insist on that for all sorts of other businesses, and I believe the same should apply to holiday lets.

Those are all good steps, and I want to put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State and other Ministers who have listened and taken on board what we have said. The measures, which go towards addressing the issue, have been welcomed in Cornwall, but we need them to be implemented. We cannot allow the situation we have experienced in Cornwall in recent years to be repeated.

Although the measures are not a silver bullet, they provide some answers and enable us to improve the situation significantly. I ask the Minister to provide an update on when we can expect the register of holiday lets and the planning change of use requirements to be implemented, because we need them as soon as possible. I would also be grateful for the Minister's thoughts on the impact that the situation is having on parish councils. What can be done to assist parish councils, which are losing their ability to support their local communities?

As I have laid out, the situation we face in Cornwall is complex and serious. I welcome the steps the Government are taking, but we need to see them implemented as soon as possible, because we need to be able to intervene. The situation we have seen in Cornwall in recent years can never be repeated. We need to work together to ensure that it improves as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I will give you all about six minutes, though we may have to reduce that. I call Samantha Dixon.

2.45 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this very important debate.

The housing crisis we face is affecting the lives of our constituents every single day. Families are unable to afford to buy, and people's mortgages are sky-high. For many young people, home ownership has become a

distant dream. We simply do not have enough houses for people to live in. Sadly, over the last 13 years too few homes have been built, including social and affordable housing. In fact, only 162,000 social rented homes have been delivered, while the same period has seen the sale or demolition of 332,000 of them.

Developers are too often able to wriggle out of their commitments on social and affordable housing in new developments, reducing numbers even further. This is leaving millions in insecure housing, unable to get on the housing ladder or secure tenures. If we want to address the housing crisis, we have to build more, protect people in long-term rentals and ensure that housing is affordable for everyone. Building more social and affordable housing will be vital to kick-starting the economic growth this country needs. I am pleased that my own party truly understands the urgency of the crisis we are in and has a clear plan to make housing a priority.

When looking at the housing crisis, especially in tourist destinations, we cannot ignore the rapid growth of short-term lets. In the City of Chester, we are proud of our tourism status, and we welcome millions of visitors each year who are vital to our local economy. Chester is a charming city, rich with history and culture. From the historic buildings, Roman walls, and the River Dee to one of the biggest tourist attractions on our doorstep, Chester Zoo, there is so much to offer. I would highly recommend a visit to anyone who has not experienced Chester, but good luck with the trains—but I will not get into that issue.

I am not ashamed to plug our wonderful city, as it really has it all. As we approach Christmas, an especially important time for all local and independent businesses, Chester is filled with visitors experiencing the city's Christmas charm. In fact, this year Chester has been recognised in multiple "best Christmas shopping destination" and "best Christmas market" lists. It even took the top spot as *The Times*' prettiest city for Christmas shopping.

It is important to recognise that short-term lets are a part of the infrastructure of the UK's visitor economy. Holiday cottages, holiday homestays and self-catering apartments have long catered for the needs of tourists, people travelling for work or those in need of overnight accommodation. However, the guest accommodation sector has changed significantly over the last 15 years in England and across the world. In particular, there has been a major expansion in the number and range of accommodation suppliers operating in the market. At the heart of this change has been the emergence of the sharing economy and the growth of digital platforms. It is important to strike the right balance and address the long and short-term impacts of this expansion.

In Chester and many other communities across the country, short-term lets are eroding the supply of housing in the private rented sector, which in turn is driving up rent prices for hard-pressed families. As someone who knocks on doors in my city, it grieves me to see former social housing, sold under right to buy into the private rented sector, now being used as short-term lets and to know that this supply of accommodation has essentially vanished.

Around a quarter of renters in the UK spend more than 40% of their income on rent, compared with just 5% of renters in Germany. This situation needs to be addressed urgently. Although I have been a Member of

[Samantha Dixon]

Parliament for just short of a year, I followed this issue closely while I was a councillor for the city centre in Chester. I was proud that while I served as council leader we started to build council houses for the first time in 40 years.

In all this time, not enough has been done to prevent the inevitable and address the specific issue of short-term lets. The message is clear: local authorities are struggling to cope with high concentrations of short-term holiday lets. They need to be given the powers to protect the sustainability and cohesion of their communities. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay is right: it is hard for local authorities to estimate how many properties have been given over to this use currently.

Will the Minister say what plans the Government have to address the wider housing crisis that my constituents face? What plans do the Government have to address the complex and unique challenges that arise with the rapid expansion of short-term lets in tourism cities such as Chester with a thriving visitor economy?

2.51 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing this debate on housing provision in tourist destinations.

Today's debate is timely. We must ask ourselves: do we have the right balance? I think most people in this room would understand the answer. Do we have the right balance between local people, who want to get on the housing ladder, and property owners who are looking to buy a second or even third home? Do we have the right balance between having enough visitor accommodation options in popular areas and ensuring that local workers have somewhere to live? Finally, do we have the right balance on regulation? Are the Government's proposals going to make a real difference and make more homes available in tourist destinations? Or will we still be debating this issue in one, two, three or 10 years' time? We cannot afford to be doing that.

To be clear, I absolutely want to see a thriving tourism industry in my corner of Devon. I am proud to represent East Devon; my home county is a desirable place to live. Many people visit and immediately fall in love with the place. They may choose to come back year after year, staying in a variety of accommodation options, such as bed and breakfasts, seaside hotels and town centre short-term lets. Others visit and choose to lay down their roots there, not least for retirement.

One thing is for sure: visitors can always be sure of a warm Devon welcome. I head up the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism, and I know from first-hand experience that the industry has put on a brave face this year to continue to provide outstanding service and a warm welcome to visitors. That is why it was very welcome to hear that the Chancellor's autumn statement announced an extension of 75% business rates relief until 2025.

Devon and Cornwall are dependent on the summer months for tourism income, and the business rates relief extension is very good news after a summer in which visitor numbers were down by a fifth. The seasonality

of our tourism has knock-on effects on the local housing market. We are all too familiar with parts of Devon and Cornwall resembling ghost towns in the middle of winter. It is a really sad sight to see, when strolling down the seafront, second homes and summer holiday lets lying empty.

In 2019, 14% of annual visitor spend was in August, with 5% of spending occurring in January. Data from Cornwall Council shows that in some parts of that county 40% of properties are used as second homes. Without question, seasonality and second-home ownership combine into a noticeable problem in the region. Although I fully respect someone's right to purchase a second home, including those used for short-term holiday lets, it is having a seismic impact on our local housing stock. Homes for local people to long-term rent and buy have simply become unaffordable in some areas. An easy way to assess the problem is to compare the average house price with the average salary of residents. In my constituency, East Devon, that ratio is 12.7; in Tiverton and Honiton, it is 10.6; in North Devon, it is 12.2; and in Totnes, it is 14.3. Bear in mind that the average ratio in England and Wales is 8.9.

What can the Government do to get the balance right on policy and regulation so that people can get on the housing ladder in tourist destinations? First, I welcome the Government closing tax loopholes for short-term holiday lets. It was a hard-fought campaign by Conservative MPs in the south-west to close the loophole that allowed second-home owners to avoid paying council tax by registering as a holiday rental, signing up for business rates, and then receiving business rates relief. To be business rated, properties will need to be available to let commercially for 140 days a year and actually let commercially for 70 days a year. That levels the playing field.

Secondly, the Government's proposals for greater regulation include a registration scheme, which would help local authorities to monitor compliance with key health and safety regulations and give them much-needed data on activity in their area. The scheme will not just be another burdensome form-filling exercise for property-owners: the data will be critical in helping local authorities as they look to use new planning powers to restrict the way in which homes can be flipped into short-term lets. The Government consulted on the proposals over the summer but have yet to respond to the consultation. I urge the Minister to press on.

Thirdly, I believe that the Government can go further. When we build new homes, there is a risk that they get snapped up by property investors to rent out as short-term letting accommodation, which is why the Government must not only build new homes in the right places but make sure that they get into the right hands. Councils that can demonstrate a high number of holiday lets and second homes in their area should be able to reserve a percentage of new builds for people with a local, family or economic connection to that area.

At the moment, local planning authorities can impose on new developments a planning condition called a local connection test, but I am not aware of councils readily using that power to make sure that local people get first dibs on new homes specifically in tourist destinations. That is why I would like to see councils being able to reserve a percentage of new builds for people with a local, family or economic connection to

the area. Under my proposal, the purchaser would have to meet conditions, such as living or working within 25 miles of the property, being born within 25 miles of the property, or having a care network within 25 miles of the property.

Ultimately, we need to strike a better balance, to help local people to rent or buy a home while also supporting tourism.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend is making an incredibly eloquent speech, with some important points about balance. One of the things that I hope the Minister will talk about is the need for constituencies such as my hon. Friend's and mine—especially as mine is an island—to use exceptional circumstances to enable us more easily to design a housing policy that protects our landscape, which we need for quality of life and our visitor economy, while at the same time allowing us to relentlessly prioritise our local housing need. The one thing that we all share, apart from living in very beautiful parts of the UK, is that our tourism economy often means that our GDP per head is lower than it is in other parts of the UK, so it is sometimes more difficult for people to buy.

Simon Jupp: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. He represents a beautiful constituency which, as an island, has its own unique issues, and I really respect that.

We need to strike a fairer balance so that local people can work in vital local industries such as tourism and hospitality without having to travel miles to get to work. Without workers behind the bar, in the kitchen or at the high street till, the hospitality and tourism industries simply would not exist in constituencies such as mine. Today's debate goes to the heart of the sustainability of our communities and the south-west. That is why it is so important that we get the balance right.

2.58 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this debate. Also, I welcome the new Minister, who is the 16th Housing Minister of this Government; the fact that there is such churn in the Department may well be part of the reason why we are struggling so much.

There is a danger that this debate could descend into the sketch about the four Yorkshiremen, as we all talk about the challenges we face. Nevertheless, I will speak as a York woman—at the centre of that—and say a little about York. We have a thriving tourism industry in our city and we really value it. Last year, 8.9 million visitors came to York. Tourism creates 17,000 jobs in the city and is a vital part of our economy, generating £1.7 billion. The city centre generates £1.2 billion. We know how important tourism is to our post-industrial city; in the last 40 years or so, it has really played an important role in our economy.

As everyone has said, though, tourism has its serious consequences. For York, the situation is descending, as many colleagues have said of other areas, into a dire housing crisis. There are consequences from having significant levels of tourism. We can look, first, at house prices in York, where demand outstrips supply. We know that has a real impact on affordability, the ratio

for which is 10.9 in York. Last year, the cost of housing in the city went up 23%, pricing people out of local housing. York has the fourth highest rent in the country behind Oxford, Brighton and London.

Some people cannot get into social housing because we simply do not have the supply. If they have to go into the private rented sector, in the BRMA—the broad rental market area—people get just £650 when they are having to pay £1,045 for a two-bedroom property. Will the Minister ensure that there is a deep dive into what is happening with the BMRA? The price is set around such a broad region, and the lower prices in North Yorkshire mean that York is more of an outlier than the other high-priced areas because of the differential in prices. As a result, people cannot go into the private rented sector, so sadly have to go into hostel accommodation or on to the streets. That has to change.

With such high demand, rent is rising faster than the national average. The average increase was 4.9% in England last year and 6.3% in York. It is becoming more inaccessible to rent or to buy and, as so many colleagues have said, that is partly because of the rise in short-term holiday lets. According to AirDNA, we have more than 2,000 such lets in the city, with a 29% increase between August 2021 and August 2023. As a result, we are struggling. We need to bring in regulation.

It is 891 days since I first raised this issue in the House and we are no further forward. It has been 355 days since I introduced a private Member's Bill in the previous Session. As we heard, the consultation closed on 7 June but we are still waiting for the outcome. Will the Minister say when the Government will bring forward the response to the consultation and legislate to help constituents like mine?

We have heard about using local revenue to address this issue, but there is also national revenue. We have to make sure that whatever system is introduced is compatible with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, because many people do not pay tax on their property to the Treasury. Some estimate that as much as £6 billion is missing. There is a lot we can do with £6 billion, so we need to address that deficit.

There is a particular issue with the impact of our visitor economy on housing. Will the Minister—and, indeed, the shadow Minister—consider setting up a taskforce to look at the specific issues that press down on the urban, rural and coastal communities with a prevalent visitor economy to ensure that we can address the issues in such areas? The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay mentioned the impact on the local economy—people are clearly needed in the jobs but unable to live in the area—and our vital public services are not able to provide the staffing required to serve the local community. We also know about the impact on our communities.

Finally, I want to raise the issue of York's local plan. We are still waiting for its approval. Next year we will mark 70 years as a city, without a local plan. Developers are taking advantage of the lack of a plan and, as many colleagues have said, building high-value accommodation when we have a real need for social and affordable housing in the city. I ask for that plan be expedited so that we can get on and start developing the housing that the city needs.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): A beautifully timed speech, might I say.

3.4 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing this important debate. As always, I agree entirely with him; our constituencies share so many characteristics—although I do dispute where the best tourist destination is.

North Devon has wonderful beaches, the UK's only surf reserve, remote moorlands and beautiful countryside. It is unsurprising that there is high demand to live in what the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities called a "very attractive" part of the country. The trend accelerated during and after the pandemic, particularly with the stamp duty incentives that enabled many to purchase additional homes by the coast. We are incredibly proud of our tourism sector, which contributes significantly to our local economy. The hospitality sector contributes £229 million and helps to employ more than 8,000 residents in North Devon.

That is all positive news for our economy, but it takes a toll on our housing market. When I talk to business owners in North Devon, they tell me that one of their biggest challenges is staffing, and that the main reason why is the lack of affordable housing that is available for local people to live in all year round. That sentiment is relayed to me across all sectors. Teachers cannot afford to live in the same areas as the schools they teach in, and with property prices more than 10 times higher than average incomes, health and social care workers in particular have little hope of being able to buy or rent a place to live. Even high-earning professions such as dentistry are affected, as demonstrated by the company mydentist being unable to recruit despite offering a £20,000 golden handshake to entice dentists to move into the area.

Housing is the root cause of so many problems in North Devon. I will not say it is a magic wand, but if we freed up and delivered new housing supply, it would allow people to live, work and, most importantly, play a part in the community that they grew up in.

I have spoken before about how the planning system does not account for or factor in the challenges that face rural communities, but I want to focus on a particular problem that is acute in tourist destinations: short-term holiday lets and Airbnbs. In North Devon we have seen a 67% drop in the availability of long-term rentals since the end of the pandemic. Swathes of landlords have evicted their tenants from long-term homes to flip them into short-term lets, and they continue to do so. This week it was reported that the rate of section 21 evictions in Devon was higher than last year.

I know that short-term lets and Airbnbs bring a range of benefits to our tourism economy, but they really have affected the availability and affordability of local rental housing and have inevitably inflated house prices. We must rebalance our housing market so that local people can live and work in the area. I know that the issue of short-term lets will involve cross-Department collaboration; to rebalance the long and short-term rental market, we urgently need to look at the taxation inequalities between those two sectors that were introduced by George Osborne and came fully into effect during the pandemic.

I place so much emphasis on short-term lets because they are properties that would otherwise be let to local people for them to live in all year round. At this time of year, so many of them are empty, creating ghost communities. We have started to make strides with the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, and I welcome the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's consultation on a registration scheme for short-term lets, which is a crucial first step for communities to have their say on the availability of housing to rent or buy in their local area. However, I join colleagues by asking, as with so many consultations, what is happening now? I know the consultation has been completed, and my understanding is that there was much support for a scheme, which is now long overdue despite being supported by the industry.

Fundamentally, there needs to be an increase in housing overall, but not just any housing. Indeed, I oppose housing targets because North Devon had built to target, but there is still nowhere affordable for anyone to live. The current preferred design for local housing seems to be massive executive homes, which push property prices ever higher. Communities cannot function without carers, teachers, doctors and nurses, yet they are being forced out because there is simply nowhere for them to live. It is not right that families are about to spend their second Christmas in a holiday park because of the lack of homes.

When the Devon housing commission visited, it observed that we have net migration of retired people into North Devon, and the housing that is built also reflects that trend. Indeed, why would people not want to retire somewhere so stunning? But that puts further pressure on public services, which struggle to fill vacancies due to the housing situation. Yes, we need to build more houses, but the crisis is urgent and we need quick solutions.

There are existing derelict buildings that could be converted into housing. There are liveable areas above shops that could be converted into flats, but that has been stopped because of an 84-year flood risk. People need housing now and every option should be looked into, as the situation will only get worse without intervention. Given this opportunity, I commend to the Minister my council's Ilfracombe proposal. In North Devon, we are at risk of creating a cross between a care home and a holiday park, and we do not have the staff for either. Tourism is essential to our economy, but it cannot be at the expense of local people finding a home. We can and must find a balance.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Sorry, but I have to drop the time limit to five minutes. I call Tim Farron.

3.9 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Sir Charles. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for bringing a really important debate to this place.

The value of tourism is enormous. I am proud to represent the Lake district, the Yorkshire and Westmorland dales and many other beautiful places that do not happen, for the time being, to be in a national park. We are proud of the fact that there are 18 million visitors to our area every year, that 60,000 jobs in Cumbria are

created and sustained by tourism and that there is a £3.5 billion economy. There is much to be proud of, and we also take seriously our role as curators and stewards of this beautiful landscape that millions of people come to visit—it is a privilege for us to take on that role.

However, as right hon. Members and hon. Members have pointed out, we cannot ignore the damaging impact that the lack of regulation has on our housing sector. A consequence is the simple fact that, in our communities, the average house prices are 12 times the average incomes, which is the highest rate in the north of England. During the pandemic, 80% of house sales were to the second home market. Over 50% of the homes in the town of Coniston are not lived in full time and, in the villages in the Langdales—Chapel Stile and Elterwater—over 80% of homes are not lived in.

We have seen the number of short-term lets grow significantly, particularly over the last three years, as well as the eating up of homes that were lived in by the workforce. The Government rightly brought in the moratorium on evictions during the pandemic. They then ended it a year later, and within a matter of weeks, we saw an explosion of people being expelled and evicted from their homes under section 21, with those homes becoming Airbnbs. In the first year following the ending of the eviction ban, there was a 32% increase in the number of holiday lets in South Lakeland alone. A massive number became even more massive, and those were homes that people had been living in.

We have seen section 21 being used by landlords to move from long-term let to short-term let. I am very encouraged that Sykes Cottages has agreed that it will take no properties on to its books that have been made available because somebody was evicted in that way. Airbnb and other platforms have not said that, and I challenge them to follow that example.

The human impact has been massive, with families being uprooted and divided. I am thinking of a couple in Ambleside: he was a chef and she was a teaching assistant, and they had two kids—one was in school and one in nursery. They were evicted from their home; their home became an Airbnb; they had to leave the whole area; their kids were taken out of school; and they have to give up their work and find something else in an entirely different place.

As for the impact on hospitality and tourism, 63% of hospitality and tourism businesses in Cumbria cannot meet the capacity of the demand they have, because they simply do not have the staff to do so.

In the care sector, more than around a third of the beds in our hospitals are full of people we cannot get out of hospitals and into care because there are not the carers. Why is that? Because there is nowhere for the carers to live. The knock-on effect on our hospitals, A&Es, ambulance response times and every part of our health service is huge and tangible.

People who have been offered decent jobs in health and education in our communities have to give back their word once they have checked out the local housing market. I was at the wonderful St Martin and St Mary Primary School in Windemere, headed by the fantastic Mr Towe and his great team. They have lost two to three classes because of a reduction in the number of people who live in those communities full time, and they are not the only school that has faced that impact.

The new builds that we see are not really affordable, so what are the answers? We talk about affordable housing, but “affordable housing” often means 80% of the market value. Well, that is great: a £400,000 home rather than a £500,000 home—a fat lot of good that is to my communities. What must we do? We must have the new planning categories, including the one that the Government have promised in order to make short-term lets a separate category of planning use, giving councils and national parks the power to maintain homes for local people. Like other Members on both sides, I want them to crack on and do what they promised by bringing in the new category of planning use.

I also want the Government to do what they have so far failed to agree to do, which is to make second homes a separate category of planning use. I urge the Government to give national parks and local authorities the enforcement power to make sure that they can retain homes for local communities and local families. When we build new homes, let us give our national parks and councils the powers to enforce and to ensure that every single home that is built is affordable for local people and people who will live locally.

We have to remember that these beautiful places exist in a broken housing market, and that we will see ourselves with broken communities as a consequence of that broken market. We lose our young people, and the most tragic thing is that only the very few wealthiest can return. I urge the Minister to act now to save communities like mine.

3.14 pm

Cheryl Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for securing this important debate. It is brilliant to see him back on the Back Benches adding his voice on this important issue, as he always does behind the scenes. I welcome the Housing Minister to his place. I feel sorry for any Housing Minister because when they go into their post, they know that a swarm of Conservative MPs from Devon and Cornwall is about to descend on them to discuss this issue. I thank him for being there and taking this on.

I probably could have given the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay word for word. This issue is not new for us, but it has been growing over the past 20 years, and it became instantly acute after covid, for many reasons. We were in this room in May when my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) had a similar debate on short-term holiday lets and the planning system. I looked back at my speech from that day and I could probably repeat it again.

This issue became most acute to me after covid when I had a village constituency surgery in St Agnes on the north coast of my constituency. Within two hours, I had had 15 constituents and families through the doors, and every single one was either being evicted or their rent was going up so much that they could not stay. Pretty much all those properties were going to be flipped into Airbnbs. Since then, as a cohort of south-west Conservative MPs, we have been lobbying the Government to make changes in this area to ensure that we do not let this continue to happen.

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

I am so grateful that we have closed the business rates loophole, which has been referred to, and that the Government have consulted on a register for holiday lets and change of use for planning. Incidentally, we talked to the industry about potentially licensing holiday lets. That would not be practical or supported, so the register is absolutely what everybody wants to see happen. That makes it easy for Government to go down that road.

Earlier this year, I was invited to a parish meeting—not a parish council meeting—in Veryan on the south coast of my constituency, where a development had recently been put in place and another was proposed. The area was not particularly ideal for the village, but it was the only one on offer at the time. The room was absolutely packed with residents. They were not nimbys asking for this not to happen, but residents saying, “Will this development really be for local people? Will we really see local families being able to raise their children in this village?” Incidentally, almost 80% of the neighbouring village of Portloe is made up of second homes. There are 90 properties, and only one child lives in the whole village.

If we do not do something about this situation soon, our communities will be stripped back. Thankfully, in Veryan, they are twisting and turning and doing everything they can to ensure that those properties will be for local families, but it should not be that difficult for them. Parishes are having to put in all sorts of covenants and measures in perpetuity to ensure that a few years down the line, the homes will not get picked up and moved on to Airbnb.

We can do something about this. We are talking about bricks and mortar. In Cornwall, we have loads of bricks and mortar. We are building houses for the future. We have loads of empty properties above shops in our town centres. Let us look at all the properties we have; either something is going to be a home or it is not, and we can start to differentiate. We know how many homes we need, and we know what everyone else wants to use for an investment. We do not have to demonise investment, but we need to differentiate between the two, so that we always have enough family homes for the people who live there.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for setting the scene so well and for leading the debate. I know his constituency has roots in tourism—he said that very clearly—so it is great to be here to support him in his plea to the Government for these changes.

Although the rules on planning and local housing authorities differ between the devolved Administrations, and the Minister will not have a key role to play for us in Northern Ireland, I sympathise with the situation facing the constituents of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay in relation to housing provision. It is always good to be here to give the Northern Ireland perspective, as I do in all the debates I come to.

In my Strangford constituency, Ards and North Down Borough Council has a key economic goal, which is that tourism provides jobs and creates wage packets for people. The theme for the council is “work, live and play”,

because that is what we want—we want people to work in the constituency, live in the constituency and play in the constituency, so that is what we try to achieve.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and with that in mind, Strangford is undoubtedly, without any fear of question, the most beautiful constituency in the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is because of Strangford lough. It is because it is an area of outstanding natural beauty and has a site of special scientific interest. It is a gorgeous place to be. Some of the Minister’s colleagues have already made the journey over to my constituency to enjoy it, and they tell me they will be back, so I look forward to that.

Back home, local councils are advised to reflect the local need resulting from the demand for second homes across Northern Ireland. Our main priority is, of course, providing local homes for local people, but there is no doubting the contribution that short-term lettings make to the economy. As the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay said, companies such as Airbnb have become so popular in providing short stays in many constituencies across the UK, including mine.

In my constituency, we have seen a definite increase in the number of Airbnb-type stays, and the stats prove that. It is mainly in the town of Newtownards, where the transport links to Belfast city centre are fantastic. Down the local peninsula where I live, we have seen the installation of small home lets in villages such as Ballyhalbert, which overlooks Burr Point, the most easterly part of Northern Ireland and, I think, of all of Ireland. In addition, there is a wonderful B&B in the village of Ballywalter, where I was brought up, right beside the beach, near lots of local family-run shops. These are things that attract. That is why people want to buy their houses there, stay there and play there.

It is worth noting that all tourist accommodation in Northern Ireland must be certified by Tourism NI, which is an independent non-departmental public body of the Department for the Economy. Even though he is not the Minister responsible for it, it would be great to know for the benefit of residents back home whether he has had any discussions with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland on ensuring that there is proper regulation of the impact that short lets are having on local constituents’ ability to get private housing. It is important when we have these debates that we share what we know with other regions of the United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the United Kingdom in our social housing allocation. In England, most local authorities include residency requirements in their housing allocation schemes. The housing selection scheme in Northern Ireland does not refer to local connection, enabling residents needing urgent rehoming a slightly better chance, as they can be considered anywhere across the Province.

The hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) talked about the need to find a happy medium, and how true that is. We must ensure that local people have better access to affordable housing in their communities and can live there but also that local economies can thrive within the tourist industry. Local councils must be given the necessary powers to monitor these situations, and the proposed planning provisions would support sustainable communities, supporting local people, local businesses and local services.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Derek Thomas—sorry, Jim; I thought you were sitting down.

Jim Shannon: It is clear that the Government have taken steps to address these issues in England, but it would be great to know that communication is under way to assess the situation further afield in the devolved nations and to share ideas, strategies and planning laws, so that we take a united approach in ensuring local housing provision for people in all constituencies of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are always better together.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Sorry for my premature calling of Derek Thomas; I saw some movement.

3.23 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I appreciate the warning, Sir Charles; I would never want to interrupt the flow of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing the debate. It is great to have him back on the Back Benches, continuing his battles for West Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon and the rest of the south-west.

There is a reason why the areas that we live in and represent become tourist destinations: they are beautiful. Most—I think over 80%—of my constituency is designated in some way or another. People flock down to it. I know that it is the most beautiful part of the country, because I get messages from colleagues all year round telling me that they are down in my patch or have just been there.

It is inevitable, because of the places we represent, that tourists will turn up, and they are welcome. Jobs are created because of the services they need and tourists support rural businesses. Many of our rural shops would probably struggle if tourists did not support them when they visit. Tourists' contribution to the economy is important, and there is the effect on construction. We have also seen, particularly since covid, that tourists become residents. They purchase property because they enjoy what they see and discover that they can work from home, so they come and live in our beautiful part of the world. Again, that brings jobs and investment and supports rural businesses and construction.

This is not a new thing. I did my apprenticeship 35 years ago as a Cornish mason. I am probably the only one in this place who is a Cornish mason—I am not a freemason; I used to charge. We used to work with slate, stone and obviously the wet trades. Most of my winters were spent working to support the tourist industry or working for people who had purchased properties and were planning to move down. This issue is not new, but it does carry consequences, which we all know of and have heard about this afternoon. It is true that successive Governments have largely allowed free market principles to determine the destiny of these communities. I am glad that this Government are recognising that the situation cannot carry on and intervention is needed.

As we heard, our communities have been hollowed out. Pubs, schools, post offices and shops have closed. The lights are turned off in the winter; that is common in some villages in the area I represent. More importantly and more concerning, older, vulnerable people become even more isolated and alone—that is really tragic, and if Members are interested in that, I have a debate on the subject next week. The Government have introduced

various ways to deal with this issue, including Help to Buy, stamp duty premiums and levelling up and regeneration, which we have heard about a lot today.

The truth is that a secure home is one of the most important things we can deliver for our constituents. The stress levels of families, as well as their health, their children's education and family wellbeing are all impacted by whether they have a secure and affordable home. That is the only reason why we are all here this afternoon. Ensuring the right balance of local homes and holiday accommodation brings with it many benefits, as we work to strengthen local communities and create places to live, work and raise a family.

Those of us representing tourist areas face a challenge, but that challenge offers huge opportunities to restore communities who feel left behind. Ramping up house building in the right places to meet local need is a really important way of addressing skills shortages and supporting pubs, schools, post offices and so on. Perhaps the Minister would like to have a word with planning departments, which seem to stand in the way of our seeing houses built in parts of the land that are ideal for supporting rural communities. Maybe he could encourage them to help rather than hinder the building of the right homes in the right places to support those communities.

Building homes ramps up skills and enables young people to stay in the local area and be part of their community, having a secure, well-paid job. Historic England has just released an important study about where the skills shortages are across every constituency, focusing particularly on existing homes and how we resolve those shortages. We must also fix rural service funding. If we fix the funding of rural areas, recognising that tourism demands certain services that other places perhaps do not need, putting pressure on the NHS, policing and so on, we can begin to build good, strong communities.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson. You have no more than 10 minutes, please.

3.28 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this important debate. I understand that this issue particularly impacts his constituency, a hub of tourism. I quite enjoyed hearing the Cornwall MPs arguing about which part of Cornwall is the best. I have to admit that I have never visited Cornwall, but I do have a brother who lives in Plymouth, so I am sure I will be in that part of the world soon.

Short-term lets and rentals are a devolved matter for Holyrood to legislate on, and the UK Government would benefit greatly from replicating the Scottish Government's strides in establishing a licence system for short-term lets, which I will outline in greater detail later. The hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) were correct in raising not only the essential role of short-term lets in the tourist economy—both in their individual constituencies and across the four nations—but the need to balance that against the impact on local people.

[*Ms Anum Qaisar*]

Scotland's growing tourism sector is a success story. For a variety of different reasons, many of those who visit my beautiful country choose short-term lets over traditional hotels as their preferred accommodation. Sir Charles, if you will indulge me, as a proud Scot—and the only Scot in the room, as far as I am aware—I will outline how popular Scotland is as a tourist destination. I will also raise the differences in people's attitudes post pandemic, because we also have to consider the impact post pandemic when we talk about this issue.

In 2022, Scotland saw a strong rebound in international travel. A total of 3.2 million visits were made to Scotland by international visitors, who stayed for 29.7 million nights and spent £3,151 million. Scotland is not only attracting people from across the globe; it is fair to say that, since the pandemic, people's attitudes towards holidays, including short breaks, have changed significantly. Whereas European cities were seen as the go-to for holiday destinations before, people across the rest of the UK now see Scotland as a destination. In 2022, they took 13.5 million overnight trips in Scotland, with 40.9 million nights and £3.4 billion spent overall.

I take this opportunity to place on the record my thanks to the VisitScotland team for all they do to advocate Scotland and to promote it as a tourist destination. The team has found five segments of tourists who are most likely to visit Scotland and the type of accommodation they would stay in. The five are adventure-seekers, who are folk who would be looking to climb our stunning Munros; curious travellers, who are folk who want to take in the deep history of Scotland; engaged sightseers, who are folk who like to wander around our many beautiful wee villages; food-loving culturalists, who are folk who want to try our uniquely Scottish foods—from potato scones, to Cullen skink, to my personal favourite, Irn-Bru; and natural advocates, who are folk who enjoy being outdoors and exploring, for example, the numerous parks Scotland has to offer. VisitScotland has found that the people in the first four groups are most likely to stay in hotels, whereas most natural advocates are likely to stay in self-catering accommodation and short-term lets. For various reasons, hotels are not always an option for some types of tourists, and it is important that legislation reflects that, so that people are not priced out of their local communities.

Like the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay, I am not anti-tourist—the SNP is not anti-tourist—but it is important that protections are in place. I was taken aback when he said that 12% of homes in the UK lie empty as second homes. I was particularly interested to hear the hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) raise concerns about seasonality and homes lying empty during the winter months. The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) also raised that concern and spoke about there being ghost communities at this time of year.

I am delighted that so many people want to visit Scotland, even if they do sometimes struggle to understand our accent. But with so many people visiting, the demand for accommodation has also increased. Although, that demand has traditionally been met by hotels, we are seeing a huge rise in the number of short-term lets. Although that has, of course, brought economic benefit to communities, it has also placed immense pressures

on local housing provision, and the issues have been raised by the hon. Members for North Devon, for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) talked about a parish meeting and raised concerns about a village with only one child and with folk being priced out.

For both rural and urban communities, the rapid rise of platforms such as Airbnb has meant that families are often priced out of areas they call home. In Scotland, this was particularly prevalent in our highlands and islands communities, but also for those seeking to get on to the property ladder in cities such as Edinburgh. Following three public consultations, the Scottish Parliament passed legislation in January 2022 introducing a licensing scheme for short-term lets. From October this year, it has become mandatory for all short-term lets to be registered with the local authority. The legislation gave local authorities the power to designate control areas to manage high concentrations of short-term lets. Within such areas, a host needs to seek planning permission to change the use of a home.

Separately, the Scottish Government will continue to look at the tax treatment of short-term lets. Alongside implementing greater control over which properties become short-term lets, they have introduced licensing safeguards for electrical standards and gas certificate compliance to provide assurances for guests. Those measures, which bring short-term lets in line with other accommodation, such as hotels and caravan parks, ensure that such businesses are well managed.

Scottish Government Ministers also met short-term let businesses from across Scotland to ensure that the views of the sector were heard and integrated in planning policy. The progress made by the Scottish Government in this area sees increased devolution to local councils, allowing them to better react to the needs of local people. The powers have been successfully implemented in Edinburgh, which introduced the first control area designed to manage the high number of short-term lets. Devolving these powers to the local level puts power in the hands of local authorities so that they can strike a balance between meeting the needs of communities and promoting tourism. The licensing scheme also brings in additional revenue for councils, allowing them to fund the management of the scheme.

Striking that balance is so important. The domino effect is that tourism is a significant sector in Scotland and a major employer, representing 7% of all workers. However, despite successful growth, the industry still faces many challenges. Scotland continues to struggle with the disastrous impacts of Brexit, with the industry facing worker shortages. We will continue to push for immigration powers to be devolved to Scotland, and we echo the calls made by UK Hospitality Scotland and the Scottish Tourism Alliance to set up a special Scottish visa for hospitality staff to help meet that demand.

The licensing scheme brought forward in Scotland offers a model that maintains the benefits that short-term lets bring, while protecting the needs of local communities that would otherwise be displaced by the increased prevalence of short-term lets. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I highly encourage the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government's lead in this regard.

3.38 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Charles. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. I also welcome the Housing Minister to his role. Reference has been made to the rapidity of changes in the identity of the Housing Minister. One wonders whether, with such a rapid turnover in the occupants of the Housing Department, it should be sponsored by Airbnb.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay set out very well the challenges facing his constituency: the pressure on the housing market, the issues with recruitment, and the stark disparity between the average house price and the average wage in Cornwall. He was right to welcome the increase in local housing allowance and to mention the pressure placed on parish councils—all local authorities will recognise that.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) showed what an excellent Member of Parliament she is and what an excellent council leader she was in bringing back council housing. She now has a third role as an excellent advocate for the Chester tourist board, because she spoke glowingly about the wonderful attractions in Chester. However, she really identified the nub of the issue, which is how right to buy has turned into private rented sector lets, which have turned into short-term lets. That is really at the root of the problems we are discussing. As an MP with a neighbouring constituency, I can see that the pressures Chester is experiencing are having an impact on the wider housing market.

The hon. Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) spoke about the balance that needs to be struck between the competing demands in his area. That is absolutely the right way to look at this issue.

It was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). She spoke in stark terms about the pressures in York, with a 23% increase in house prices and the fourth highest rents in the country. However, she also talked about a £6 billion tax deficit—money that is not reaching the Exchequer—and I am sure my colleagues in the shadow Treasury team will be looking at that with interest. She also made the important point that this is a cross-departmental issue and that a taskforce approach should be considered. I will certainly take that point back to others in the team.

Cross-departmental approaches were also raised by the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), so it is absolutely clear that there is more than one tool in the arsenal that we can use. She also mentioned the pressures this issue puts on education and dentistry, and I think we all recognise the pressures that those parts of the public sector face.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about average house prices in his constituency being 12 times average incomes. I think we can all see why it is absolutely impossible for young people, in particular, to get on the housing ladder when they face these issues. The hon. Member was also right to raise the impact these issues have on recruitment in the hospitality and care sectors.

The hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) also all spoke with great passion and

sincerity about the issues this subject brings up. To summarise the crux of those issues, it is clear that the housing problems in tourist hotspots have spiralled over the last decade and that the Government have not got a handle on the situation. As a result, local people are facing deep problems in accessing affordable housing.

Those who live year round in some of the most beautiful parts of the country are being squeezed out by the owners of second homes and the proliferation of short-term lets. People who have grown up in an area, who work there and who are the bedrock of the community now feel secondary to those who spend just a portion of their time there. I think we can all see how that direction of travel has hollowed out communities, and the consequences that can flow from that.

Having said that, as other Members have said, there is clearly a balance to be struck—one I think we all appreciate. Tourism is crucial to local economies, and indeed to regional and national economies, and many local communities rely on an influx of visitors to keep their economies going. In some places, tourism is the No.1 income generator, and we cannot ignore that. The availability of accommodation is also an important element in attracting people to visit a particular destination.

However, I reiterate that a balance has to be struck. For these destinations to thrive, there needs to be a community that underpins the hospitality at attractions; otherwise, who will be there to run the services that both visitors and locals rely on? Unfortunately, I think that that balance has got out of kilter in recent years, and the consequences that flow from that have been set out today.

Demand for housing has spiralled in many tourist destinations across the country. It was reported that, in the south-west alone, 3,000 new holiday and second homes were listed during the pandemic, while the number of homes listed for normal letting halved and rents increased significantly. In Wales during that period, there was a 5% increase in the number of holiday lets, with average rents rising from £155 to £181 a week. As a consequence, house prices in those areas have spiked.

The ONS reported in September 2021 that house prices were rising at three times the national rate in some of these areas—places such as Conwy, north Devon and Richmondshire have experienced increases of more than 20%, continuing trends that had begun in the pandemic. A report published today by the CPRE shows that demand for short-term lettings grew by 661% in Cornwall in the five years to September 2021, and by 1,231% in South Lakeland between 2016 and 2020. Nationally, the number of short-term lets has increased by more than 1,000% since 2015. This is not just one part of the country; it is north, south, east and west—every place that has significant tourism activity is seeing the same. For many people in many parts of the country, the cost of purchasing a home is already out of reach; in these tourist areas, that dream is even more unobtainable for too many people.

This issue stretches far beyond the challenge of actual home ownership. In Cornwall, for example, 15,000 families are on waiting lists for social housing, which, coincidentally, is the number of properties being marketed as holiday lets. In South Lakeland, roughly half the families in need of social housing could be accommodated in the properties that are made exclusively available for holiday lets. In Cumbria more widely, the 4% decline in privately

[Justin Madders]

rented properties has coincided with a 14% increase in social housing waiting lists since 2016. In Devon, it is clear that short-term lets are making problems worse, with 4,000 homes taken out of the private rented sector, but 11,000 added to the short-term lets sector since 2016. Those damning statistics lay bare the impact of what happens when the balance is out of kilter. Does the Minister accept that there is a clear link between the number of private rented properties and short-term lets?

It is beyond doubt that the deregulated nature of the short-term letting sector is deeply problematic. There needs to be an overhaul of the regulatory framework. We would also argue that there is now a watertight case for giving local authorities that are struggling to cope with this issue the necessary powers to protect the sustainability and cohesion of their communities.

Reforms have been attempted on a small scale, but nothing substantial has been done to get to grips with the problem. For example, Members have talked about the consultation conducted and completed in June, and I am sure all Members will want to hear from the Minister about when it will be published. But this piecemeal, foot-dragging approach is patently not enough to tackle the deep problems faced in our communities. The Government are still opposed to, for example, the introduction of a discretionary licensing scheme of the kind the Opposition have proposed on numerous occasions. We believe that such a scheme would be part of the solution to tackling this issue.

We welcome the consultation on the new planning use class, just as we welcome the commitment to introduce a new discretionary registration scheme. However, there is a sting in the tail—giving with one hand but taking away with the other—because the new consultation also invites views on introducing new permitted development rights that would in fact make it easier to convert dwelling houses into short-term lets. Perhaps the Minister can explain the rationale for including that in the consultation and how it will help with the problems we have been discussing. I encourage hon. Members to see what investors are saying about that part of the consultation. They are happy with the consultation overall because it is light-touch and it will make it incredibly attractive and easy for them to continue to convert properties into short-term lets.

The time has gone to recognise that this is an issue; the time has gone for sticking-plaster solutions. Communities urgently require a response that is up to the scale of the problem they face. We urge the Government to accelerate the introduction of the discretionary registration scheme and to legislate for the introduction of a new planning use class for short-term lets without delay. Nothing less than a full array of planning and non-planning tools is needed to appropriately regulate the number of short-term holiday lets. If this Government will not get on with it, they should step aside and leave it to a Government that will.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister Rowley, could you leave a minute at the end for Steve Double to wind up, please?

3.47 pm

The Minister for Housing (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this important debate. I know that colleagues in Cornwall and Devon have returned to this issue time and time again and that there are very strong views about it. As clear advocates of their constituencies, they have highlighted the issues they see in their individual areas. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay for all the work he has done with colleagues, both today and more broadly, to highlight this issue.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the role of Housing Minister being sponsored by a certain company, and I liked the role so much that I came back a second time. I recall some of the discussions I had when I was first in this position, and the issue before us was one of the bigger ones raised by colleagues who are in the room today. In my first debate back in this role, it is a pleasure to be able to talk about it and to understand the continuing challenges faced in not just the south-west but other parts of the country. Colleagues have seen first hand, and have heard from constituents about, the benefits of tourism but also the challenges that come with it. I pay tribute to all the work they do.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) rightly highlighted, there is a balance to strike. First, in responding on behalf of the Government, I acknowledge, as all hon. Members have done, the benefits of tourism. It is an economic, social and cultural asset, and it is hugely valuable for parts of the country such as not only Cornwall and Devon, but mine in North East Derbyshire. It employs 1.7 million people and contributed nearly £74 billion, pre-pandemic. Up to one in five jobs in Cornwall is supported by it, and that is one of the reasons why we need to get this right—so that people who work in the sector can live. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) highlighted the staffing challenges.

To enjoy the tourism offer, people need somewhere to stay and to rest. This is not a new issue, but it has come into sharper relief in the past 10 or 15 years, particularly with the rise in digital platforms and the sharing economy. That change has accentuated the offer in many parts of the country, but it has also created significant challenges, which were outlined.

Tourism has brought benefits, but we know and have heard about the challenges and the impact on communities, including the growing number of lets, which limits the availability of housing for people permanently resident in the community, and the reduction in the permanent population. That translates into problems for families and neighbourhoods, and issues with public services. Those are problems of popularity, of desire, and of people wanting to experience and enjoy the benefits of such areas, but as colleagues have indicated, they are still problems, on which it is reasonable and proportionate to take action.

As I am sure hon. Members will appreciate, the same issues do not apply in all parts of the country. We have to be cautious in how we approach this issue, to ensure that we deal appropriately with the different challenges and opportunities found in the south-west and in the

city of Chester, which the hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) highlighted. Areas such as mine might not face the same kind of tourist issues as other areas, despite it being even prettier than Cornwall, Devon, and Strangford—a point that I will take up separately with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Hon. Friends and colleagues have asked me to talk about our work in Government, but it has been described already, so I will not go through it in extraordinary detail. As has been outlined, my colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have consulted on a registration scheme that we intend to introduce under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which received Royal Assent a short time ago. That is a tool to provide local authorities with stronger evidence. It was consulted on earlier this year, with more than 2,500 responses received. We are part of the way through analysing those receipts, and the Government will respond as soon as we can. I assure the House that I have heard what Members say about the importance of moving quickly, and I will pass that back to colleagues in my Department, and in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Tim Farron: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I am usually delighted to give way, but given the limited time, I will demur in this instance. On the consultation on use-class changes and short-term lets, I have heard clearly that there is a desire for clarity and speed. We are moving as quickly as we can. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) highlighted the Scottish example, which I will refrain from commenting on, apart from to emphasise that it took four years and a delay to get to that point. I do not anticipate ours being a four-year journey, but we need to ensure that we do this correctly, and work through the issue in the depth that it deserves. I assure hon. Members that we will try to do that in the time we have available. Given that I have made up a little time, I am happy to hear the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

Tim Farron: The Minister is a good man. During my enjoyable time on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill Committee, his predecessor guaranteed to me that the change in planning use class for short-term lets would come in this April. Can he deliver on that promise?

Lee Rowley: I am happy to talk about that separately. I will try to move that as quickly as I can, recognising that we have had a large number of consultation responses, which we are working through as quickly as we can.

In the few minutes I have left, I turn to some of the points made. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, who secured the debate, raised a concern about the implications for parish councils. I am grateful to him for doing so, both in the debate and a short time before. I spoke with officials in advance of the debate, and we are unsure about some of the challenges that are experienced. I am very happy to receive direct information on that from the parish council in Mevagissey—I tried to pronounce that; I hope that gives me some credit. If the parish council gets a power of competence, as it can, it should be able to spend the money that it talks about in a more flexible way. I am happy to speak to my hon. Friend about that, if that is helpful.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Devon rightly talked about balance, and the importance of the broader tourist ecosystem, as did my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about a taskforce, but I think we have clarity about the challenges, at least as far as I can see from this initial debate with colleagues who are impacted by tourism. The need now is to move at the greatest pace to hopefully bring in measures that we have said we are looking at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) highlighted some of the more extreme instances of these issues; in particular, she mentioned the single child in Portloe, who is now in school. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for the Northern Ireland perspective, as ever. This is day 11 in this job, and I have not yet spoken specifically to colleagues in Northern Ireland, but I look forward to doing so through our inter-ministerial groups.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) talked about the importance of building housing, and the opportunities to build it in the right place. That is absolutely at the core of what we are trying to do in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: to build more housing, but in the right place. Where there are opportunities in rural areas as well as urban ones, we should take them.

Finally, given the comments from the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston, and for City of Chester, let me gently ensure some balance in this debate, in the short time that I have left. I understand that we have challenges around housing, but taking a broader perspective, home ownership has started to rise again in this country for the first time in many years. It is important for that to be recognised and anticipated. Three of the years with the greatest house building in this country have been in the last five years. We also have the largest number of first-time buyers in many years. There is always more to do—I would not want to suggest otherwise, particularly in this debate, when there are specific, localised issues that need to be dealt with—but that needs to be placed in the wider context of the progress that is being made.

I conclude by saying again how grateful I am for the opportunity to debate this important issue, and I recognise the challenge in individual areas. We have to get the balance right, and recognise that there are many different circumstances, as well as areas that are impacted and those that are not. The impact may be felt in differently in different parts of the country. I acknowledge and recognise the points made, the challenge that has been set for us to move as quickly as possible, and the opportunity to make progress on this issue, for the benefit of all the areas represented in the debate.

3.58 pm

Steve Double: I thank all colleagues here, from right across the country, for contributing to this debate. It is clear that the challenges we all face in tourist areas are very similar. There is a very clear message for the Minister and the Government about the situation we face and the need for action.

I welcome the Minister's response. On the consultation on planning for change of use, I absolutely understand the need to get the proposals right, but I am pleased that he has clearly got the message not to take too long getting it right. He is absolutely right: a when it comes

[Steve Double]

to planning regulations, a one-size-fits-all approach across the country is probably not right. We need something flexible enough to address the needs of specific areas, rather than a blanket approach.

To conclude, all I ask is that the people I represent, who were born and grew up in some of the most beautiful and popular parts of the country, have the right to continue to live in their community—to buy or rent a house in the place that has been their home, as they deserve. That is what we seek to achieve. At the moment, too many are not able to do that; we simply want the Government to continue to act, so that future generations can do that.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Havering Council: Funding

4 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I will call Jon Cruddas to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge of the debate to wind up.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for Havering Council.

This afternoon, I want to: highlight the financial situation facing the London Borough of Havering; ask for help and support from the Government; request a joint approach to remedying the situation; and offset the dangers of a section 114 report by the council's chief financial officer, which would effectively freeze all non-statutory spending.

There is obviously also a wider national story here. Councils continue to face increasing demands for statutory services, especially adult and children's social care, the provision of temporary accommodation, and homelessness support. Demographic forces are driving up demand for those services, and that affects some councils more than others. Meanwhile, central Government grant funding for councils dropped by some 40% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2019-20; it has gone from £46.5 billion down to £28 billion. Consequently, councils are more and more reliant on local funding through council tax and business rates. That has not been enough to compensate for the drop in central Government funding.

Since 2021, five local authorities have declared themselves effectively bankrupt because their costs are larger than their resources. Slough, Croydon, our neighbours in Thurrock, as well as Woking and Birmingham City Council, have all issued section 114 notices. Until recently, section 114 notices were generally seen as the result of financial mismanagement or equal pay backlogs. That is changing, however. Section 114 notices are increasingly likely to be issued by a significantly larger pool of councils, due to a one-two punch of demographic changes and dramatic shifts in funding. Combined, these changes mean that a whole series of councils look likely to become trapped in a position in which the cost of social care and homelessness exceeds their resources.

Many local authorities are already issuing warnings about section 114 notices. These include city councils, such as Sheffield, Coventry, Southampton and Nottingham; district councils, such as Mole Valley, Chelmsford, St Albans and South Cambridgeshire; borough councils, such as Windsor and Maidenhead, Surrey Heath and Wokingham; and county councils, such as Hampshire, Kent, Derbyshire and Northamptonshire, alongside councils such as Medway, Bradford, Barnsley, Rotherham and Manchester.

These councils do not fall on one side of a strict party political divide. They include councils from across the country, and from north and south; councils urban and rural; and councils led from both the left and the right. For instance, one in 10 of the so-called SIGOMA group—the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities, which represents 47 urban local authorities—has reported considering issuing a section 114 notice this year, and 20% say it might be possible in the next year. Similarly, one in 10 members of the County Councils Network

reports facing effective bankruptcy. If we look at politics, the list includes Surrey Heath Council—the local council of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—and various Labour-led authorities across the country.

Despite local authorities' dire financial situation, the autumn statement had no new money for social care services, or any general local government funding beyond what was announced last year. However, I note that the Government increased local housing allowance rates last week, which is to be welcomed.

Although the language of local government often appears technically complex and incredibly dull and boring, we might conclude that much of British local government—a significant portion of the British state—is in danger of literally going bankrupt. This reality stretches way beyond those authorities that have already effectively declared themselves bust, and it has huge implications for public life across a range of services, from refuse collection, housing and homelessness, to education, social care, tackling antisocial behaviour, estate management, libraries and youth services—the list goes on. It is estimated that some 90% of councils have been using their reserves to meet their statutory duties, although some are more fortunate than others in that regard. I will come to that in a minute.

Take the general situation in London. According to London Councils, the capital's boroughs' overall resources are about 18% lower than in 2010-11 in real terms, but the population of the capital has grown by almost 800,000 since then. London boroughs need to make some £500 million of savings for 2024-25, to meet an estimated £2 billion funding gap over the next four years.

The next few weeks are critical. Councils will shortly receive their settlement figures, probably just as Parliament goes into recess. Following consultation, the figures will be confirmed in the middle of January, and council tax will be set in early March. It is against that general backdrop that I want to consider the situation facing Havering.

I should make three initial points regarding Havering. First, Havering has been very open about its predicament. In September 2023, the leader of the council, Ray Morgon, warned that the authority could be six months away from triggering a section 114 notice because of the escalating costs of social care and housing. Although other boroughs have tried to obscure their financial position and in effect hide from the communities that put them in the town hall, Havering has levelled with residents from the outset about what is going on. I very much welcome that as a mature form of civic leadership.

Secondly, Havering is generally regarded as a well-run and efficient council. It has low borrowing, unlike Croydon or Slough, and it has no historical pay claims, unlike Birmingham. It has the lowest unit costs in London, according to the well-regarded LG Futures consultancy, and is the third most productive council in the country, according to the consultancy IMPOWER. The situation it faces is very different from that of its immediate neighbours. Thurrock, for example, provided £655 million to companies via bonds, including for the purchase of some 53 solar farms. It shares a border with Barking and Dagenham, which I partly represent, and which has an accumulated debt of £1.2 billion. Havering is in a

very different situation, and has not embarked on ill advised speculative activity to try to offset funding challenges.

Thirdly—this is not a party political issue—until May last year, the borough was a Conservative-led authority. Today it is run by 22 representatives of Havering Residents Association, supported by Labour's nine councillors on the authority. On the scale of the financial challenge facing Havering, we have to bear in mind that local government funding continues to use a distribution model dating from 2013, based on data from the 2011 census. The model is ill equipped to deal with the kind of population flows that we have experienced in outer east London over the last decade.

Attempts at establishing a revised fair funding formula based on demographic change and modern need have effectively been parked by the Government, with pretty disastrous consequences for boroughs such as Havering. Moreover, the authority has limited resources to help take the strain. Havering's reserves are the second lowest in London, standing at some £47.8 million. Meanwhile, the borough receives the third lowest settlement funding assessment in London, yet it remains in the top quartile for income collection.

The scale of the problem becomes apparent when we consider the demographic pressures facing adult and children's social care. Havering has the second oldest population in London on the one hand, yet it has the fourth fastest growing children's population in the entire country among those aged 0 to 14. On the growth of the child population, the Department for Education uses more recent data to allocate children's school place capital funding. For 2025-26, it has allocated Havering a staggering 57% of all of London's schools basic needs capital funding. That demonstrates the extraordinary expansion in the borough's child population. That statistic shocked me, and it shows how important it is to use the latest data in distributing our resources. The other 43% of that funding is divided up between London's other 33 boroughs. That is just one vivid statistical example of the changing demographics in the capital, of Havering's growth and growing numbers of young people, and the escalating demands that that places on statutory expenditure.

As for the financial situation, Havering is currently forecast an overspend of some £23 million. In terms of its recent track record of budget setting, since 2010 it has delivered a mix of £163 million in savings and income generation, most of which has been reinvested in other services. It has also sold off £160 million of assets over the last 10 years.

To illustrate the scale of reduced support from central Government, Havering received nearly £100 million in central grant in 2010-11. That was reduced, in just over a decade, to just £37 million in 2023-24. Its budget gap is currently estimated to be some £31.2 million for next year, and £77 million over the next four years, against a net budget of £182 million. Currently, it has the fifth highest council tax in London. I accept that, for 2023-24, the authority's core spending power was increased by some £18 million, including the council tax social precept, yet the pressures from social care were already £20 million in 2022-23, so the increased funding did not address additional demand and inflationary pressures for 2023-24.

[Jon Cruddas]

On children and adult social care costs, it is estimated that the rates paid to providers for adult social care has increased by 33% since 2019-20, and children's placement costs have risen by 49% over the same period. Those rises are partly accounted for by care home costs charged by hedge fund owners. In Scotland, in contrast, those running care homes have to be not-for-profit organisations. Basically, for-profit care is crippling our councils. Placements for our children can cost tens of thousands of pounds a week.

To add to that, Havering is seeing a large increase in those presenting as homeless, especially families. That is partly the effect of out-of-borough placements by other London local authorities, partly the effect of the housing benefit cap, and partly due to general migration to outer east London. It is now costing the authority some £3.5 million in cumulative accommodation costs.

Despite those extraordinary demand pressures, over 80% of Havering's core income now comes from council tax. To repeat: it received the third lowest settlement funding assessment in London.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Many of Havering's challenges that he has outlined are similar to those we experience across the water in Bexley. As a former deputy leader of the council, I have great sympathy for the arguments he is making. Given some of those challenges and the growth that, as we know, is coming out eastward on both sides of the river, does he agree that one way for the Government to quickly get more money out to the likes of Havering and Bexley would be to allocate more of the funding that currently goes to City Hall directly to those boroughs?

Jon Cruddas: I am not playing pass the parcel here; it seems to me that, objectively—all parties can agree—there is a structural problem that is escalating across the length and breadth of this country. Havering is where the rubber hits the wall, in terms of the escalating demographic changes, especially with young people set against the long-term legacy of an older community, and this one-two punch of funding pressures on our basic statutory reserves. Therefore, I am not going to get into this game; I want to create some sort of cross-party dialogue towards greater partnership to resolve these pressures, rather than playing this little tit-for-tat political game.

Meanwhile, our health challenges mean additional budget pressures for people coming out of hospitals who need social care. In fact, it would be better for them not to go into hospital at all, but Havering has the lowest number of GPs per head of population in London.

Therefore, overall, given that Havering had the second lowest level of reserves, and given the level of its overspend and the forecast budget gap for next year, it is warning that, without additional support, it is six to 12 months away from issuing a section 114 notice.

To help Havering—and to return to the point that the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) made about how we resolve the situation—fundamentally, a fair-funding review must be implemented: one that better allocates resources based on modern realities of demographic change and need. I accept that that will

not happen this side of an election, but may I suggest that any new money that the Government might allocate should not rest simply on the current funding formula, which is increasingly outdated and further compounds the inequalities in funding?

However, the only solution being offered seems to be capitalisation orders, which Havering will have to take if there is no new money. That penalises well-run councils with an additional 1% added to the Public Works Loan Board rate—a rate that is then fixed for 20 years—yet that blunt instrument will penalise an ever larger number of residents under well-run councils. Perversely, it will also increase those councils' debts further each year and mean that we will go back to them year after year. Surely, as more councils are forced to use such orders, we need a more agile system—one that does not use a form of payday loan to pay for our public services. There should be different rules for good councils such as Havering. It is clear that the funding system is broken and must be fixed.

Overall, a crisis is unfolding across local government, and that is captured in well-run local authorities such as Havering. I request urgent discussions to look at these solutions between national Government and our civil leadership to help to address the looming funding crisis. I also suggest a more agile capitalisation system. The current system further penalises the residents of an increasing number of boroughs that are having to deal with the heightened level of statutory expenditure.

Havering is very much in the eye of the storm, yet it is commendably honest about the scale of the challenge it faces. I hope the Government are listening and will respond, because the clock is ticking. Otherwise, more councils will follow and our local communities will suffer. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I first of all thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) not only for raising this issue, but raising it in the tone that he did. I am grateful to him for that. I am also grateful for the work that his council leader, Ray Morgon, is doing on behalf of his residents. The hon. Gentleman raised that, which I thought was very important.

I will spend a moment or two setting the scene. It is not my intention to name and shame local authorities. I think the hon. Gentleman made an apposite point: we must all focus on the funding of the services that many of the most vulnerable citizens across the country rely on. As tempting as it is to try to play politics, I am not going to do so. Likewise, my door is open to those councils that are anxious that they are approaching the issuing of a section 114, because prevention is better than cure.

I join the hon. Gentleman in commending his council, without providing a running commentary on discussions between individual councils and my Department. I commend the openness with which the leadership of Havering and others in the borough have engaged the community and my Department. They are right to do so, and they will continue to have as much support from my officials and me as they possibly can.

The hon. Gentleman is also right, on section 114, that there is a mixed mosaic of reasons. It would be far easier if there was one geography, one political control and one reason for the trigger, but he set out a number of councils in different parts of the country that find themselves in challenging circumstances for a multitude of reasons. Irrespective of the reason, as with Havering, my Department stands ready to work alongside those councils, with the Local Government Association and others.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned SIGOMA. I was with the leader of SIGOMA, Sir Stephen Houghton, this morning, discussing the issues that his member councils are facing. That meeting was very useful. We will work alongside those councils to ensure that they can stay standing up to deliver their services.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to meet him; I am more than happy to do so, with any council officers or elected members that he deems appropriate, because we have to get this right. I recognise entirely the demographic challenges to which he alluded and how a council will need to change its mindset and policy-setting priorities to respond to those changes in pretty quick time.

The hon. Gentleman welcomed the changes that the Chancellor announced to the local housing allowance, and I welcome that. We listened to a whole variety of stakeholders, and there was general agreement that that is the right thing to do.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the timing of the settlement, which was not helped this year by the lateness of the autumn statement. I can share with him and the House that the instruction I gave to officials, who are more than prepared to meet the challenge, is to get the figures and as much information as we possibly can out of the door, on the proviso that those figures are correct and robust. I spent 11 years serving in local government as a parish councillor, a district councillor and a county councillor. I spent several years as a cabinet member on West Oxfordshire District Council putting together the budget, and I remember sitting for too many hours with the finance director when we all wanted to go home for family things, trying to crunch numbers, make savings and work out different things. There must be a better way of doing it. I am yet to identify what that is; when I do, I will share it, among the first people, with the hon. Gentleman. That is important, given these uncertain times.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the increasing complexity, range and quantum of demand from both ends of the age spectrum, from the needs of the very young to those of the vulnerable elderly. We must ensure that we are focused, as I know he and his council are, and remind ourselves that we can get tied up in the minutiae of the formula for this, the process for that and the probity of making announcements. We have people sitting at home wondering how, if or when their legitimate applications for support will be processed and delivered to make their lives more comfortable and better.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the social care grant. Through the 2023-24 settlement, Havering is receiving £14.2 million. That is a £5.8 million increase compared with the previous year's settlement. The funding can be used for both adult's and children's social care. Additionally, we are providing £2.4 million through the market sustainability and improvement fund, £1 million

through the discharge fund, and £6.8 million through the improved better care fund, which I am told is already improving local health outcomes and supporting the crucial social care sector.

Those figures are important, but—there is always a “but”, isn't there?—I acknowledge the challenging position in which local government in England finds itself. We all know the issues that have afflicted the national economy in recent years. I do not offer them up to the hon. Gentleman as excuses, but we would be negligent if we did not put them into our mix of thinking. Just when the reverberations of the '08 banking collapse started to be less severe, along came the pandemic and then Ukraine. They led to inflation, interest and all those pressures that people have felt in their back pocket and that council officers have felt in their budget settlements. Despite all those challenges, central Government have sought to provide big increases in funding to local government in recent years to try to address some of the reasons that the hon. Gentleman set before us. The local government finance settlement for 2023-24 made available up to £59.7 billion of funding for local government in England. That was an increase in core spending power of up to £5.1 billion on 2022-23—or, to put it another way, 9.4% in cash terms. Havering's core spending power as a council rose to £218.7 million—a 9.2% increase on the funding for 2022-23.

Numbers and percentages are fine; we know that. But—again, there is another “but”—we are all aware, and it would be foolhardy of any Minister to pretend otherwise, that there are huge increases in demand for service. Costs are going up. It is great news that we have increases to the living wage—I suggest that nobody would challenge that as a matter of principle. However, it clearly has an effect on the pay requirements, particularly for local councils, when they are already under pressure. I know that Councillor Morgon is addressing the council's funding pressure, and he himself has noted the unprecedented demand for both adult and children's social care. As the hon. Gentleman said, Havering has one of the oldest populations in London, together with the second fastest growing young population in the country. There is pressure from both ends of the public sector service demand telescope, so it is understandable that the council is feeling the pressure from a growing need for social care.

I want the hon. Gentleman to understand that I get that, and to convey to anybody who is interested that we have empathy for his points. We are determined to continue working alongside Havering London Borough Council to ensure that it can deliver not just the services demanded of it, but the services that the councillors and officers themselves want to deliver, because they are true and honest public servants. It is not going to be easy. I am afraid I am not the owner of the ministerial goose that is laying a multitude of golden eggs for the local government sector, but we will continue to work with the hon. Gentleman and his council.

I will close by repeating my warm invitation for him to come in and have a conversation. We can go over the figures and think about these issues. I am almost preaching to the choir on this point. I know that the hon. Gentleman will keep at the forefront of his mind—as will I—that, whether we are Opposition MPs, Government Ministers or councillors, our primary duty is to do our very best to serve the public who put us here, and to discharge the

[Simon Hoare]

duties that they give us in order to try to make their lives a little safer, a little more comfortable and a little easier. He and I share that endeavour, and I look forward to welcoming him and his colleagues to do the very best we can for his residents.

Question put and agreed to.

Rural Communities: Government Support

4.28 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for rural communities.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. This is the first debate that I have held. I feel it is important to highlight the challenges facing many of our rural communities. The Government must recognise the financial support needed, especially for local authorities to deliver essential frontline services.

To begin, I will explain the challenges that affect rural communities, and how their rurality provides specific complications that are often missed or ignored by central Government. People who live in rural areas face added living costs known as the rural premium. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that they typically need to spend around 10% to 20% more on everyday essentials than their urban counterparts. The rural economy is 19% less productive per worker than the national average, which is reported to cost the UK economy £43 billion per year. Employers face difficulties recruiting staff as rural areas generally have poorer public transport connections, resulting in employees relying on private vehicles and facing higher fuel expenditure.

The Government recognised the need to assist rural areas with the cost of travel and introduced the rural fuel duty relief in 2001, and it was extended again in 2015. However, it extends only to the most remote parts of the UK. I urge the Government to listen to Liberal Democrat calls for the scheme to be extended to cover most rural areas in the UK, including Somerset.

Fifty-three thousand people live within 10 km of Langport and Somerton, yet they are without access to a train station. Travellers have to drive 24 km to Taunton or 25km to Castle Cary. For those without access to private transport, the travel time by bus between Langport and Taunton is 51 minutes, and for Somerton it is 62 minutes. There is no direct connection to the rail by bus between Langport and Somerton and Castle Cary, with public transport requiring an interchange. The shortest journey time is therefore around one hour and 17 minutes. Bus routes in my constituency are also under threat, with four routes currently without guaranteed long-term funding.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing her first Westminster Hall debate. She is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that bus services are important not only for getting people to train stations but for preventing social isolation and getting people to school and to the doctors and so on?

Sarah Dyke: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that rural isolation is a very important matter.

I received a phone call today from a constituent who cannot get to their medical appointments. The 58 bus service is currently under threat, and if that closes they will not be able to move around the constituency and access the vital services they need. It is clear that sparse public transport is a constant constraint to regeneration of the local economy.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. She is doing a wonderful job raising many of the issues that I also see in Bosworth, which is an 85% rural community. She has hit on the issue of sparsity and its impact on the delivery of services that need to be able to reach people, such as care workers. Does she agree that the Government should consider changing the local authority funding formula such that it takes sparsity into account? That would make a real difference, because it is a real problem when it comes to hidden rural poverty.

Sarah Dyke: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is very important for very rural areas such as Somerset, so I thank him for that.

Moving on to broadband, poor levels of rural connectivity and broadband impact rural economies, limiting growth and inhibiting people's lives. New research by Vodafone UK revealed the extent of the rural digital divide across the UK. Somerton and Frome is in the bottom 6% of constituencies for mobile coverage, and nearly a quarter of the constituency is in a total 5G notspot. This has a significant impact on attracting businesses to the area, with rural businesses already struggling with online sales, services and accepting credit card payments.

For these reasons, many rural businesses rely on cash, meaning that access to cash is even more important in rural areas. Three banks have closed in Somerton and Frome in the last year alone, and the sharp drop in Government services through post offices has exacerbated the problem of post offices closing. Since 2010, Government services through post offices have declined by over 75%, as provision has been withdrawn. That affects the profitability of post offices and withdraws a valuable front-facing public asset from rural communities.

While the Government may brag about bringing inflation down to 4.6%, food inflation remains very high, at around 10%. The impact of food inflation can hit rural communities harder than their urban counterparts. Research by Which? found that people who rely on small local supermarket stores will almost never be able to buy essential budget-line items. Those types of stores are more prevalent in rural communities, with access to larger supermarkets more likely to be close to the urban centres.

Data from the Association of Convenience Stores shows that rural consumer visits to local convenience stores dropped from 3.4 times a week in 2018 to 2.5 times in 2022, suggesting that people are feeling the effects of food inflation acutely, which will hurt these convenience stores. When local convenience stores fail, they leave behind an empty space, which is often unfilled, depriving the community of vital provisions and forcing people to travel further for goods. Over the last two years, food prices have risen by more than a quarter. Examples of food prices now compared with 12 months ago reveal the extent to which people are struggling. In Tesco 12 months ago, 10 large eggs were sold at £2.70; now, they cost £3.85. The cost is 42% higher in just one year.

To tackle food prices and ensure food security, the Government need to provide support to those who grow our food. We need sustainable food production here at home. The common agricultural policy reform was welcomed, but the Government have botched that, leaving many farmers on the brink. The farming budget for England has not increased in line with inflation,

despite the cost of farmers' inputs and energy costs increasing significantly. Also, the latest figures from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs show that the average farm in England is £5,000 down this year because of departmental underspend.

Before the autumn statement, the National Farmers Union president was clear that British farming needs more investment. That is something that I, as someone from a farming family, fully agree with. It is also something that my party fully agrees with. The Liberal Democrats want to boost the farming budget by £1 billion to provide farmers with the relief that they so desperately need, alongside giving food producers more energy support.

Our rural communities have an intrinsic relationship with farming; 91% of land in Somerton and Frome is agricultural. Farming and its supply chain are major employers throughout rural communities, but they are struggling to get the workers that they need, which points to the major workforce problems in the sector. A report last year by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that covid and Brexit had had a huge impact on the sector. A lack of workers severely affects the productivity of our farms, resulting in higher food prices. The Liberal Democrats want to act on that by ensuring that we provide visas for agricultural workers and allow our farms to produce the food that they so desperately want to produce.

Farms have also been heavily affected by increases in energy costs. The Government reduced energy support for farms drastically—by 85%—in replacing the energy bill relief scheme with the energy bills discount scheme, and with farms not being classified as an energy and trade-intensive industry, farmers have been denied extra support, despite the industry being highly energy intensive.

The high costs of energy have also massively impacted domestic consumers. The higher likelihood of rural communities not having a direct relationship with their energy supplier has posed different difficulties for rural consumers from those faced by their urban counterparts. A quarter of homes in Somerton and Frome are off the gas grid and rely on alternative sources of fuel. Between 2021 and 2023, heating oil prices rose by 77% and the price of liquid gas doubled. The energy price guarantee introduced by the Government to cap people's energy costs did not cover off-grid homes. They were forced to wait for the Government's alternative fuels payment. It was initially £100, but after extensive lobbying, including by some of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, the Government increased that to £200. However, it was not rolled out for those completely off grid until March 2023. Those who are off grid are still suffering high fuel costs, with liquified petroleum gas twice the price it was two years ago. I believe that the Government need to introduce a cap on domestic heating oil to support rural areas.

The rural premium applied in rural areas needs to be recognised by the Government, and support needs to be in place to alleviate the current high cost of living. The Liberal Democrats have a plan to help rural people. This Government have shown that they do not.

4.39 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) on securing this debate.

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

The United Kingdom boasts a rich tapestry of rural communities, each with its unique charm, heritage and challenges. Over the years the UK Government have strongly recognised the significance of these communities and have implemented various measures to support their growth, sustainability and resilience.

Earlier this year, when I was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I wrote the foreword for, and indeed owned the whole document called “Unleashing rural opportunity”, in which we set out really important ways to ensure that our rural communities thrive. Whether it was about investing in the rural economy, removing barriers to enterprise or improving connections, we have already seen significant improvements in digital connection, and under Project Gigabit we will go even further.

There have also been connections on transport. I recognise what the hon. Lady said in that regard. Particularly in some rural areas, the sparsity of communities is challenging when it comes to providing a consistent public transport service. However, I hope that she welcomed the £2 bus fare cap, which I know has significantly improved the use of bus services in Suffolk. There has also been other support, which can often go towards things such as community volunteer transport or transport on demand, which, to be candid, I think is still going to be the most likely way to have an on-demand service for most of our very rural communities.

I also believe that there is more that we need to do on aspects of affordable housing and on aspects of energy. A decade ago, I was strongly involved in the fuel poverty challenge for properties off the gas grid. In fact, the Government changed the law under the Digital Economy Act 2017, a change that I helped to secure. That was to allow the opportunity to get information that the Government had but which was collected with certain powers that restricted its use, in order to open up that information to energy companies, so that they were able to go and identify the communities, or people in the community, who were off the gas grid, to try to help with the energy company obligation support. However, it was not unique to people who were off the gas grid.

I believe that it is that sort of thing where we probably need to put some more momentum behind what the energy companies are actually doing to be able to distribute that sort of support. It is there, but too often quite a lot of the money still goes, as I think the National Energy Association has said, into trying to identify people who might be eligible for support rather than going into delivering the solutions. I think the willingness is there. Now that I am back on the Back Benches, I perhaps have the opportunity to say that we should get that sort of connectivity going again and challenge things in that regard.

Regarding connectivity more broadly, enhanced connectivity lies at the heart of empowering rural areas, and I think that the UK Government have been dedicated to bridging the digital divide, ensuring that even the remotest villages have access to high-speed internet. The rural gigabit connectivity programme aims to deliver lightning-fast broadband to over 1 million homes and businesses in rural areas. That will bring economic opportunities and facilitate remote working, online education and, I hope, online healthcare, so that instead

of having to travel long distances to get specialist care, people in rural areas might be able to receive such care online.

Dr Luke Evans: Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before the right hon. Member gives way, may I just say something to her? I am sorry, but I forgot to ask her if she could sit down at 4.48 pm, so that I can get the other speakers in.

Dr Coffey: Yes, of course.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): And I will just repeat that the motion is:

“That this House has considered Government support for rural communities”,

because I am failing miserably in the Chair. Sorry. [Laughter.]

Dr Evans: Sir Charles, your failure is met by enthusiasm and has been offset as a result.

I thank my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for the point she is making. On digital connectivity, the percentage of my constituency of Bosworth with 1 gigabit has increased from 0.1% to 67%. This kind of thing gives huge opportunity to businesses and folk in my community. Is that not exactly the kind of thing that the Government want to do, in order to unlock opportunities for businesses, so that they can create new reasons for people to be in a rural constituency, apart from the beautiful countryside?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. About a decade ago our ambition was to get to 10 megabits as the universal service obligation. We have much greater ambition that that now. Of course it is about delivery, and quite a lot of legislation in the past few years has been about unblocking some of the barriers to making delivery happen, but it is good that the process is under way.

However, I share the concerns about mobile phones. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) has undertaken an assessment, and will be working with DEFRA and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Ofcom needs to look again when it says an area is covered for mobile phones. All of us have examples from our constituencies of that not being the case. It is particularly distressing when I think about the removal of copper-line communications that is due to happen this decade and the impact that could have if Ofcom is working off not totally reliable communication points.

Helen Morgan: The shared rural network is obviously designed to address that issue, but in many cases the equipment that providers have is not shared by other providers. Does the right hon. Member agree that either the equipment needs to be shared by all the main mobile providers or there needs to be rural roaming?

Dr Coffey: That is a good point. I do not know enough about the detail of what the hon. Lady suggests, but I know there are two sets of providers because they already share connection masts, but I appreciate that is not totally comprehensive.

I want to say a bit more about the importance of farming to our countryside and in our rural communities. Over the past year, I have made a lot of effort to try to ensure that that is recognised and that farmers are seen as the custodians of the countryside. Perhaps that speech will have to wait for another time, given the variety of issues that rural affairs covers, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome set out extensively.

One of the things that will continue to be of interest to me is school transport. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) has a debate tomorrow on funding for rural councils. There is no doubt that young people miss some opportunities because they cannot necessarily get to their college, which is a long distance away. More broadly, hon. Members who represent urban constituencies may not understand that children leave home very early in the morning, have quite long days—although those days seem to get shorter—and often may miss out on the regular opportunities that others have for sports, debate and similar.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid that I just do not have the time, but I am sure the hon. Member will be making a speech soon.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): You can have an extra minute, Dr Coffey. You do not have to give way, but I will give you till 4.49 pm.

Dr Coffey: Then I will take the intervention.

Keir Mather: The right hon. Lady is extremely kind for giving way, and I apologise for missing the opening remarks by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke). I want to build on the point about transport, because there are massive issues in my constituency for transport for children with special educational needs. Children have to go from Selby up to Harrogate or Scarborough to receive the education they need. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need more funding and investment to transport those children who need that extra help in a way that better respects the fact that they are getting up very early in the morning and not enjoying school in the way that other young people are able to?

Dr Coffey: I understand what the hon. Gentleman says. The situation varies around the country, but I know it is a challenge that councils have. We could actually have an all-day debate in the Chamber or in here to discuss the plethora of issues covered by the brief held by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), whom I welcome to his well-deserved ministerial role. Being from a rural Yorkshire constituency, he will know a lot of the challenges that are faced, but he will also know of the opportunities and what a special place it is.

In terms of Government support, we need to keep that funding going for post offices, and we need ongoing investment in rural access programmes, whether that is for health or the internet. I commend the Government for the progress they have made. Of course, I would say that because a couple of weeks ago I was in charge of the Department doing it, but I assure the House that

there is a genuine passion there. We need to ensure that the rural proofing that operates right across Government is still done and gets the scrutiny it deserves.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): The time limit will be six minutes.

4.49 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) on securing the debate. It is such an important debate for many of us here because, while we recognise that urban areas have issues specific to their communities, everyone in this room understands the specific challenges that exist for our constituents living in rural areas.

Often these challenges are not adequately considered by the Government when the finer details of policy delivery are decided, and it is to the detriment of our constituents. Special educational needs, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) referred, is a perfect example. With smaller and more disparate populations in villages and towns in my constituency, children with special educational needs and disabilities are at risk of slipping through the net. Being students in smaller rural cohorts should not prevent them from accessing the same services as their peers in urban areas. I had hoped that the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan published in March would address some of the unique challenges in rural SEND provision, but it failed to do so. None of the proposals related specifically to SEND in rural communities but spoke simply in generalisations, assuming that all geographies have the same concerns.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. One of the issues mentioned beforehand, to which the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) also referred, is that children with disabilities, whether emotional or physical, are up at half-past 4 in the morning to catch a bus at half-past 7. Their parents are up; their families are up; the whole house is disrupted. Those are special circumstances: a bus arrives at half-past 7 and there is no other choice, even though school does not start until 9 am or half-past 9. Those are real problems.

Ashley Dalton: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. The big question is how the Government can possibly expect to address those issues when we see no sign of their recognising them.

The challenges in rural educational provision differ from the provision of SEND in urban areas. In spread-out communities, often with non-existent public transport, it is far more difficult for SEND children to access those services. Thirty children in an urban area with a small geographical footprint and a bus every 20 minutes find it much easier than do 30 children spread over a vast geographical footprint with no public transport.

Flooding also brings challenges particular to rural areas. Of course, such challenges can occur in any part of the country—they are not unique to rural areas—but some of the issues are wide-ranging. The farmers of

[Ashley Dalton]

West Lancashire are proud to be the growers and feeders of our nation, but when their fields are flooded and their produce is written off, it does not just impact farmers and their incomes; it reduces the availability of food in our shops and it drives up prices, hitting consumers in the pocket all over the country. How can the Government support the growers and food providers of West Lancashire when they do not even have a recognised definition of flooding, and no one is recording how many floods take place each year?

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that although this is an important issue, a lot of the debate on flood risk in this country centres on the number of chimney pots—houses—that will be affected rather than on the high-quality arable land that our farmers use to feed the nation in the way that she suggests?

Ashley Dalton: I agree with that. Talking to farmers in my community is fascinating: they cannot understand why the Environment Agency attaches a value of zero to farmland when it measures the impact of flood defences. We really need to talk about that, because without protecting that agricultural land, we are damaging not only the economics of our food providers but access to food and food sustainability across the whole country.

It is not just farmland that is affected. Flooding on roads is a major inconvenience for people in urban communities, but it brings communities like mine to a standstill. In Skelmersdale, we have been without a train station for 65 years, despite the Government supposedly freeing up £36 billion for transport projects through the cancellation of the northern leg of High Speed 2. The Rail Minister has told me in writing that it is not possible to connect Skem to the rail network, because money has already been committed to other projects, a number of which are either recycled announcements or already operational. Projects such as a station for Skem do not only support our rural communities; they unlock the potential within them. It is difficult for me to go back to my constituency and tell residents on their doorstep that the Government are supporting rural communities, when time and time again, people in West Lancashire tell me that they do not feel they are being heard.

The theme running through all these issues is that the Government simply do not understand the needs of rural communities. It is time that the people of West Lancashire had a Government who are on their side and support them by meeting the ambition out there with a bold and ambitious strategy in this place that recognises the specific needs of rural areas, but for now I fear that such a strategy is sadly lacking.

4.55 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. As an MP representing rural Devon, every day I see at first hand the impact on my constituents of decisions made in Westminster. The Conservative party was pretty canny in 2019 to include in its manifesto the term “levelling up”, because what people in my constituency heard was that the historical imbalance between the west country and other parts of the country—the south-east, in particular—would be addressed. What I have

been hearing in the past 18 months is that that illusion has been utterly shattered. Rural communities feel more left out and ignored than ever, and that applies to public services, local businesses and individuals.

I will talk about some of the challenges relating to rural health, rural housing and rural education. Healthcare services in areas such as my part of east Devon are patchy at best. The distances from people’s homes to the nearest acute hospital are huge, and the network of small community hospitals that used to play a vital role has been diminished. Rehabilitation used to go on in community hospitals, but that is no longer the case. In 2017, acute beds were taken out of hospitals in places such as Ottery St Mary and Seaton. Such facilities used to be part of the character of the village or small market town, but people no longer feel they are there to support them.

It would be a huge blow for us to lose a wing from Seaton community hospital, which is severely under threat. I am working with community campaigners to turn that wing into a new care hub so that we can continue to support the ageing population in that part of Devon.

The housing stock in rural areas tends to be draughty and poorly insulated, and frankly there is a lack of it. Who would not want to move from this part of the country to Devon? But that is creating a shortage of housing in towns such as Honiton. Just before I joined this debate, I took a look online and there are just six properties in the whole of Honiton available for private rent. They have three or four large bedrooms, which means that they cost way in excess of £1,000 per month, which, given Devon salaries, is out of range for a lot of key workers in the area. I appreciate that there is pressure on housing across the country, including in urban areas, but we need to take into account the fact that people in Devon travel much longer distances to go to school or work, so they have to extend their search for housing much further. Constituents sometimes come to my surgeries in tears because they simply cannot afford to live in the patch where they grew up.

Providing education in rural areas is particularly difficult, and there is a huge catchment for many schools. Mrs Ethelston’s Church of England Primary Academy in Uplyme has such a large catchment, and so many people want to send their children to it, that the space pressure is acute. The teachers and children desperately look forward to the warmer months, when they will be able to open the doors and have some of the classes taught outside, such is the pressure on space. I think of Tiverton High School, for which I fought a campaign during the by-election last summer. We have heard nothing on when we might see spades in the ground and action taken to replace that crumbling high school with something the people of Tiverton deserve.

To conclude, the idea of levelling up for a lot of people in rural areas—certainly in the west country and my part of Devon—is a great concept. But people think this is now a tool being used to win over marginal constituencies in urban areas in the midlands and the north. They have not seen it. Frankly, if I go and talk with people in my patch about levelling up, they say “Levelling up? The Government can’t even level up the pothole outside my house.” This Government say they want level up. Instead, they need to start by ensuring rural areas get a fair deal and a fair shot at success.

5.1 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance once again, Sir Charles. It is a real privilege to follow everybody in this debate, but especially my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke), who succeeded in securing this debate and made an outstanding speech at the beginning.

I want to cover many issues we have already talked about, and I will start with farming. Farming is crucial to feeding our country, protecting and restoring our environment, tackling climate change, promoting biodiversity and underpinning the landscape that our tourism economy depends on, but it has been badly let down. Farmers across my community feel angry with this Government for many reasons—including the trade deals with New Zealand and Australia that threw them under the bus—but specifically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned, the botched transition from the old scheme to the new scheme.

We believe in environmental land management schemes, and we think the project is one worth supporting. However, the Government promised £2.4 billion in their manifesto for farming in England, and the latest figures for 2022-23 show £1.97 billion for agriculture in England. Environmental schemes have increased in their expenditure to farmers by £145 million a year—great—but basic payments have fallen by £490 million. We see upland livestock farm incomes down by 44% and lowland livestock farm incomes down by 41%.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind hon. Members of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. If the Government find it so difficult to put money into farming in the way my hon. Friend describes, could they not perhaps give a bit more attention to ensuring that farmers get a fair price for their product at the farm gate? The Groceries Code Adjudicator has not achieved what we wanted it to, but surely somebody, at some point, has got to address the fact that that market is failing, and it fails to the disadvantage of our farmers and rural communities.

Tim Farron: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for making that point; he is absolutely right. The Groceries Code Adjudicator has the capacity to potentially make a big difference for farmers and growers—producers of all kinds. But the reality is that it does not have the sanctions and remit. It is not allowed to take third-party referrals from the likes of us or the NFU on behalf of farmers who are being stitched up by processors or retailers. It is absolutely right that the Government support farming, but the market should be fixed so it does not exploit our farmers either.

We already have a situation where we are only 58% self-sufficient in farming in this country. We are never going to deliver the environmental goods we need if we do not have those expert hands on the land delivering those environmental policies. Our landscapes are at risk of changing radically, dramatically and negatively to undermine—for example—the £3.5 billion-a-year tourism economy of the English Lake district.

Moving on to broadband, Project Gigabit is a good idea, but there will be many people who miss out. Thousands of homes in my part of Cumbria are outside the scope, or in deferred scope, of Project Gigabit.

B4RN—the Minister may be aware of it—or Broadband for the Rural North is an excellent local community interest company. It could absolutely connect all of those homes in—I am going to mention them now—parts of Sedbergh, Kaber, Murton, Long Marton, Winton, Warcop, Ormside, Hilton, Hartley and Bleatarn.

I mention those places because, if the broadband voucher system were still available, they could be connected now through B4RN, if it was not for the fact that Project Gigabit is trying to only ride one horse, and is not prepared to accept that not every issue has to be dealt with in the same way—one size does not fit all. I ask the Minister to look specifically at those communities and consider restoring the vouchers to them so that they can be connected well and connected now.

I want to briefly move on to buses. The right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) rightly points out the importance and value of the £2 bus fare, which I think has increased footfall or “busfall” by about 10%—it certainly has in my community. The £2 bus fare does a fat load of good if there is no bus. I want this Government to give local authorities like mine the power to run their own bus companies and the funding to ensure that they work. Buses often do not make a profit, but they are the oil that ensures that the economy works in communities to keep people connected and to ensure that people can get to work and school, or make use of leisure facilities. Back our buses.

Keir Mather: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): If the hon. Gentleman gives way, he will squeeze the time available to the mover of the debate to wind up.

Tim Farron: In which case, I really apologise—I will not give way. I apologise, Sir Charles. I do not want to be ungenerous to the mover especially.

I will finish on health, and I want to talk about cancer in particular. The reality in a community like mine is that, throughout south Cumbria, there are around 700 people having to travel each year for radiotherapy treatment to their nearest radiotherapy centre—the Rosemere Cancer Centre in Preston in Lancashire, which is excellent. That is a two, three or four hour round trip for those 700 people. Swindon has recently been allocated a satellite unit on the basis of 600 patients who would use that centre. My call is for a satellite radiotherapy centre to be placed at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal to serve south Cumbria and to ensure that those people receive the treatment they need.

The latest figures tell us that 38% of people in south Cumbria diagnosed with cancer wait more than two months for their first intervention, and 54% of those in places in north Cumbria, such as Appleby, Kirkby Stephen and Shap, have to wait more than two months for their first intervention. We know that, for every four weeks of delay in cancer treatment, one has 10% less chance of surviving. I believe that people in rural communities have as much right to have a life ahead of them than those who live elsewhere, yet we have a funding situation that does not treat them as such. I will finish there, Sir Charles, and thank you for overseeing this debate. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call the spokesman for the SNP, who has five minutes.

5.7 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Sir Charles. I commend the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) on securing this debate today—the first of many excellent contributions in this Chamber, I am sure. The Scottish Government are committed to supporting farmers and agricultural communities all across Scotland. Unlike the Government here in Westminster, the Scottish Government understand the needs of the rural communities, and the unique and important roles they play in the make-up of not only our economy but our country and its health.

Brexit has been bad for all of these of course—the economy, our country and its health—and EU withdrawal has damaged the UK's farming industry. It has made trade with the EU more difficult, it has led to labour shortages and a reduction in standards, and it has resulted in a loss of funding to UK farmers. The Scottish Government are committed to maintaining direct payments to support the act of farming and food production in these communities. The Cabinet Secretary in Holyrood has offered assurances that the envelopes for tiers 1 and 2—based and enhanced—will take up by far the majority of available funding. We are of course working closely with communities to ensure that there will also be no cliff edge between the current system and moving on to the newer systems, but people of course have to do a lot more in return for their payment.

Scottish farmers and rural communities require clarity and certainty from the UK Government about future funding after 2025, and they need that right now. As things stand, we have no idea what either a Labour or a Conservative Government might do in the future. We will be listening intently to what the Minister and the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—have to say on the future of funding, or perhaps on which U-turns might be undertaken next. Of course, if we were still in the European Union, we would have that funding certainty through the multi-year common agricultural policy framework, which is something else that we have lost thanks to Brexit, which is of course was supported by the two major parties here in Westminster.

As those in the Chamber will be aware, agricultural policy is devolved to Scotland, and it is crucial that the Scottish Government's policies are unhindered by this place and the threats imposed upon it by the UK Internal Market Act 2020, subsidy control regimes and a lack of a long-term replacement for that structured EU funding. Those of us who sit on the EFRA Committee heard evidence from devolution experts last week, which is worth reinforcing here today: it is high time that the Westminster Government learned how to listen to devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales because it is not only farmers and rural communities that have been affected; the damage of decisions taken in this place goes far and it goes deep.

The Scottish Government have introduced an Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill to Parliament to establish a new payment framework, which will begin to reform our agricultural and our wider rural support systems. One area that I want to focus on is how the Scottish Government are acting to deliver improved infrastructure and connectivity for rural communities and islands. We have heard a lot about that already today.

Work is ongoing to open a new railway station next to Inverness airport, offering better connectivity and initiatives made possible by the £40 million of Scottish Government investment as part of our commitment to a fairer, greener Scotland.

We are also pushing for connections to be established between the famous Caledonian sleeper service and the Eurostar at St Pancras International. That will help join the two key services linking the highlands of Scotland with major European cities. It will further support our strategic aims going forward. The Scottish Government have invested over £9 billion on rail infrastructure in Scotland.

Finally, I want to touch on how important good quality, affordable housing is to help attract and retain people in Scotland's communities. Between 2016-17 and 2022-23 the Scottish Government have supported the delivery of more than 10,000 affordable homes in the rural and island areas, and we have much bigger ambitions yet. On 13 October we committed to deliver at least 10% of our 110,000 targets in rural and island communities, to meet housing needs and to retain and attract people to those communities.

The Scottish Government are fully committed to supporting farmers and our agricultural communities by delivering the funding, improved connectivity and infrastructure programmes and by building the homes that we so desperately need now in those locations.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister—five minutes, please.

5.12 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is always a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. As you may have noticed, I am not my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins). He is currently unavailable, so I am here in his place. I am sure he will catch up on the debate very quickly.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) on her first debate held here in Westminster Hall. She did well and made an excellent speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) for her passionate championing of children with special educational needs and how their particular needs need to be met in a very specific way in rural communities. That would have been felt and heard by everybody in this room.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) for mentioning the particular needs of children with special educational needs and how we need to make sure that they do not miss out on anything because of the area in which they live. I quickly want to thank the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for their contributions to this debate. We have had a really interesting discussion.

I want to comment on the issues around broadband. As I am sure the Minister is aware, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Latvia and Bulgaria already have at least 85% ultrafast full-fibre broadband coverage, so it is an embarrassment to us in this country that we are so far behind. In fact, we could say that if we were in the slow lane compared with the EU when it comes to our rural

communities, we are in a traffic jam because the super-slow roll-out of ultrafast broadband in rural areas is genuinely putting communities at a disadvantage. We have more people working from home, which is something to be pleased and positive about, and more are choosing a rural life, but unfortunately I found out in this debate that only six homes are available in Tiverton, in case anyone wants to move there.

The broadband failure is a major loss. It impacts households and also businesses and productivity. When Project Gigabit was first announced, we were promised it would focus on harder-to-reach areas, but it is clear from Ofcom and DCMS data that the funding is being spent more on easier and cheaper-to-reach areas, many of which already have decent broadband connectivity. That is just because the Government want to be able to hit that figure of 85%. It feels as though the policy is driving what is good in terms of politics but not what is good in rural communities. Can the Minister tell me what proportion of areas not covered by gigabit-capable broadband are in rural areas and what action is being taken to address that?

We have heard from many people commenting on concerns around the availability of bus services. Someone used the phrase “rural isolation”. It is not just about getting to work: it is also about having a life, being able to connect with family and friends, and social activities. The lack of funding for local authorities has forced many communities to make tough decisions when it comes to road maintenance and the lack of availability of rural bus services. Roads are in a disgraceful state. Figures from the RAC say that there could be over 1.5 million potholes in England. I would gently say that election leaflets pointing at potholes, despite the impression they give, do not fix them. What will the Government do to deliver a solution to the potholes we have? Joking aside, 8,100 car breakdowns happen because of potholes.

Labour will act to support our rural communities where the Conservatives have failed. We will not sit back while more shops and local services disappear, while numbers dwindle in village schools so that they risk closure, and while farmers struggle to make ends meet and local people struggle with higher food and energy bills. The Government have failed to recognise that business and growth are not in competition with the environment, and that we can use the green agenda to promote business, increase skills and growth, and rebuild and protect our rural and farming communities. That is what the next Labour Government will do. We will embed rural proofing at the heart of Government and Labour policy and ensure that these areas thrive.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you very much, shadow Minister. Minister—you know what the timings are.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I thank the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) for securing today’s debate and congratulate her on securing her first debate in the House. We have a number of firsts: it is my first debate responding as a Minister, and I am very pleased to be in the position to do so. I would also like to thank other hon. Members for their contributions today.

It gives me great pleasure to speak as the Minister for Rural Affairs, because Rural Affairs is one of those portfolios that cuts across multiple Government Departments. Representing the rural economy and the rural sector, I very much see it as my role to bring together some of the challenges that have been identified and that we are well aware of from other Government Departments, so that we can focus on driving forward the very best agenda for our rural communities.

The countryside makes up 90% of the UK’s land mass, is home to millions of people and is central to our economy, contributing £270 billion each year in England. This Government are absolutely committed to improving the quality of life for all businesses, farming communities and individuals living within the rural sector. We are ensuring that the needs of people and businesses in rural areas are at the heart of policymaking, and that absolutely sits right with me. Rural proofing policy and our levelling-up agenda are the very basis of what this Government are about when it comes to the rural community.

That is why, earlier this year, my Department published the “Unleashing rural opportunity” report under my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). I thank her for her time and her service to the rural community while she was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. That report was vital because it outlined how the Government are addressing the needs of people and businesses in rural areas. It included new commitments from across the Government to support rural communities to thrive and be more resilient.

I would like to canter through some of the topics that have been raised by many contributors to the debate. I will start with some of the points on farming. Our farming community is at the very heart of our rural community. The Government continue to support and invest in farming and have stood by our manifesto commitment to invest £2.4 billion a year for the rest of this Parliament. We are phasing out the EU’s bureaucratic land-based subsidies and introducing new schemes that work for farmers, food producers and the environment. We have accelerated the roll-out of the sustainable farming incentive and there are now a further 19 actions that can be accessed to grow food more sustainably. They include actions relating to soil health, hedgerow management, providing food and habitats for wildlife, and managing pests and nutrients. We have rolled out the farming investment fund, which has been very much welcomed by many in our farming community because it focuses on improving productivity and efficiency within farming business, animal health and welfare, and bringing forward more environmental benefits.

Another topic that has been raised is the levelling-up agenda, which of course is one of the Government’s core missions, particularly when it comes to rural areas. Rural areas face specific challenges: productivity is generally lower, access to services is sometimes more difficult, and connectivity can be more challenging than it is in urban environments. That is why the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which enshrines the levelling-up missions in law, includes a duty for this Government and future Governments to have regard to rural areas. Delivery of the Government’s levelling-up agenda is underpinned by significant investment—notably, £4.8 billion through the UK shared prosperity fund. To address the

[Robbie Moore]

challenges faced by rural areas, we have supplemented that funding with an additional £110 million through the rural England prosperity fund, which supports capital projects for small businesses and community infrastructure and helps to improve productivity and strengthen the rural economy across the country.

Many Members, including the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome and my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal, mentioned digital connectivity. Rural areas offer significant potential for growth, and the Government are committed to creating the right conditions to unleash that potential. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), who is no longer in his place, highlighted the extent to which the Government will improve rural digital connectivity, which will do more to support growth in rural areas than almost anything else. It is not only an economic necessity, but a matter of social justice. More services, both public and private, are being delivered electronically, so those living in rural areas must be able to get online. The Government recognise that and are doing something about it. Through Project Gigabit, we are investing £5 billion in hard-to-reach areas to achieve access to lightning-fast broadband. Our target is to reach 85% gigabit-capable coverage by 2025, with nationwide coverage by 2030. Through the £1 billion shared rural network, in collaboration with industry, we will deliver 4G coverage to 95% of the UK's land mass by 2025, which will help many people living in remote rural areas.

Many Members mentioned housing. I want to pick up the points raised by the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). We all know that a thriving, working countryside depends on having sufficient housing stock. People want to be able to earn a livelihood in their communities, near their family and friends, and employers want to recruit a locally based workforce. Small site developments can be an effective means of delivering the housing that is needed in rural areas. Developments of up to six units of well-located, affordable housing in villages can be transformational. We recognise that, and I have seen it elsewhere—particularly in remote areas of Northumberland. That is why we are taking action through our rural exception sites policy to allow the development of small affordable housing sites in rural areas where they would not normally be permitted.

Earlier this year, we announced £2.5 million of funding to support the national network of rural housing enablers across England to boost the supply of new affordable housing. They will help by identifying development opportunities, supporting site owners and community representatives to navigate the planning system, and securing the support of local communities for developments.

Reference was made to the challenges associated with getting homes better insulated. I assure the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome that through the housing upgrade grant scheme, which supports low-income households, one-off grants can be made available to better insulate homes; £218 million has been made available, of which 67% is being ringfenced for rural areas. That will help to address some of the challenges that have been identified.

Of course, we all want thriving rural communities, so I want to mention some of the wider work the Government are doing to support rural communities to thrive through

better access to transport, healthcare and community infrastructure. People living in rural areas often have further to travel to get to work or school, or to access personal and professional services such as healthcare and banking, which the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome mentioned. Ensuring that rural communities have access to effective transport options is vital. That is why I welcome, as I hope many Members do, the £300 million Government investment in protecting and capping bus fares. That was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal. The £2 bus fare cap has been extended to £2.50 until October 2024. That is helping my constituents across Keighley and Ilkley to get out and about at a much more affordable rate.

We are also trialling novel demand-responsive minibus services in 15 local authority areas, supported by the £20 million rural mobility fund. In October 2023, the Department for Transport published “Future of Transport”, which shows how emerging technologies could address some of the major challenges in rural communities. As part of this, the Department is making up to £3 million of funding available for rural innovation. That will help explore new solutions to long-term issues, such as loneliness and isolation, poor access to services and the financial challenges facing rural transport services.

We are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to good-quality health and social care wherever they live. That is why we are working better and faster to deliver more accessible care in rural areas. That includes rolling out 160 community diagnostic centres. Many are located in market town centres, which can reduce the distances that people need to travel. I am pleased that those diagnostic centres are being rolled out across England as I speak.

I also want to pick up on a point on satellite services made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale. I have seen them work very well in certain parts of England. I recognise some of the specific challenges that he referenced in his speech. They are something I could take away to look at with the Department of Health and Social Care. My role as Minister for Rural Affairs is to try to bring together objectives that other Departments want to achieve and ensure that they can be rolled out in rural areas.

I also want to highlight the work that the Government are doing to support vital community infrastructure in community hubs, such as village halls, public libraries and places of play. Those places play a key role in sustaining rural community networks and services. DEFRA is investing £3 million to support improvements to village hall facilities across the country and the £150 million community ownership fund supports community ownership of pubs, shops, community centres and the like.

I reassure everyone that I want our rural areas to prosper and be a central part of the levelling-up ambitions. I want them to be places where people not only want to live and work, but where they have better access to the essential services that they need to go about their everyday lives.

5.27 pm

Sarah Dyke: I thank the Minister, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy); and I thank all hon. Members for their passionate and valuable contributions.

309WH

*Rural Communities:
Government Support*

28 NOVEMBER 2023

*Rural Communities:
Government Support*

310WH

I close by reiterating the need for tailored support for our rural communities. They are so often forgotten, but we need to recognise their importance to our society. We need the Government to understand the specific issues that such communities face and heed the calls from hon. Members present regarding the ways that the Government can better assist.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for rural communities.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 November 2023

EDUCATION

Schools, Colleges and Universities: Minimum Service Levels

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan):

Today I am announcing the launch of a consultation on minimum service levels in schools, colleges and universities that would apply during strikes. Every day out of education is a missed opportunity, and absences have a significant impact on attendance, attainment, wellbeing and mental health.

This announcement follows a series of talks my Ministers and I have held with trade unions in the schools and further education sectors on a voluntary agreement. Unfortunately, we were not able to achieve significant progress during these discussions to ensure that protections for children and young people are in place for the next academic year. During the consultation period, I remain open to further conversations with the education unions and to discussing any proposals they may have to safeguard our children's education in the event of strike action, providing a fair balance between the right to strike and children's right to access education.

Subject to the consultation, I intend to use powers in the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 to make regulations to set minimum service levels in the event of strike action.

I know that many schools and colleges did their best to keep children and young people in face-to-face education during strikes. However, I believe there are benefits to having a formalised set of standards for children, young people and parents, supporting consistency across the country and clear expectations during strikes.

The consultation we are launching will provide us with information on the best solution for pupils, students and parents. However, I remain committed to ensuring any minimum service level balances the ability of individuals to strike with the rights of children to receive an education.

The consultation launches today, 28 November 2023, and will be open for nine weeks, until 30 January 2024.

[HCWS74]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly

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

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has been appointed as a full representative of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in place of the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth).

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has been appointed as a substitute member of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) has been appointed as a substitute member of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.

[HCWS72]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Consultants: Pay Offer

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins):

After several weeks of constructive negotiation with the British Medical Association and Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association committees, I am pleased to inform the House that, on 27 November, I made a formal offer to both unions, which includes a package of reforms to be applied from January 2024. If accepted by their members, this would end damaging strike action, benefit patients and deliver for consultants by reforming outdated aspects of their contracts.

The Government's position is that the headline pay uplift for 2023-24 was settled through the pay review body process. This offer builds on that and focuses on reform. All parties strived to find a fair deal for NHS consultants that acknowledges the wider economic pressures facing the UK and the need to continue to bring down inflation. We have heard the concerns consultants have raised about outdated pay scales that have poor equalities outcomes. This offer would invest in modernising the consultant pay scale to reduce the number of pay points and the time it takes to reach the top.

As part of this reform, we would also be introducing more consistent performance gateways so that there is a clearer link between pay progression and evidence of skills, competencies and experience. This would make it faster for consultants to progress and help mitigate the gender pay gap, which was expressly highlighted in the independent review into gender pay gaps in medicine in England. To enable these reforms, unions have agreed to end local clinical excellence awards—an employer-level bonus scheme that has been seen to contribute to pay inequalities.

In addition, the Government will work with the unions to review the operation of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration. This work will extend to looking at the process for the appointment of members to the DDRB, the timing of the round, the data provided to the DDRB, and changes to remit letters and the panel's terms of reference.

The Government have listened carefully to the concerns of consultants, their representatives and employers, particularly around retention, motivation and morale. This offer has been carefully balanced to meet those concerns while also ensuring value for the taxpayer. Together, this represents the biggest transformation in the consultant contract in 20 years. This offer, should it be accepted, will improve the working lives of consultants while ending damaging strike action that has had a detrimental impact on patients and the NHS.

The BMA and HCSA will put this offer to their members for a vote in the coming weeks. No further industrial action will be called while this happens.

[HCWS75]

Fuller Inquiry Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Today the report of the independent inquiry into the issues raised by the David Fuller case has been published. Sir Jonathan Michael updated the victims' families earlier today.

This report follows two years of work by the independent inquiry, led by Sir Jonathan, investigating David Fuller's shocking and depraved actions in the mortuaries of Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust.

I am very grateful to all those who provided evidence to the independent inquiry, especially the families who found the courage to share their experience of what happened to their loved ones.

The report makes for harrowing reading. It sheds a light on the circumstances surrounding David Fuller's abuse, which regrettably meant that his crimes went undetected for a long period of time.

I want to profoundly apologise on behalf of the Government and the NHS and commit that lessons will be learned. We fully welcome the report, and will ensure that there is a full response to the recommendations in

spring 2024 and that lessons are learned across the wider NHS so that no family has to go through this experience again.

A lot of work has already been done to review mortuary safety since these crimes were first revealed. NHS England required all NHS trusts with either a mortuary or a body store to review practices and ensure they are compliant with the requirements set out in the Human Tissue Authority's standards and guidance. NHS trusts were asked to take action to ensure all access points to mortuaries or body stores are controlled by swipe card security access, ensure there is effective CCTV coverage monitoring access to and from mortuary areas, undertake risk assessments of mortuary security and ensure consistent application of appropriate levels of Disclosure and Barring Service checks for all trust and contracted employees.

However, we should not be complacent. It is important that the whole system remains alert and accountable at all levels and that any concerns are swiftly identified and escalated through the appropriate governance processes.

The report will be published on www.gov.uk and is available in the Vote Office (HC 310).

[HCWS73]

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Tuesday 5 December 2023**

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