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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 30 November 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

CPTPP: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

1. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership on small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK. [900367]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): The CPTPP is one of the major benefits of Brexit. It has the potential to deliver billions of pounds to our economy and benefits small businesses across the UK. The deal delivers lower tariffs, reduced red tape, and cutting-edge digital provisions that directly support small businesses to trade more. It has an SME chapter committing all countries to make the agreement accessible for SMEs. I know that will be welcome news for my hon. Friend ahead of Small Business Saturday.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. It is great news that we are progressing membership of CPTPP and I welcome what she says about SMEs. Many SMEs will be new to exporting and need expert advice. Will she outline what particular plans there are to help small businesses?

Kemi Badenoch: We will ensure that our support offer for SMEs will help firms build their capability to import and export under our free trade agreements. We have started preparing for CPTPP entering into force. We will be producing written guidance on gov.uk to ensure businesses are equipped with the knowledge they need to access those opportunities. Specifically, our export support service, network of international trade advisers, export academy, and in-market support services will also help businesses to access opportunities in CPTPP markets.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency of Strangford SMEs are an integral, core part of creating jobs, putting wages into pockets, and ensuring that people can progress and learn more trades. We want to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and

Northern Ireland pushing for the CPTPP. What can the Secretary of State do to help me and my businesses in Strangford to be a part of that and to move forward?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will know that we had the Northern Ireland investment summit a few months ago. We met lots of businesses and investors who talked about how they want to take advantage of these markets. In fact, we have had one of the first big investors into a factory in Belfast. What I can do is help him with some of the materials we have around the export academy and the export support service, which he can hand out to businesses in his constituency who want to find out more.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): For UK businesses to benefit from agreements like the CPTPP, we must have a clear plan to boost small business exports. Labour has a plan to remove export barriers, with clear information and support. That is in stark contrast to the Government's approach, which has been a catalogue of failures, including the recent fiasco with the Government's export website, which was so deficient that firms were forced to seek essential information from foreign Government websites. What immediate steps will the Department take to provide some stability and ensure UK businesses can excel in exporting?

Kemi Badenoch: I think the hon. Gentleman might be talking about something that happened three years ago, which we fixed. He talks about the export support service website. Businesses have actually been praising it. [*Interruption.*] Businesses have been praising it; they very much have been. We have an expert toolkit, which has been developed by business and trade officials. What is interesting is that all he says is that Labour has a plan to remove export barriers. We have actually been removing export barriers. Labour talks about a plan with no detail. No one is taking it seriously at all. The Conservative party is the party that represents business in the House of Commons.

Audit and Corporate Governance Reform

2. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent progress her Department has made on bringing forward legislative proposals on reform of audit and corporate governance. [900368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): We remain committed to reform. Significant reforms have already been delivered to the Financial Reporting Council to strengthen its capabilities and drive up audit quality.

Deidre Brock: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland has branded the Government's decision to leave the audit and governance reform Bill out of the King's Speech as a lost opportunity and a huge blow to the interests of UK businesses and the public. The Government have been promising the Bill since 2021. Will they reconsider that backward step and make the UK's corporate regulatory framework fit for purpose in the 21st century?

Kevin Hollinrake: Time and again, Opposition parties seek to wrap businesses up in red tape, whereas Conservatives are keen to cut red tape. Consultation with businesses revealed concerns about imposing additional reporting requirements, while the Government are looking to simplify and streamline existing requirements.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): This week, the Business and Trade Committee took evidence from Wilko. Business collapses such as that of Wilko, Carillion, Thomas Cook and Patisserie Valerie have been a consequence of failures in the audit process, costing people their jobs and hurting investors and suppliers. Audit reform was recommended by the then Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in 2019, and the Government offered to bring forward a draft Bill. I know the Minister wants to reduce red tape, but does he agree that some form of action is now pretty urgent?

Kevin Hollinrake: I was delighted to give the Select Committee evidence on Wilko. The administration report on Wilko is continuing and clearly we need to see the findings, but investigations so far have not shown that director misconduct played an instrumental part in Wilko's failure, although I think it is clear to all concerned that there were failures in management that led to the company's demise.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): How strange the change from minor to major in that response. Financial transparency and accountability are essential components of economic stability. For three years now, the Government have been promising legislation and improved checks on company finances, but they have repeatedly failed to deliver. How can the Minister justify leaving the audit and governance Bill out of the King's Speech, when it is supported by businesses, regulators and auditors alike?

Kevin Hollinrake: We work very closely with the Financial Reporting Council. No one can deny that the FRC has changed its approach completely and is now a much more effective regulator. Sir Jon Thompson did a fantastic job when he was there, and the current chief executive, Richard Moriarty, and chair, Jan du Plessis, are following his work. We are confident that the FRC can make sure that the UK's corporate regime works effectively, without tying businesses up in red tape.

Fire and Rehire

3. **Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to prevent the use of fire and rehire practices. [900369]

17. **Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to prevent the use of fire and rehire practices. [900385]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government consulted on a draft statutory code of practice on fire and rehire earlier this year. The Government response and the final version of the code will be published in spring next year. The code sets out employers' responsibilities when

seeking to change contractual terms and conditions of employment, and is designed to ensure that dismissal and re-engagement is used only as the last resort.

Dame Nia Griffith: The very fact that only last week P&O Cruises felt able to say it would impose new contractual terms on workers through fire and rehire tactics shows that some employers still feel that they can use these tactics with impunity, in spite of the Government's promise to clamp down on them. I thank the Minister for his answer, but is there any way he could bring in the legislation more urgently, so that we can protect our workers properly?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with the sentiment behind the hon. Lady's question in terms of bringing legislation forward as quickly as possible. Of course, we have to get this right. I have to say that P&O was not a fire and rehire situation; it was a fire-only situation, which was strongly condemned by this Government and by many other stakeholders, and a civil investigation is ongoing into the matters surrounding that case. But yes, the hon. Lady is right, and we are keen to get the new statutory code of practice in place as soon as possible. We expect that to be in spring next year, and once it is in force, the employment tribunal can increase employees' compensation by up to 25% when an employer fails unreasonably to comply with the code.

Mick Whitley: Last week, concerns were raised that the Carnival group was making provision to fire and rehire hundreds of staff working on P&O Cruises and Cunard Line, reviving memories of last year, when P&O Ferries sacked over 800 of its employees and replaced them with agency labour, while the Government sat back and let it happen. Does the Minister agree that the only way to provide workers with the security they deserve is by legislating to outlaw fire and rehire tactics once and for all? If not, it is time the Government came clean with the British public and admitted that they will always side with bad bosses.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is not the case at all. We take these matters very seriously, but we do not think that completely banning fire and rehire is the right thing to do because there are some situations in which companies need to restructure quickly. We think that employees' proper consultation rights should be observed. Where they are not observed and where an employer does not follow the statutory code of practice, employment tribunals can impose a significant uplift on redundancy payments. We think that is the best way to deal with this, by striking a balance between companies and their workers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Fire and rehire is rife in this country. Research published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that, between March 2020 and July 2021, 43,000 employers changed their employees' contracts through fire and rehire techniques. The Government promised in March 2022 that they would take action following the P&O scandal, and we now learn that it will be a full two years since that time before anything actually changes. Given the propensity for using fire and rehire tactics,

can the Minister tell us how many employees he estimates will have had their contract changed through fire and rehire in that two-year period?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not have that number to hand. We want to strike a balance between employers and their workforces. We condemn what P&O did. We need to bring in new measures on fire and rehire, and we have committed to do that. A consultation is clearly needed to make sure those provisions are fair on both businesses and workers. That is what we are doing right now, and we intend to bring those provisions before the House next spring.

High Street Outlets

4. **Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to encourage businesses to open outlets on high streets. [900371]

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to encourage businesses to open outlets on high streets. [900374]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): In addition to small business rate relief, under which businesses with a rateable value of less than £12,000 pay no business rates whatsoever, in his autumn statement the Chancellor announced a further business rate support package, worth £4.3 billion over the next five years, to support small businesses and the high street.

Alistair Strathern: My constituents in Flitwick have been dismayed over the past few years as their high street has been gradually hollowed out, losing much-loved businesses and, recently, both their post office and banking facilities. Sadly, that is far too familiar for people in towns and villages across my constituency, where businesses are weighed down by high cost pressures and a business rate system that no longer seems fit for purpose or fair. When will the Government commit to bringing forward the comprehensive business rates reform that my businesses are crying out for, so that we can get back to revitalised, much-loved high streets?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and welcome him to his place in the House.

Of course, we are very concerned about the high street. The pressures on the high street are largely caused by changing consumer habits, but the Government have stepped in to ease pressures, such as through the £20 billion energy bill support scheme and the £17 billion business rate package.

The hon. Gentleman talks about completely scrapping the current business rate system, which Labour has committed to do, but it is incumbent on Labour to set out how it will replace the £25 billion that business rates currently add to the Exchequer. What is the solution? It is not right for him or others simply to say they will scrap that £25 billion without setting out how they will replace it.

Dr Huq: The vanishing of Debenhams, Wilko and Paperchase has left huge holes in our town centres—I have lost a Wilko in both Ealing and Acton. Analysis shows that the incentivisation of out-of-town retail is

the culprit. Labour has a five-point plan to revive our high streets, putting communities first. What are the Government doing about all this?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not accept that, although out-of-town shopping can put pressure on the high street. Local authorities have to be very careful when they give planning consent for out-of-town shopping centres that could put pressure on the high street. That is clearly an important part of the planning process, but it is not the responsibility of central Government, of course. I would be interested to see that five-point plan, but if it includes the scrapping of business rates, which raise £25 billion, I ask the Labour Front Bench team once again—I have yet to receive an answer—where is that money coming from?

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Labour-run Leeds City Council has decided that it wants to bring parking charges to my market town of Wetherby—it currently has no parking charges. Does my hon. Friend agree that the investments we are making are all very well, but if local authorities make it harder for shoppers by increasing their costs, that will choke off the high street rather than help it?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and he is absolutely right to say that some local authorities see parking charges as potential revenue raisers, but this is in effect a tax on business. Local authorities can, of course, make charges where appropriate, but they should only cover the cost of maintaining those car parks; they should not be a punitive tax on businesses.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There are streets in the west end of this city, important to our economy, that would certainly benefit from the ability of tourists to reclaim VAT, aren't there?

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend raises an important point that this Department has looked at carefully. We are concerned about the impact of the withdrawal of that tax concession on businesses, not just for these businesses themselves, but for the other businesses that rely on foreign visitors—I am talking about hoteliers, restaurateurs and so on. We are keen to look at this matter. The Chancellor committed in his autumn statement to review the evidence to see what impact this was having. We will look at that with great interest and make our views known strongly to the Exchequer.

Exports: Small and Medium-sized Businesses

5. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help small and medium-sized businesses to export. [900372]

19. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help small and medium-sized businesses to export. [900388]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): The Government's export support for SMEs includes the export support service; the export academy; more than 400 export champions; our network of nearly 200 trade advisers; and support provided around

the world through the international market service. Just last week, my noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for exports announced that UK Export Finance is introducing more flexible fast-track financing for SMEs, making it easier than ever for UK firms to sell into international markets.

Ashley Dalton: Last week, I welcomed the Duke of Gloucester to my constituency to award local SME GaraDry the King's award for enterprise for its innovation in international trade. How can such businesses have confidence in the Government's support for SMEs when Britain's export growth is among the worst of the G7 economies and is forecast to be falling?

Greg Hands: I certainly welcome the royal visit that the hon. Lady had in her constituency; it is always fantastic to see that support, particularly for exporters. However, I think she is a bit off on the data. When we look at export data, we see that we had £877 billion-worth of exports in the 12 months to the end of September 2023. We are heading towards the £1 trillion export target, and that figure is up by almost £200 billion—or 29%—on the figure from five years ago, which was before Brexit.

Mohammad Yasin: In 2021, the Government launched a rebranded trade show programme pilot to great fanfare, but between November 2021 and March 2022 only two businesses in the UK were funded under the programme. We now hear that the scheme has been shelved. Will the Minister explain what has happened to that initiative, which has launched a number of household British fashion brands abroad and which served as a vital gateway under the last Labour Government for SMEs to access new markets?

Greg Hands: The last Labour Government were, of course, in office rather a long time ago. It is not always incumbent on successive Governments more than a decade later to keep previous Labour Government schemes going. The scheme to which the hon. Gentleman refers was a pilot, which did not yield the successes that we might have hoped. However, I will take no criticism from him and the Labour party for the support we are giving to exporters. We are spending £200 million over this spending review period to support SMEs to grow and succeed internationally, and we have a record to be commended.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Kenya, may I welcome the fact that this week the Government held the successful global investment summit and are taking steps to help British businesses to export? I recently returned from Nairobi, where I visited some of the UK's flagship investments, including in infrastructure and clean energy. Will the Minister provide an update on the Africa investment summit next year? I also ask that the UK continues to bang the drum for British businesses to export to Kenya, the gateway to east Africa.

Greg Hands: First, let me commend my hon. Friend for winning "Speech of the Year" at last night's *The Spectator* parliamentary awards. She has continued her fine form today. She does an amazing job for the country as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Kenya,

and her recent visit in September was a big success, particularly on the infrastructure side of things. She has already referred to railways and other infrastructure. She mentioned the UK-Africa investment summit, which will take place in London next year and will further our engagement with Kenya and other African countries, fostering modern partnerships in trade and investment in areas such as resilient infrastructure, clean technologies and renewable energy.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend back to his post. I pay tribute to him and to the Secretary of State for the international trade deals that they have struck during their period in office. The UK has strategic relationships with a number of Gulf nations. What progress is being made on a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council? If it is more challenging to strike a deal across all nations, what bilateral trade agreements can we explore in order to exploit the opportunity for those nations to invest significantly in the UK?

Greg Hands: I am excited by the prospect of the deal with the Gulf Cooperation Council, with which the Secretary of State is very much engaged, and I am looking forward to being re-engaged with it. It is a huge opportunity for us, as the latest figures show that total trade between the UK and the Gulf is worth more than £60 billion. We are looking forward to moving the negotiation forward and getting a very good deal for the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister back to the Department for Business and Trade, and I look forward to helping him hopefully to do better this time around. According to the International Monetary Fund, over the past decade British food and drink exports, including from SMEs, rose by just 3%, which was the lowest growth of any G7 country. The US, Canada, Italy and Japan all saw their exports grow by between 30% and 95%. Government Ministers will not negotiate a veterinary agreement with the EU, which would help, they have cut funding for trade missions, and now the Secretary of State has cut funding to go to trade shows too. Why will Ministers not share our ambitions for Britain to have the fastest export growth rate of any G7 country?

Greg Hands: Of course, the hon. Gentleman and I have been around in these jobs for a while. He was possibly the last Trade Minister under the last Labour Government, so I will not be taking any lectures from him on how to improve UK exports. We have been financing dozens of global trade missions and we are spending £200 million over the spending review period on exports in general. On the export figures, he neglected to mention services exports, which totalled £463 billion in the 12 months to September 2023. That is a huge increase of 42% on our performance in 2018, before Brexit.

Retail Crime

6. **Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** What assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of retail crime on high street businesses. [900373]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government are clear that violent and abusive behaviour towards any public-facing worker is never acceptable, and we recognise the implications that such incidents can have on businesses as well as victims. On 23 October, the Government launched a retail crime action plan, which includes a commitment to prioritise police attendance at the scene where violence has been used towards shop staff, where an offender has been detained by store security or where evidence needs to be secured by police personnel. The Government also launched Project Pegasus, a unique private-public partnership that will radically improve the way retailers are able to share intelligence with the police.

Daniel Zeichner: In recent weeks, I, like many colleagues, have visited shops in my constituency as part of USDAW's—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—Freedom from Fear campaign. I have heard from staff about the daily levels of verbal and sometimes physical abuse they face, and the huge losses from theft. Will the Minister say more about what the Government are doing to stem that tide of lawlessness, particularly for independent retailers who may not be part of the Pegasus Project? Will she also say how much is being lost to theft, because that costs all of us as customers, as well as costing retailers?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This is not a victimless crime; it impacts shops, workers and customers. Credit is due to the hon. Gentleman for visiting the shops in his constituency. Overall crime is down by 54% since 2010, and down by 10% since last year. However, he is right that shoplifting is up, which is why the action plan is so important. The action plan works for our high streets because it is about ensuring that the police are determined to collect evidence and to go after repeat offenders and organised gangs.

Project Pegasus is key because it is a public-private partnership. We have created an extra offence, with a longer sentence, for those who are violent towards a shop worker. With those extra programmes of work and evidence collection, more people will be convicted, so those who are involved in crime against shops will spend some time in prison.

Regulators: Statutory Duties

8. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If she will make a comparative assessment of the adequacy of the number of statutory duties of the Competition and Markets Authority and other regulators reporting to her Department. [900376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The CMA has a primary statutory duty to promote competition both inside and outside the UK for the benefit of consumers, which provides the CMA with a clear, strong focus on delivering for consumers. In our recent steer to the CMA, we did point out how very important it is that it focuses also on economic growth.

John Penrose: Regulators such as the CMA have huge powers, so Parliament must give clear instructions about how those powers should and should not be used. Does the Minister agree that the CMA's instruction is a

model of the kind of clear and strong legal duty that leaves no doubt in regulators' minds about the job that Parliament has asked them to do. Will he join me in pushing for equally clear and focused duties for other economic regulators where, sadly, the same cannot currently be said?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his very important work in this area. I know that reducing the regulatory burden is a cause that is very close to his heart, and to the hearts of those in the Chamber today who supported his amendment in the recent Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill. That view is also shared by myself and by the Secretary of State. We are very keen to make sure that, as well as ensuring that sectors are well regulated, our economic regulators focus on competition and economic growth.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I disagree. The Competition and Markets Authority is not only the dog that does not bark, but the dog that does not bite. We see multinational corporations and investment funds of such a size that they have more power than a sovereign Government. When will the Government give the CMA the powers and authority needed to tackle the corporate monopolies and cartels that have so much sway over our lives?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Member raises an important matter. That is why the Government are legislating in this space, through the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, which gives the CMA huge new powers, particularly over some of our largest online platforms—platforms that have what we describe as strategic market status. This is world-leading legislation that will tackle many of the examples of detriment that he will be aware of and that he raises in his question today.

High Street Postal Services

9. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to maintain access to high street postal services. [900377]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The Government protect the post office branch network by setting access criteria and minimum service levels to be provided by branches across the country. More post offices have opened this year than have closed. The network is as large today as it has been for five years, with around 11,700 branches open, above the 11,500 target that we set for the Post Office.

Florence Eshalomi: The Minister mentioned that more post offices are opening. Actually, they are closing. The Clapham Common post office in my Vauxhall constituency has been earmarked for closure and there are no current plans to replace it. I am fighting this closure, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and local ward councillors in the Communications Workers Union. This is a pattern that we are seeing across the country. It has been identified that 260 postal shopfronts have closed across the country in the past 10 years. With those closures, we are seeing elderly and

vulnerable people—people who need their post offices on the high street—having to travel further. Will the Minister tell me what more he and the Government are doing to protect these vital services?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Post Office has launched a public consultation regarding the Clapham Common post office. The Post Office maintains that locals will continue to have good access to services. There is a post office within a mile of the Clapham Road branch, and three further branches within two miles. Nevertheless, the Government support the post office network with a significant amount of financial support—£2.5 billion over the past 10 years—so we do continue to support post offices. We know how important they are to constituents and other colleagues in this House. I am very happy to meet her to discuss this particular case.

CPTPP: Ratification

10. **John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): What her planned timetable is for the ratification of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. [900378]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): We are working at pace to ratify the CPTPP, which we hope to bring into force next year. We are the first European country to join the CPTPP, and I know how powerful it will be for British businesses and consumers, which is why this Government are progressing legislation as quickly as possible, with Second Reading of the Bill having taken place in the other place on 21 November. We are already playing our part as the second largest economy in the agreement. The Secretary of State met other CPTPP Ministers two weeks ago in San Francisco to discuss the blossoming future of the agreement.

John McDonnell: Across the House, over a period of time, Members working with organisations such as the Trade Justice Movement have expressed concern about the inclusion of investor-state dispute settlement procedures within treaties, because they restrict our own country's ability to regulate. I raised that issue in September and suggested that, as the Government have done with Australia and New Zealand, we agree in a separate letter that the settlement procedure will not be included in this treaty. I was then told—rather curtly—that it was too late. Actually, it is not too late. There is the potential to do a side letter, as we have with other countries, to exclude an investor-state dispute settlement procedure. In the light of the Government's negotiating remit for the free trade agreement with Canada, the Government are specifically seeking to exclude that procedure. I wonder whether the Government might think again.

Greg Hands: It is good to be sparring with the right hon. Gentleman again from the Dispatch Box—we have both had a few ups and downs since we last went head to head. CPTPP does not compromise the UK's right to regulate at all; it expressly preserves the rights of states to regulate proportionately, fairly and in the public interest. It is worth reminding the House that the UK has never lost an ISDS case. Such procedures actually help to protect UK investments abroad. British

investments in Canada totalled £40.6 billion in 2020-21, which will be covered for the first time by these protections. As I say, if we cannot trust Canada in international affairs, who can we trust? I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the deal cannot be ratified until the legislation has been approved by Parliament and the deal has completed the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process.

Business Exports

11. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to help increase the number of businesses that export. [900379]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): The Government's published export strategy focuses on addressing the challenges that UK businesses face when exporting. The Government continue to promote exporting, and to support companies through our network of international trade advisers, sector specialists, and the export support service. All our services can be accessed on [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk).

Andrew Selous: In my constituency I have companies such as EyeOL, Lindal Valve, Peli Biothermal, Friction Marketing, Signature Flatbreads and 198 smaller businesses, all of which export globally. The smaller businesses export through Amazon. That is fantastic, as there is evidence that businesses that export can pay their staff more, but what is the best way to get businesses that have not yet realised that the world is their marketplace exporting not just to Europe but around the whole world?

Greg Hands: I commend my hon. Friend for being a long-standing champion of his constituency exporters. As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to South Africa and Mauritius, he knows only too well the importance of exports. The Government's export strategy is clear. We have a clear programme to assist small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly first-time exporters. All of our services can be accessed via [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk), and we have a network of international trade advisers locally for Bedfordshire who are able to help as well.

Business in Essex: Exports

12. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support businesses in Essex to export. [900380]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): As a fellow Essex MP, I can assure my right hon. Friend that this matter is close to my heart. Businesses can access support through [great.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk), including our self-serve digital offer, the export support service, international trade advisers and UK Export Finance. My Department is helping Essex companies such as Icon LifeSaver in Colchester to secure potential sales of over £10 million in the US, Colombia and Estonia. Kestrel Liner Agencies, which is headquartered in my constituency and last year received its third Queen's Award for international trade, has also benefited. We are focused on priority trade barriers in particular, which could boost UK exports by around £20 billion over five years.

Priti Patel: The Secretary of State will know inside out what the wonderful county of Essex has to offer when it comes to business exports. We have companies such as Wilkin & Sons and Wicks Manor, and many other producers who will sell the produce that households across the country will enjoy this Christmas, at home and abroad. Will the Secretary of State highlight how she is working across Government with other Departments to reduce the barriers to export that cover, for example, produce, manufacturing costs, energy costs, and even the processing of animals?

Kemi Badenoch: Removing barriers to trade is one of this Government's top priorities. My right hon. Friend will know many of the things that the Government have been doing, including subsidising energy bills, because we recognise the difficulties that manufacturers and processing plants face. At the moment I am particularly focused on resolving trade barriers. We have resolved 178 trade barriers worth more than £6.5 billion to businesses, including those in Essex, over the next five years. Food producers in her constituency specifically will be pleased to know that just last month, when I was in Japan for the G7, we resolved a barrier restricting exports of cooked poultry from the UK to Japan, which I think will provide a festive boost to UK exporters worth an estimated £10 million over five years.

Arms Export Licences: Israel

13. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of revoking arms export licences to Israel. [900381]

15. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of revoking arms export licenses to Israel. [900383]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Since the barbaric terrorist acts by Hamas against Israel on 7 October and the subsequent conflict in the region, the Government have been monitoring the situation very closely. The UK supports Israel's legitimate right to defend itself and take action against terrorism, provided that that is within the bounds of international humanitarian law. Export licences are kept under careful and continual review as standard, and we are able to amend licences or refuse new licence applications if they are inconsistent with the strategic export licensing criteria.

Joanna Cherry: No one is suggesting that Israel does not have the right to defend itself—but, as the Secretary of State says and we agree, within the bounds of international law. The mass killing of civilians in Gaza should concern us all. Without resorting to platitudes about the relative toughness of the UK's arms export controls, could she please identify which arms export licences are currently in force, including open licences for end use by the Israeli defence and security forces, and provide details of them to the House?

Kemi Badenoch: I do not believe that is something that I am able to do or should do. I can tell the hon. and learned Lady that last year we granted 114 standard individual export licences for military goods valued at

£42 million to Israel. If there is a specific issue that she would like to highlight, we are prepared to look at it, but she will know that security and defence exports are not necessarily best discussed on the Floor of the House or in public, for obvious reasons.

Steven Bonnar: A state that supplies military equipment that is used in the commission of violations of international humanitarian law is at risk of complicity in a humanitarian catastrophe. In continuing with those licences and supplying UK arms to Israel, what assessment does the Secretary of State make of the potential for UK Government complicity, if Israel is found to have committed war crimes in Gaza by the ongoing International Criminal Court investigation?

Kemi Badenoch: I am quite surprised that there is not a word of condemnation, and the implication that the UK is complicit is really not the sort of thing we would expect from a British Member of Parliament in this House. I completely disagree with the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question. The Government take our defence export responsibilities extremely seriously and operate some of the most robust and transparent export controls in the world.

India Trade Deal

14. **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What recent progress she has made on negotiating a trade deal with India. [900382]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): I am pleased to confirm that advanced talks with India are ongoing. We are in round 13, with discussions currently focused on goods, market access, services and investment. We remain clear that we will not sign until we have a free trade agreement that fully benefits the UK people and economy. We are focused on the deal, not the date.

Mr Davis: Total trade in goods and services between the UK and India was £36.3 billion in the year to March 2023. An FTA with the fifth-largest economy in the world, and one of the fastest-growing, would be a massive boost to the UK economy and put UK businesses at the front of the queue to supply India's growing middle class, which is expected to be a quarter of a billion consumers by 2050. This is an important exploitation of Brexit, so will the Minister do all he can to bring this deal over the line as soon as possible for Britain?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend of course has a lot of experience in complex negotiations and I can say that we, like him, will not be satisfied until we have the right deal. He is right that a deal with India would be a big step forward in the UK's post-Brexit strategy to refocus UK trade on the Indo-Pacific region, which represents one third of global GDP. My negotiators and I continue to work at pace and we will negotiate until we have secured the right deal. I warmly welcome his interest in doing more trade with India.

Steel Industry

16. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support the steel industry. [900384]

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government recognise the vital role of the steel sector, and are working with the sector to achieve a sustainable future. We have announced £500 million of support towards a joint £1.25 billion investment with Tata Steel to achieve the transformation of Port Talbot, and we are also in talks with British Steel. We have provided the steel sector with £730 million in energy costs relief since 2013, and announced the British industry supercharger—decisive measures to reduce energy costs for energy-intensive industries.

Tonia Antoniazzi: In communities across the country—particularly in Wales through Port Talbot—steel has created high-paying, productive jobs for generations, but we are the only G7 country with a steel industry in decline. Thousands of jobs are being lost. What we need is a long-term plan that supports steelworkers and their communities to maintain those good jobs into the future and transition to net zero, so why is the Minister making short-term decisions instead of delivering on the long-term industrial strategy that communities such as mine, and our steel industry and workers, desperately need?

Ms Ghani: That is just not correct, especially the comparisons to the G7. The decisions over Port Talbot have been hanging around for quite some time, and we were able to work with Tata Steel to ensure that jobs were confirmed long into the future. Tata Steel employs more than 8,000 people, and that was under serious threat until the investment was secured. Now consultation is taking place with the unions, and the reality is, as the media have noted, that the unions themselves are not sure how they want to take this forward. We were absolutely sure that we wanted steelmaking in that area and that jobs should be secured. That is why we offered the support that we did.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I have written again to the Secretary of State to seek specific confirmation of the Government's position on a virgin steelmaking sovereign capability in this country. Will she ensure that that specific question is addressed when I receive a response?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is first and foremost an advocate for the steelworks and steelworkers in her constituency. Obviously that letter will be on its way, and I thank her so much for raising it.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): We are used to this Government flip-flopping all over the place. It would be funny if it were not so serious for business, exports and jobs. So when we heard the Treasury telling everyone who would listen that the Government's response to the carbon border adjustment mechanism would be in the autumn statement, we were not surprised that it was not. The future of steel investment and growth relies on a clear and certain path from Government. We cannot have our business disadvantaged any more, so what is the decision on the CBAM? If this Government cannot decide, is it not time to make way for one who can?

Ms Ghani: Decisions have to be taken while responding to the consultations that take place. We have been absolutely determined to ensure that steelmaking will remain competitive in the UK, which is why we have

been able to support the steel sector with high energy costs and put over £1 billion in place to deal with decarbonisation technology. When it comes to Tata, the support we have pledged involves an investment of over £1 billion to ensure that jobs remain secure in the future, and negotiations continue with British Steel as well. That is the support that we have provided and will continue to provide for steel in the UK.

Topical Questions

T1. [900391] **Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): This week, I hosted more than 200 global CEOs and investors at the UK global investment summit, which was an extraordinary success. The Prime Minister set a £9.5 billion target to beat, and we tripled it, securing £29.5 billion of investment and more than 12,000 jobs. The success of the GIS is a vote of confidence in the UK. My Department's work, supported by the £20 billion business tax cut in the autumn statement, is securing our country as a world-leading business and investment destination.

Matt Vickers: Many people are aware of the incredible story of the Redcar steelworks site being reborn as Teesworks, creating 20,000 jobs and unlocking £2 billion in private investment. Fewer people are aware that Stockton's very own freeport business park is being built at the airport. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Teesside, as the home of the UK's first and biggest freeport, offers a unique opportunity to those investing in the industries of the future?

Kemi Badenoch: I do agree, and my hon. Friend is quite right to praise the progress that has been made on delivering Teesside freeport. The freeport has already been successful in securing several landmark investments, including from SeAH Wind, which is investing £650 million in building an offshore wind manufacturing facility. That will create around 750 high-skilled jobs and builds on the measures announced in the autumn statement last week to further strengthen the offer of UK freeports. My Department will continue to work with freeports, in Teesside and elsewhere, on securing high-value investment.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): This is the Department in charge of growth, investment and exports. In the latest figures, following the autumn statement, growth has been downgraded. Business investment is still forecast to be the lowest in the G7, and goods exports have declined, both to the EU and to non-EU countries. Given that there are so many amazing businesses and sectors in the UK, how do the Government account for their poor performance?

Kemi Badenoch: I will not allow the hon. Gentleman to spin his way out of what is actually a very good news story for the Government. The fact is that the UK has overtaken France to become the world's eighth-largest manufacturing nation. We are the world's fifth-largest exporter. We are growing faster than Germany and France, and have received more investment than them combined. We are the top investment destination, certainly

for financial services. We are doing well. Perhaps this is the moment for me to tell him what businesses told me at the global investment summit: that they were unimpressed by the Labour shadow Ministers they had met; that their offer was unimaginative; and that they were repetitive, and had no vision for the future of business in the UK.

Jonathan Reynolds: We follow the Secretary of State's Twitter feed, and quite simply, we do not believe her.

I want to ask the Secretary of State about late payment. In the nine years that the Government have spent consulting on late payments, 450,000 businesses have gone under while waiting to be paid. Why do the Government's new plans on late payment apply only to firms contracting with the Government? Why do they not rather follow our proposal to make sure that all public companies disclose their payment practices?

Kemi Badenoch: I have been working with the Federation of Small Businesses and others on late payments. The hon. Gentleman will have heard the measures announced in the autumn statement; this is an issue that the Government take very seriously. I disagree that we are implementing our plans in a partial way. We will resolve this issue, but I am afraid that I completely disagree with the Opposition: have done quite a lot on this, and many businesses have praised the measures that we announced in the autumn statement.

T4. [900394] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On 14 November, the Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the US state of Florida. This is the seventh such agreement that the Government have signed with a state in the US, and I understand that there are ongoing discussions with other states. Obviously, that is welcome. Will the Secretary of State give us an assessment of the effect of this approach, and tell us what the next steps are to getting a more general trade agreement with the United States?

Kemi Badenoch: We are ready to have a free trade agreement with the US, but it is not undertaking free trade agreements with any country. That is, of course, disappointing, but it knows that we stand ready. That is why we have the state MOU programme. The latest figures show that UK-US trade has reached £310 billion. We are the biggest investor in Florida. I was pleased to meet Governor DeSantis earlier this month, and I also met the California Governor, Gavin Newsom, who wanted to be even faster in signing an MOU with the UK. They believe that this country has a lot of opportunity, and they want to do business with us.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Import tariffs on egg products allow us to recognise the higher cost of UK egg production because of safety, welfare and environmental considerations. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that eggs and egg products will be afforded sensitive product status by the UK in future free trade agreement negotiations, and that import tariffs will remain in place on those products?

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): It is difficult to comment on tariffs in live negotiations, but I would say two things to the hon. Gentleman: first, this country imports very few eggs from abroad, and secondly, anything that happens

with imported eggs would not change our standards on food imports, food safety and animal welfare in this country.

T7. [900400] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): In yesterday's data Bill debate, Ministers gave clear and positive replies about the importance of interoperable data standards, and the need for an investable timetable of which sectors will get smart data and when. However, they were much less clear—one might even call it bashful—about giving a date for when that timetable will be published. Is my hon. Friend the Minister willing to be a little less coy this morning?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I am not known for my coyness. My hon. Friend has done very important work in this space, and we share his ambition: I chair the Smart Data Council, and we are planning to open up databases right across our economy to allow for more competition in the worlds of energy, telecoms, and buying and selling houses. He has been a great champion of all those measures. I am very keen to bring forward the roadmap that my hon. Friend has referred to, hopefully as early as January next year.

T2. [900392] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): At their busiest time of year, British cheese exporters are warning of damaging losses as the Government continue to fail to reach a deal that ensures access to the Canadian market. Every day that the Government fail, companies such as the Snowdonia Cheese Company in north Wales lose contracts, and they cannot make plans with the looming deadline of 31 December a matter of weeks away. Can the Minister update the House on the negotiations to extend the deadline for cheese tariff quotas between the UK and Canada?

Kemi Badenoch: We are aware of the situation, and are working on it—negotiations to resolve it are actively ongoing. UK cheese is in increasing demand in Canada, and exports of UK cheese benefit businesses on both sides of the Atlantic. The UK has made continued and repeated efforts to find a solution since negotiations began, including by seeking an extension to the current arrangements, and we are clear that the UK is rightly entitled to ongoing access to Canada's World Trade Organisation cheese tariff quota under our rights and obligations at the WTO.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Brazil, I know that the best way of supporting exports from my Dudley businesses is to remove barriers to trade. That is why I was absolutely delighted when both our countries signed a double taxation agreement, in good faith and to the highest possible standards. There appear to be complications in Brazil at the moment with ratifying that agreement through Congress, as we have ratified it through our Parliament. What more can Ministers—the Chancellor of the Exchequer, perhaps—do to try to persuade Brazil that it is indeed a very good deal for itself as well?

Greg Hands: First, I praise my hon. Friend for the amazing job he does as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Brazil. Partly due to his efforts, UK-Brazil trade has increased by 33% in the past year alone, so we are doing

a very good job there. The UK-Brazil double taxation agreement was passed into UK law in June, and is estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of pounds to the UK. I hope that Brazil ratifies the agreement soon: it is very much in its own interests as well. As my hon. Friend knows, the Chancellor has made very strong representations to that effect, and we look forward to strengthening our trade relationship at the next UK-Brazil joint economic and trade committee next year.

T5. [900395] **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Under current laws, unions are required to use electronic means to communicate with their members about matters relating to work, yet are prevented from using the very same electronic methods when balloting their members for industrial action. Does the Minister accept that it should be possible to ballot trade union members on industrial action electronically?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is something we are looking at; we have been looking at it for some time, and are keen to bring forward the results of our deliberations very shortly.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): May I ask the Trade Minister, whom I welcome back to his position, what efforts the Government are making to raise awareness of the developing countries trading scheme, particularly among African countries? What encouragement is he giving those countries to take advantage of that scheme, which would benefit them and us?

Greg Hands: Again, we have almost a full turnout of the Prime Minister's trade envoys in the House this morning, and I commend my hon. Friend for the work he does as the Prime Minister's trade envoy not just to one country, but to three—Angola, Zambia and Ethiopia. He rightly takes a strong interest in the UK's forward-leaning and exemplary developing countries trading scheme. The scheme was launched on 19 June by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who is now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and provides duty-free or nearly duty-free access to goods to 37 African countries. The scheme was launched to significant media attention in Ethiopia, and there was a series of events in more than 10 countries.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson): the onus is on all of us in this House to continue to extol the virtues and the benefits of the UK's developing countries trade scheme. We have taken the EU scheme and gone significantly further, making it more generous for developing countries. We should all be united in extolling the virtues of the UK's scheme, and of the brilliant job the UK is doing to promote goods access to developing countries.

T6. [900396] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Could I revisit my earlier question to the Secretary of State about arms export licences to Israel? I and many others do not agree with her secrecy approach, and I and many others believe that Members of Parliament are entitled to this information, so I will try another approach. Could she detail the classification and description of the goods, the stated end use and the licence type,

including direct transfers and those via third countries, and could she place that information in the Library for Members of Parliament?

Kemi Badenoch: I believe there is a quarterly register that may contain some of the information the hon. and learned Member is asking for, but I am not able or going to list every single export decision that has been made by the export control joint unit. I will see what I can do to get her a fuller answer, but she will know that this is a very sensitive issue. I have a quasi-judicial role, and I must be seen to be impartial at all times. I will do what I can to provide the information she wants, but I do not have a list to provide her with this morning, and certainly not on the Floor of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On Scunthorpe, what major economy does not have a blast furnace and the ability to make virgin steel?

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Almost all the G20 countries have operational blast furnaces, and a number of those are transitioning to electric arc furnaces as well. We know the importance of Scunthorpe, which is a key driver of economic growth. British Steel provides a third of all domestic production supplied to the construction and rail industries. We continue to be in negotiations to make sure that we secure the best deal, and one that is good value for taxpayers, when it comes to Scunthorpe.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): On Tuesday, we finally had answers from Lisa Wilkinson about the mistakes that led to the collapse of that much-loved firm, but Ms Wilkinson was not able to answer why 70% of the profits in the last four years were paid out in dividends to family trusts while the deficit in the pension fund amounted to now £50 million. Will the Secretary of State ensure that regulators explore every option to claw back those dividends so that Wilko pensioners are not short-changed?

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Member raises a very important point. He has looked at this matter very carefully, including on the Business and Trade Committee, and I thank him for his work. I was pleased to give evidence to his Committee on Tuesday. Clearly, the Insolvency Service is looking at this. It is looking at the directors' conduct report from PricewaterhouseCoopers, the administrator, which it needs to look at very carefully. It is clear from that report so far that there is no evidence of director misconduct, but further work is ongoing. The Insolvency Service is due to meet the administrator, PwC, in January, and we will look at the situation as it unfolds.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): One of the most effective ways we could strengthen both the public sector and the private sector is the creation of an office of the whistleblower, as long championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson). That would strengthen corporate governance, empower those who see wrongdoing to come forward and protect them from intimidation, and strengthen the UK as a place to do business. Given that this week is Whistleblowing Awareness Week, could I encourage Ministers to bring forward proposals to support this important initiative?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his work in this area, in which he has great expertise. I met my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) yesterday to discuss this very matter.

She has set out some key proposals in this area. We are currently undertaking a review of whistleblowing, and we hope to report to the House very shortly.

Business of the House

10.34 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 4 December will include:

MONDAY 4 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

TUESDAY 5 DECEMBER—Opposition day (1st allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 6 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Sentencing Bill.

THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER—General debate on tackling Islamophobia, followed by a debate on a motion on the implementation of public registers of beneficial ownership in the UK's overseas territories and Crown dependencies. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 8 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 December includes:

MONDAY 11 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill.

Lucy Powell: So it is another week, and another business statement, yet still no emergency legislation on Rwanda as promised. It has been another week of infighting, division and chaos on illegal and managed migration from the Conservative party. Apparently, some in the Cabinet—I do not know whether the Leader of the House is one of them—are holding that legislation back, while others clamour for it, with the Minister for Immigration going rogue. The Prime Minister is stranded between them, too weak to face down either side and too weak to act. Weeks after it was promised in days, when will we finally see the treaty and legislation?

As well as a treaty to negotiate, we have the ongoing situation between Israel and Gaza—I welcome the further extension in the temporary truce this morning—war still raging in Ukraine, a diplomatic row with Greece, visits to Kyiv and the middle east, a NATO summit, COP28 this week and a visit to Brussels next week, yet not a peep from the Foreign Secretary in this House, and no reporting back to Members. When I last raised this issue with the Leader of the House, she said that the House must be able to “hold him to account”. When? I welcome the Procedure Committee looking into the matter, but the Government could and should do more to ensure that we are able to raise issues directly and regularly, now. We have had no Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office statements this week or last, only an urgent question—yet again the Government are being dragged here instead of respecting the House of Commons, and it is just not good enough. The next questions to the Foreign Office will be on Tuesday 12 December. Will the Leader of the House ensure that some progress on holding the Foreign Secretary to account is made before then?

It is not just foreign policy decisions that Members are keen to ask Lord Cameron about. Questions about his dealings with Greensill Capital continue to rumble on. Thanks to diligent work by my deputy, my hon.

Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), the Insolvency Service has been asked whether Lord Cameron could be considered a “shadow director” of Greensill. If that is the case, he could be subject to the same duties and liabilities as a director. His tax affairs from the time are now under scrutiny for failing to provide details of his personal use of planes owned by Greensill Capital. My hon. Friend has written to the Chair of the Treasury Committee to ask her to consider whether Lord Cameron's failure to declare that information to the Committee is potentially in contempt of the House. Will the Leader of the House encourage the Chair of the Committee to investigate that? Will she also ensure that Lord Cameron does not wriggle out of frequent appearances in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee?

It is not just his lordship who is dodging scrutiny, because that is the Government's tried and tested tactic on every front. Day by day, they are eroding the conventions of this place with their cavalier approach to scrutiny and good government. On Monday, Members debated minimum service level regulations for rail without the opinion of the Government's own independent assessors, because they did not give them enough time to look at them. Yesterday we had Report stage of the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, and the Government tabled 240 new amendments, some really substantial, at the last minute. It is outrageous.

Even the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg)—not someone I often agree with—thinks that the Government take a dictatorial approach to new legislation. It has also emerged that the Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill not only will not apply to new flats, but now will not even apply to the sale of new houses. We have a flagship Bill to ban leaseholds that does not even ban leaseholds. What a shambles. This is child's play and no way to run a Government.

Finally, this week saw some serious questions about what can only be described as the possible bribery of sitting Members. The hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) was recorded revealing that he had been offered a lot of money to join the Reform party. The offer was five years of an MP's salary as insurance for defecting. These allegations are incredibly serious and tantamount to bribery from a rival political party, potentially in breach of electoral law. It has subsequently emerged that the Government Chief Whip was made aware of these enticements being offered months ago and believed them to be serious and potentially criminal. Have these matters now been passed to the police? If so, when? If not, why not? Why has it taken a secret recording to bring these very serious matters, which go to the heart of our democracy, to the attention of this House?

Penny Mordaunt: First, may I wish everyone a happy St Andrew's day? I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say that our thoughts are still with the hostages who are still in Gaza and their families. We hope that situation can be resolved quickly.

First, the hon. Lady raises the issue of the Foreign Secretary being answerable to this House. She will know that a senior Foreign Office Minister is available to lead on matters, and on very serious issues the Prime Minister would speak from this Dispatch Box. The Foreign Secretary has been forward-leaning and suggested a number of things that he thinks would be highly appropriate

for how he could be held to account in this place and directly by Members of this House. No decisions have been taken yet, because we are waiting to hear from the Procedure Committee. It is right that matters for this House are dealt with by the Committees of this House.

The Foreign Secretary has been forward-leaning. I know that many Members have been concerned in particular about liaison with Members of this House who have hostage families living in their constituencies, whether they are British nationals or have a connection to Britain. The Foreign Secretary is meeting and has offered to meet all such families, and he is in touch with hon. Members who are in that situation. When the Procedure Committee brings forward measures—it is always sensible in its deliberations—I am sure those measures will be put in place.

The hon. Lady criticises us for not allowing scrutiny of legislation. Her point might have had more traction if in yesterday's sitting we had not finished an hour early. Part of the reason for that was that only one Opposition Back Bencher spoke in the debate. I think we were having votes when Report should have been concluded.

The hon. Lady talks about the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. She will know that Bills can be amended during their passage through the House, and we have committed to including a ban on new leasehold houses during the Bill's passage, despite what has been reported. That commitment has not changed.

The hon. Lady talks about migration and emergency legislation, and I will put that in context. It is slightly ironic that Labour is eagerly awaiting further legislation from us on these matters when Labour Members have opposed all the new powers that we have brought in to protect our border. They fought against us in ending free movement and deporting foreign criminals, they would wish to take an extra 110,000 people every year from Europe, and Labour in Wales is giving asylum seekers £1,600 a month. The legislation will be brought forward shortly, but I am not holding my breath on the Opposition supporting it. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I welcome the news that the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, which will bring in modern housing terms, will have its Second Reading in a week or so. Through my right hon. Friend, may I say to the Government that even if we have to add things to the Bill as it goes along, that is better than having to wait another year for this overdue opportunity to reform effectively the scandalous abuses within leasehold, which are loaded so much against 6 million home occupiers—the tenants of leasehold homes?

I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the named day question I tabled for the Foreign Office about the acid attack on Shahzad Akbar on Sunday in England. If Ministers think it is appropriate to make an oral statement, will she please encourage them to do so? It is just as shocking to have a Commonwealth country suspected of an acid attack on one of its nationals—a human rights lawyer—in this country as it was to have the Russian attack in Salisbury and the alleged Indian attack in Canada.

May I ask my right hon. Friend to draw to the Home Secretary's attention the letter he will have received today from the human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, asking whether the police force in the relevant area was right to assess the risk to this man as low when in fact it was high, and whether it is true that the local police had switched off the automatic number plate recognition system for some reason, when that might have helped to detect the culprits of this terrible acid attack?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm welcome for the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill. I will certainly ensure that the Home Secretary is aware of his concerns with regard to that police force. He will know that the next Foreign Office questions are on 12 December, but I will certainly ensure that both the Foreign Secretary and his lead Minister in the Commons are aware of his concerns about that terrible attack.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am sure that the hearts of all of us in the House go out to those innocents who have suffered in Gaza and Israel, and who continue to suffer.

I, too, wish the House a very happy St Andrew's day—to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to us all. On this special day, I have first a word of thanks. The Leader of the House has described me in this Chamber and on social media as “sanctimonious”, “delusional”, “treacherous” and “slopy-shouldered”. I cannot say how much that language from a Tory is a badge of honour for me in Scotland, so I am grateful. Even more, her comments last week about Scotland's drug policies were literally front-page news. The *Daily Record* described them as “an odd rant”—one of the more positive responses. One correspondent asked:

“Why does Penny hate Scotland so much—was she scared by the bagpipes as a child?”

We certainly look forward to her reply to that.

I am afraid that that answer from the Leader of the House illustrated comprehensively the attitudes and contempt on the Government side of the House for the people of Scotland. Maybe she needs to refresh her Government's growing army of scriptwriters in Edinburgh—paid for, of course, by taxpayers' money. No more fat-free, out-of-date Trumpian rants, please.

The Leader of the House has claimed that she takes an interest in the welfare of Scotland's children, so obviously she will have seen the remarkable new assessment of the Scottish child payment posted on the London School of Economics website by a number of academics expert in social policy and economics. It says that the Scottish Government's payments are

“predicted to have a monumental impact on reducing child poverty rates”,

and that they will

“transform Scotland from being one of the most unequal places to live in Europe to being one of the most equal.”

I feel that this House should be given an opportunity to debate it, as child poverty in England rockets. Given her stated interest, will she please confirm that she has read that assessment? If not, would she like me to send her a copy? Or maybe it is really all about clickbait and social media reach, and she does not care at all.

Penny Mordaunt: Let me add some more adjectives to what the hon. Lady described. The SNP really has surpassed itself this week in being self-obsessed, self-pitying and self-delusional. I have hit on why it is losing the case for independence: if Scotland were to take the leap, surely it would want its leaders to be the sort of people to step up, take responsibility and work hard to improve their opportunities, but despite the Scottish Government being one of the most powerful devolved Administrations in the world, they cannot accept responsibility for anything.

Given that the SNP has been in power for 16 years and in every single year its budget has been 20% higher than in England, who does the hon. Lady think is responsible for Scotland's declining A&E performance, increased waiting times, 70% hike in drug-related deaths and 10% increase in the attainment gap? What about the 10 years that the Scottish Government have missed their cancer and housing targets, the rising crime, the soaring violence in schools, the lowest police numbers since 2008 or the 1,700 fewer teachers? Who does she think is responsible for the fact that some police forces do not even investigate certain offences, and are warning that soon they will not be able to attend call-outs?

Who does the hon. Lady think is responsible for plummeting international rankings in maths, literacy and science? Who does she think has snaffled more than half the £1 billion in extra tax that Scottish residents have to pay, which never reaches public services? She talks about Scottish schoolchildren, but who has chosen to pay so much less to Scottish schools per pupil than anywhere else in the UK? The autumn statement has given the Scottish Government an additional £545 million. We are about to hear their budget, and it is a pretty safe bet that it will not be spent wisely. By all means, the hon. Lady can send me what she likes, but there is a trend here. Scottish SNP supporters will soon be outnumbered by the pandas in her local zoo.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I want to raise the brilliance of the Fromehall Mill team and to encourage everyone to look at the *Stroud Times* article and video as they try to raise share support to buy the mill. It is a multi-business powerhouse with everything from bikes and bakeries to artificial intelligence and social action. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House when the next round of community ownership fund bids will be announced? Can we have a debate in the House about smaller companies around the country that are using, selling and teaching AI technology, because they are doing an incredible job?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all her work to champion that brilliant local community initiative. We expect to be able to inform applicants to the third round of the community ownership fund by the end of December. She will know that Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions are on Monday, where she may wish to make the case again.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business debates for Thursday 7 December. Let me give her early notice that if we are awarded time on Thursday 14 December,

the Committee will intend to schedule debates on knife crime and the potential merger of Vodafone and Three. Is the Leader of the House considering giving the Backbench Business Committee any time in the week beginning Monday 18 December? If she is, we would love to know as soon as possible so that we can allocate debates and let Members know. I am glad to say that the Committee was re-established this week and is up and running, but we already have a backlog of debates, with 13 on our waiting list. It is good that we have plenty of business to come.

The Go North East bus industrial action continues, with very few buses running for weeks and, on many routes, not at all. That is having a huge detrimental impact on our local economy and jobs, and on the learning of students who cannot get to their local further education colleges such as Gateshead College in my constituency. Students who struggled to make up the learning lost during covid are being hit again, since they are unable to attend at all without incurring massive additional expense. Can we have a debate in Government time about introducing a compensation scheme from public transport providers that are singularly failing in their service delivery obligations?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advert for forthcoming debates. It is good to know that the Backbench Business Committee is busy. I will certainly let him know as soon as possible about the week of 18 December. He will know that we always try to give as much notice as possible.

I am very sorry to hear about his ongoing constituency issue. That is why we believe minimum service standards in vital sectors—transport is one of them—are so important. I will make sure that the Transport Secretary has heard about that ongoing situation. It is very well understood that students from lower socioeconomic groups will be disproportionately affected by such action.

Dame Caroline Dinage (Gosport) (Con): May we have a debate on decisions by probation and prison services to release on licence? Last Friday, my constituent Levi Kent was stabbed to death. The man charged with his murder was sentenced to two years in prison for wounding with intent just in January this year and was released on licence in September. Will my right hon. Friend back my calls for a serious case review into the licensing decision and monitoring, which may have freed someone who should be in prison to murder?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say how appalled we are to hear of that situation. Our thoughts are with my hon. Friend's constituents and all those affected by this appalling tragedy. The Lord Chancellor is aware of this case. I am sure it will need to be subject to a review into what happened in this instance, but I know the Lord Chancellor's door is always open to her and I think he may have already contacted her. I thank her for all she is doing in her constituency in the aftermath of this appalling event.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Cases of rickets in children, which is associated with malnutrition, have risen by over 700% in the last two years. My Healthy Start Scheme (Take-Up) (No. 2) Bill would

have prevented over 157,000 babies, children and pregnant mothers from missing out on essential food and vitamins, but the Government rejected it. Can we please have an urgent debate on why the Government have dragged our children into Victorian levels of poverty?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that there are over 500,000 fewer children living in absolute poverty under this Administration, and that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) has been doing incredible work, bringing together Government Departments to focus on the early years and to create much more effective pathways at a local level for children who are particularly vulnerable.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time on the effectiveness of the process of calling in? Although the mechanism technically exists to help in planning cases, such as the one I am dealing with in relation to proposals for two drive-through fast food outlets on a busy highways interchange near Risleigh in my constituency, I fear that in practice the process of calling in does not work as it should and needs urgent reform.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all she is doing to make sure that the views of her constituents are heard in such matters. She will know that the next Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions will be on 4 December. I invite her to raise it directly with the Secretary of State. I will also make sure that he has heard what she has said today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Jim Shannon. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"]

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You caught me off guard there, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for bringing me in early.

In every one of our constituencies, across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we have girlguiding groups, which we greatly support as they do wonderful work with girls of all ages. It is therefore with much concern that I ask the Leader of the House, very kindly, whether we may have a debate in Government time on the Floor of the House on the proposed devastating decision by Girlguiding UK to sell off its UK activity centres and to stop direct delivery of girlguiding in British overseas territories and on UK military bases. It will have a catastrophic impact, not just here but across the seas, on young women in the British family, which we all want to preserve and retain.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his early question this week. I think that would be an excellent topic for a Backbench Business debate. Many Members were agreeing with him as he outlined the issues. I know that one of the problems is that the guiding community does not feel that it was properly consulted in advance of the decision being taken, and I know that many right hon. and hon. Members have written to the board to question it. I think an airing on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall would be welcomed.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend is as shocked as I am by some of the working practices of SSE in providing power to commercial premises. My constituent Philip Liddell of ACE Liftaway has paid £73,000 on deposit to SSE, but because of SSE's delays with SSE's solicitors, it has now asked him for an additional £50,000 to move an electricity substation on his commercial premises—an increase of 69%. Mr Liddell did not cause the delay, but he has no choice but to pay up. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in this Chamber to discuss SSE's working practices and how it is holding people to ransom?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a shocking case. As I would normally do, I shall write to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, but I am sure that SSE's diligent public affairs department is listening to business questions, is terribly shocked to hear about the situation, and will get in touch with my right hon. Friend or her constituent before 3 o'clock, when I put my letters in the postbox. I hope that she will keep me posted on progress.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Reading gaol has been empty for 10 years now, and there has been a strong local campaign to turn the historic prison into an arts and heritage hub. The campaign is supported by me and the right hon. Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma), by our local council and by many others. The Ministry of Justice promised us an update this autumn on this important project, but sadly, none has yet been forthcoming. Will the Leader of the House raise the matter with the Justice Secretary?

Penny Mordaunt: I fully understand why the local community wants that heritage building to be brought into use, and it has an arts connection through some of its former inmates. Given that the next MOJ questions is in the new year, I shall certainly raise it with the Lord Chancellor and his team, and ask them to update the hon. Gentleman.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I recently visited the Falkland Islands, at the invitation of the Falkland Islands Government. A subject that arose while we were there is the complete lack of broadband and internet connectivity. I was unable to receive or reply to emails, or look at anything on the web. This is holding back individuals and, in particular, business opportunities in the Falklands. Will the Government arrange a debate to explore how we can improve broadband and internet connectivity in overseas territories?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and many Members who have visited the Falkland Islands will fully understand what she means. In addition to stifling economic opportunities, it is a particular problem for the spouses of our serving personnel out there, whose ability to remain economically active is very limited by this situation. I shall certainly make sure that all the relevant Departments hear what she has said, and we will see what they can do to rectify the situation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The welfare of animals is hugely important to many of my constituents, and they were pleased to see the announcement of the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill in the King's

[Patrick Grady]

Speech, although they would have liked it to go further and cover issues such as puppy smuggling. When can we expect the Bill to be presented to the House and its Second Reading?

Penny Mordaunt: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's approval of that Bill. He will know that we are still committed to the other measures that were in our manifesto. We will just be doing them in other ways, such as fulfilling our commitment on primates through secondary legislation. He will not be surprised to hear me say that further business will be announced in the usual way, but it is good to know that he will be supporting the Government on these measures.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When can we have a debate on the World Health Organisation's pandemic preparedness treaty and the associated international health regulations? Does the Leader of the House realise that there is a lot of concern across the country that this treaty will result in a loss of personal liberty and a real challenge to our sovereignty as a Parliament?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard my hon. Friend's concerns on this matter. I know that many Members have an interest in pandemics, which do not respect borders. International co-operation is needed, but there will be concerns about how the World Health Organisation has responded to particular situations. I know the House will want to scrutinise such measures in detail.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My constituent, Mr Jones, had his car written off by a third-party insurer in December 2022. Due to an insurance loophole, Mr Jones has been forced to settle the car hire costs because his insurer, Admiral, booked the car hire in his name and not through Admiral. Nine months on, Admiral is still refusing to cover the costs and the third-party insurer says it has no liability, so Mr Jones is left thousands of pounds out of pocket because Admiral did not do its job properly. Will the Leader of the House ask Ministers in the Department for Transport or the Department for Business and Trade to try to rectify this loophole, so that nobody else is left short-changed by insurance companies that simply dodge the rules?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about that case. I will raise it with the relevant Departments but, again, I hope the public affairs team at Admiral has heard his question. This is a competitive market, and we have legislated to improve competition on such matters. If it has not already, I hope the public affairs team will be in touch with the hon. Gentleman to discuss what recompense could be made.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The record 1,455 police officers in Bedfordshire are extremely welcome. Can the Home Office reassure the chief constable of Bedfordshire that apprehending illegal and dangerous motorcyclists who terrorise communities is what the Government and, indeed, the people of Bedfordshire want him to do? One young man has already lost his life

and another has suffered life-changing injuries as a result of this behaviour. Roads and footpaths need to be kept safe for adults and children.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all he is doing in the wake of these tragic incidents. I will make sure the Home Secretary has heard his concerns about the action that his local police may or may not be taking. This kind of antisocial behaviour causes misery for many people, which is why, through our antisocial behaviour action plan, we have committed £160 million to help local authorities make high streets, footpaths and so on much safer for their communities. The police have powers to deal with these situations, and we expect them to be used.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This weekend marks small business Saturday, and I look forward to visiting our wonderful Christmas market in Bath, which brings in £50 million for the local area. Anyone who has not been to Bath at Christmas should please come. It is absolutely magical.

I am pleased that footfall in Bath is above pre-pandemic levels. However, many UK businesses are struggling to recover. This year has seen the most company insolvencies since 2009, and the autumn statement offered no energy support for businesses. Can we have a ministerial statement on what the Government will do to stop businesses closing this winter?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for the advert for small business Saturday; I am sure that all Members of this House will be involved in it, celebrating the incredible entrepreneurial organisations and individuals in their constituencies. A number of measures were set out in the autumn statement to help our high streets and, in particular, the hospitality, retail and leisure sectors. We recognise that they are the backbone of this economy and they are often the focal point for many other services and social interactions in our communities. They should be treasured and I hope that everyone does that this Saturday.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): One reason why the good people of Gedling voted to leave the European Union was to take back control of our borders. There have been several high-profile and complex challenges in doing that, be it dealing with the emergence of criminal gangs or complicated legal proceedings. So may we have a statement to set out the progress the Government have made on this issue since we left the EU?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will know that progress is being made on this matter: boat crossings are down by 33%; the legacy backlog is down by 42%; asylum decision processing has increased by 250%; returns are up by 29%; and immigrants are 43% less likely to be in receipt of any form of state benefits. Since we left the EU, we have been working to change our systems. In December 2020, we ended free movement—that was opposed by the Labour party—and changed access to benefits. In April last year, we passed the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 to deter entry into the UK and to help us to remove people who have no right to be here. In December last year, we signed the deal with Albania, reducing the number of people coming here by 90%. In May, we

introduced measures to reduce the rise in the number of students bringing dependants and to stop students switching out of the student route. In July, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 became law, although, again, it was opposed by the Labour party—70 times. Again that legislation is helping us to remove people who should not be here and to speed up removals. In October, we opened a consultation on capping the numbers that we would take from safe and legal routes. More legislation will come to the Floor of this House imminently, particularly to enable the Rwanda plan to be put into full effect—no doubt, it will be opposed by the Labour party. Now that we have greater control, we should use those controls.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Government Chief Whip is a Minister but, by convention, does not make statements from the Dispatch Box. So will the Leader of the House please give confirmation on accusations made by the GB News presenter who also has a side hustle as the hon. Member for Ashfield about being effectively offered a bribe in his role as a Member of Parliament? I know this was reported to the Government Chief Whip, but have they reported that allegation to the police for proper investigation?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point; this is a serious matter. I am not aware of the situation that he refers to, but if these matters were being investigated by the police, it would probably not be wise to comment on them on the Floor of the House.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Before I ask my question, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me declare an interest, as a Cornish fishwife. The Cornish inshore fleets, particularly the under-10 metre fleet, are alarmed at proposals for a potential ban on the landing of pollock in the next round of negotiations for fisheries quota. The Cornish Fish Producers Organisation and the Cornish fishermen I know tell me that pollock is the staple for much of the inshore fleet, parts of which rely on it entirely. Sadly, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has so far not listened to the suggested compromises that have been tabled, which include keeping the fishery open for just line-caught pollock. Therefore, on behalf of all six Cornish MPs, including myself, may I ask for a debate in Government time on the potential impact that this ban is likely to have on the already precarious livelihoods of our Cornish fishermen?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point on a subject close to her heart. She will know that since we left the EU there have been good opportunities for our fishing communities. In one instance, a fishing port not far away from her has seen its annual sales go from £40 million to £70 million. This should be a success story and, of course, what benefits the fishing community benefits hospitality, leisure, retail and many other things. She will know that there will be an opportunity to raise this matter with the Secretary of State on 7 December and I urge her to do so.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Today is Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, and I thank National Energy Action for its work ensuring everyone can have a warm, safe and healthy home. I recently met with Friends of

the Earth Luton, as part of its United for Warm Homes campaign, who told me that in my constituency there are 36 energy crisis hotspots, representing over 50% of neighbourhoods in Luton South, where below average incomes meet high fuel bills. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on an emergency home insulation programme to start in neighbourhoods hit hardest by the energy crisis?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I shall ensure her suggestion is heard by the Secretary of State. She will know about the financial support that we have given households, as well as recent measures in the autumn statement, that mean over £100 billion in support has been provided. On average, low-income households have received £2,500 a year to enable them to cope with higher energy bills. Through her auspices, her constituents could make use of a number of insulation schemes, including those in the private and public sectors. I will ask the Department to ensure she is aware of all those schemes.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): We often have debates about parliamentary standards for MPs, which I have contributed to, but we rarely debate the standards adopted by political candidates. They are not elected, and most never will be, yet that large group of people has a significant effect on the public perception of our politics and politicians. If we want to improve standards in politics, that begins at the grassroots level of political activism. During my time as an MP, there have been far too many instances of behaviour by my political opponents that have failed any definition of acceptable standards, or even legal ones. Can we have a debate about how we raise the bar throughout our political system, including local party associations and candidates for office?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope what my hon. Friend says will be met by agreement from both sides of the House, particularly from party leaders. I happen to know that my hon. Friend has suffered appallingly at the hands of a particular individual and I urge him to raise that matter with the relevant party leader. We should take these things seriously. I know from my own party that our candidates are required to sign up to the Nolan principles of public life, which is matched with training. This week our sitting MPs and parliamentary candidates received training from the Antisemitism Policy Trust. This is an incredibly important point and I hope we will all hold our colleagues, whether they are MPs or prospective parliamentary candidates, to account on this matter. I hope that my hon. Friend's particular situation is resolved swiftly.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Last Sunday, I was proud to march against antisemitism, standing shoulder to shoulder with British Jews alongside my friends and constituents. I welcome the increase in funding to the Community Security Trust, as laid out in the autumn statement, and thank it for keeping my constituents safe. However, since the pogrom of October 7, we have seen a staggering 1,300% increase in antisemitism, with many Jews no longer feeling safe in Britain. With that in mind, can we have a debate in Government time on tackling antisemitism and hate speech, to ensure people of all communities feel safe?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members who joined that march or showed solidarity to the Jewish community on that day. We must all continue to do that when the headlines disappear when the situation is resolved, as I hope it will be soon. I met with the Jewish Leadership Council yesterday to look at what more we can do. As well as showing support to the Jewish community, we need to show support to other faith communities who want to do the right thing, stand in solidarity together, and continue to work at strengthening ties. We must support individuals who reach out to other faith groups in their communities, and ensure that they do not face intimidation.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): As we continue to celebrate Disability History Month, may I raise again the lack of any disabled lift at Chalkwell station in my constituency? It is an absolute disgrace. It is the main station giving access to our beaches, and with 40 steep steps it is completely inaccessible to anyone with a disability or with a pushchair. I have raised this matter in the House five times now. This year I have been promised twice that it will be sorted out. Given that rail companies have a duty under the Equality Act 2010, itself a consolidating Act, to make reasonable adjustments, please may we have a debate in Government time on when the provisions will be enforced in a timely manner?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is a diligent campaigner on this matter, rightly so, and her campaigning has yielded some results: I understand that the Department for Transport has said that Network Rail expects to award the construction contract early next month for that work. It is a very bad situation that needs to be rectified. In the meantime, disabled passengers, if they cannot use that station, can contact c2c, which will arrange alternative transport at no additional cost, but, of course, that is not optimum. With the hon. Lady's campaigning, I hope that optimum is not far away.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Last week, I raised with the Leader of the House the case of Teagan Appleby, as did her Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke). We did, as a result, have a meeting with the Minister, so I thank the Leader of the House for that. However, both the hon. Lady and I asked for an emergency intervention by the Department. This is day 37 of seizures and, last night at 7.30, Teagan's mum, Emma, was told that there is nothing else that can be done. A brain operation would not address Teagan's seizures. She currently has access to an oil, which her parents must pay for while she is in an NHS hospital. She needs another oil. I passed Emma's number to the officials on Monday. I have seen the Minister in these corridors, but nothing has happened. I have asked for an emergency intervention. It is now Thursday. We need one and I urge the Leader of the House to make that intervention on my behalf and on behalf of everybody who is supporting Teagan.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her ongoing work on what is a very difficult case. I shall ensure, immediately after these questions, that the new Secretary of State has heard what she has said. As she will know, I am not aware of what the healthcare professionals caring for her constituent are saying that

she needs, but if it is something that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care can intervene and act on, I am sure that she would want to do so.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Colleagues will be aware of the brilliant Bluebell Wood Children's Hospice in Rother Valley, and the work that it does supporting children and their families through some of the worst times imaginable. I wish to highlight the £25,000 raised for Bluebell Wood by eight of my constituents in Maltby—Conner Wesley, Rob Pryke, Craig Edwards, Matt Whitehead, Corey Mangham, Chris Daley, Danny Bearman and Caleb Wedge—in their coast-to-coast walk across England, raising two and a half times their target and making sure that Bluebell Wood has the resources that it needs to help those who need it the most in their time of need.

May we have a debate, in Government time, to discuss what this Government can do to help our charitable constituents support hospices such as Bluebell Wood?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for getting the names of his fantastic constituents on record, and I thank them for all the work that they have done to raise such a huge sum for this very important children's hospice. We all know the incredible work that these organisations do and how valued they are by all who come into contact with them. Were my hon. Friend to apply for a debate on this, I am sure that it would be well attended.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): A few short years ago, my brother died by himself, at home and alone, having taken an overdose of drugs following a life of serious, harmful addiction. Last week, the Leader of the House stood at the Dispatch Box and dismissed the pilot in Scotland of drug consumption facilities. She dismissed them as somewhere safe and warm for heroin users—people like my brother—to take their heroin, but they are healthcare facilities designed to help people with addiction problems, and turn their lives around. She did it in the most ignorant and contemptuous way possible, so I invite her to my constituency to meet the families who are thankful that a pilot is finally taking place. Maybe she will then come back and make an apology at the Dispatch Box. Given her love of clicks, if she puts it on Twitter I will even share it.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman can go and look at last week's *Hansard*, because that is not what I said. I was actually saying that that would be a legacy of the Scottish National party. What I criticised the Scottish National party for was having let down a generation of children by destroying an education system, reducing the number of teachers, starving schools of resources, widening the attainment gap and many other things. I am genuinely sorry for the hon. Gentleman's loss, and I know a great deal about the particular pilot, which the Government support the Scottish Government's doing, but his obligations to the children of Scotland are important, and the Scottish Government are failing them. I will not apologise for holding him and his party to account.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Levelling up round 3 resulted in over £1 billion of support for 55 projects around the country, yet not

many of them were in the south-east. Gillingham high street in my constituency urgently needs that funding and regeneration. The autumn statement also included funding for town centres, not many of which were in the south-east. Levelling up is about levelling up the north, south, east and west. Will the Leader of the House clarify when we will have a statement regarding round 4 of levelling-up funding? Can we please ensure that that funding goes to all parts of the country, including areas such as Gillingham in the south-east, because we urgently need our fair share of resources, allocated on a merits basis?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend makes a compelling case for projects and funding going to his constituency. He will know that the levelling-up agenda has been at the heart of successive Conservative Administrations. The next Question Time will be on Monday, and I hope that my hon. Friend will attend to put those questions directly to the Secretary of State.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): December 9th marks the 75th anniversary of the signing of the genocide convention. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, and we will mark this time by calling for a strategy. I invite you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, and all Members present to come to a drop-in that we will hold next Wednesday in Portcullis House Room U from 12.30 pm to 2.30 pm, to talk to experts about how, as parliamentarians, when we say, “Never again,” we can really mean that. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for advertising her event. I shall certainly try to come along, subject to my duties in this House. It is incredibly important that hon. Members know what steps we can take, and what policies we can put forward, to ensure that these things never happen again, and to deepen our knowledge of such things as the international definitions and the appropriate terms to use for different situations. She is providing the House with a timely education session.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): At a recent football match in the Sheffield and Hallamshire women’s football league, a young woman was seriously injured following a collision with a male player—a trans woman—on the opposing team. As has been well publicised in the national media, a number of other teams in that local women’s league have withdrawn from fixtures against that particular team out of concern for the safety of their players. Unlike other sporting associations, the FA has not yet acted to ban biological males from playing in women’s football, which is threatening the safety and the fairness of the women’s game at a time when its popularity is rightly rising. Will my right hon. Friend give time for a debate on women’s football, and the role of the FA in ensuring the safety of female players?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. When I was Minister for Women and Equalities, I raised it with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in part because FIFA’s own rules do not allow biological men and biological women on the same pitch together. The FA has different rules for different levels

and categories of the game. I know that there are local teams here who have trans women playing on them and they are very valued, so I think it depends on the level of the game—that is certainly the response that I received at the time from such sporting bodies. The issue is receiving new focus, however, and clearly the constituents she mentions are concerned about it, so I urge her to raise it both with the Equalities Minister and at CMS questions, which are on 11 January.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I am delighted to hear that this is Whistleblowing Awareness Week, because some weeks ago I was given access to 5 million confidential New Zealand Government vaccination records by a whistleblower. The data was anonymised and passed to scientists and data analysts in the UK and other countries. I will share a fraction of that analysis: the mortality rate in New Zealand rose post vaccination for five months, regardless of what time of year the vaccine was taken. That rate of mortality increase rose with every subsequent booster that was taken. From the data, the chances of the excess deaths in New Zealand being random and not due to the experimental vaccines has been calculated at one in 100 billion. It is the vaccines that are causing excess deaths in New Zealand, just as it is the vaccines that are causing excess deaths in the UK and elsewhere. Can we please have a statement now from the Government, suspending these experimental mRNA vaccines before any more death and harm is done to our population?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this question. I think in New Zealand over 11 million doses of the covid-19 vaccine were administered. In England and Wales it was 150 million, and it is estimated that over 120,000 deaths were prevented by covid vaccines in England up to the end of September 2021. I disagree with what he says about the critical issue of vaccinations; I think they are life-saving. The report to which he refers has been debunked around the world, and he fails to mention the part that states that while an adverse event

“can occur after vaccination, that does not mean it was caused by vaccination.”

It is incredibly important that we look at the facts in this matter. We have the covid inquiry going on at the moment and, thanks to the work that our science base did in producing those vaccines, we were able to save millions of lives. It is incredibly important that we combat any misinformation about the vaccine.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The Leader of the House is more than aware that Barry in my constituency has not only the best beach front, but the best coastline in the whole of the country. Barry is to be enhanced even further by a successful levelling-up bid of £20 million to deliver a marina for the town, following a long-standing campaign. May we have a debate in the Chamber on regeneration in general, not only to consider the benefits that a marina will bring but, more importantly, on attracting further investment and using the levelling-up fund successfully to create quality jobs and better facilities in Wales’s largest town?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing that very large sum for his constituency. He is right that, in addition to the immediate facilities that

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it will enable to be constructed, there will be immense business opportunities for hospitality, leisure, retail and many other things. I think all hon. Members who have heard him will be very interested in visiting and seeing the results.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): This Friday is Romania's national day, a chance to celebrate the contribution of Romania to European efforts to support Ukraine and to acknowledge the huge contribution that the British Romanian community make here. I was pleased last night to host 150 members of Romanian churches in the UK, including some of the most senior figures in the Romanian Christian community. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the contribution of Romania to the efforts to support Ukraine, and take this opportunity to praise the contributions of British Romanians to our country?

Penny Mordaunt: I say "Multe mulțumesc" to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Romania has made a huge contribution to our efforts with Ukraine, and I join him wholeheartedly in paying tribute to everything Romanians have done, as well as to the many levels of partnership between our two nations. I thank him very much for the advert, and I am sure that all Members of the House will send their good wishes for Romania's national day.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Yesterday, the BBC announced that it was reducing the time allocation for the "Newsnight" programme. [Interruption.] The reason given was that it wants to concentrate more on online coverage and have more serious debate. The airwaves are not exactly short of talking heads. Would it be appropriate, notwithstanding the fact that the Media Bill is currently in Committee, to have a debate about the BBC and its role as a national broadcaster?

Penny Mordaunt: *Hansard* may not have picked up that there were mixed views to that news across the Chamber. Obviously, the BBC is operationally and editorially independent—it is up to the BBC to determine how it delivers its services—but it must ensure that it continues to provide the news content required to deliver its remit, as set out in the charter and the agreement. The first purpose of that is:

"To provide impartial news and information to help people to understand and engage with the world around them."

The Government expect Ofcom, as the BBC's independent regulator, to ensure that the BBC is robustly held to account in delivering its public services. If there were to be a debate, I am sure that it would be a very lively one.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): There has been a 26% reduction in the number of free-to-use ATMs in my constituency since July 2018, alongside a 30% reduction in the number of free-to-use ATMs across the UK over the past five years. An increasing number of ATMs are switching to the pay-to-use model because the interchange fee fails to cover the cost of maintaining the machines. I am sure that the Leader of the House would agree that it is important to halt the decline of free-to-use ATMs, so will she make a statement on the need for interchange fees to rise to a level that

properly covers the cost of providing and managing the UK's free-to-use ATM network, particularly in the light of interest rate increases and the rising cost of labour and distribution?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Of course, this issue has a disproportionate impact on rural communities, where there is less choice of available ATMs. I shall certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard her concerns. If she were to apply for a debate, I am sure that it would be well attended.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): For over 10 years, 100 of my constituents at the Mill development in Ipswich have been in limbo, unable to move on with their lives, re-mortgage or sell their properties, because the Mill has deep structural and cladding problems. The previous creditor-freeholder was the National Asset Management Agency—the Irish entity created to recoup losses to the Irish taxpayer after the banking crisis. Some £15 million received from a court case was meant to be spent on cladding remediation, but NAMA, before it washed its hand of the development, took the vast bulk of that money. What has happened to it? We do not know. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is a deeply immoral way for that entity to behave? It has caused immense anxiety and distress to my constituents, who, after 10 years, feel that the situation has moved backwards, not forwards. Will she advise me on what steps I should take and on whether my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister might raise the matter with his counterpart in Ireland?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the ongoing situation in my hon. Friend's constituency. Questions to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be on Monday, and he may wish to raise it directly with the Secretary of State then. Given the international dimension to the matter, I shall certainly ensure that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is briefed. If my hon. Friend would like to give me further information, I will ensure that it is passed to the relevant Minister.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): May we have a debate on BBC impartiality? Surely we cannot have BBC presenters using their on-air status to espouse fake news about Israel, or to make scurrilous suggestions about the Prime Minister's motivations, as has been described in *The Daily Telegraph* today. It published a well researched piece of journalism on the subject, having trawled through the social media of some BBC journalists and personnel. Anti-Israel bile and bias is there for all to see. What are we going to do about the BBC?

Penny Mordaunt: I think we all want our national broadcaster to be the best in the world, and we want its editorial standards and policies, and those who work for it, to be the best in the world. The BBC is operationally independent, but I hope it will reflect on what has happened over the past few weeks. I hope it will look at what it can do, perhaps through training, and at what is happening with its editorial teams and those who work for it in the field, so that the British public can rely on getting impartial, good advice, produced to the highest journalistic standards. The BBC is usually very good at

these sorts of things, but there are certainly questions that I, as a licence fee payer, would want answered in this respect.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): This is National Tree Week, and it is also 50 years since Conservative MP Sydney Chapman suggested the “Plant a Tree in ’73” campaign. It is even more important now that we preserve our woodland and plant productive forests for sustainable manufacturing and construction. What conversations has my right hon. Friend had with Cabinet colleagues on the deforestation due diligence legislation that we committed to in the Environment Act 2021, and on its progression through the House, and what other steps can I take to assist on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Sydney Chapman and his campaign; it is nice to know of the legacy that Members of this place can leave. My hon. Friend will know that we are committed to implementing the provisions that she mentioned at the earliest opportunity through secondary legislation. We also recognise that businesses need clarity on their obligations, so that they can prepare to meet them. Questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are on 7 December, next week, so she may wish to raise her point directly with the Secretary of State then.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Although the Government’s decision to reduce air passenger duty has boosted regional aviation, further reform of public service obligation routes is still required if we are to maximise the use of regional airports, such as Blackpool airport. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on reforming PSOs, and may we have a debate on how we can support regional airports and regional aviation?

Penny Mordaunt: Regional airports are absolutely vital to local economies, and they are one of the things that make us very attractive to inward investors. This is an important matter. The hon. Member will know that he can raise it directly with the Secretary of State for Transport on 14 December, and I encourage him to do so.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will share my concerns about teenage suicide. This week, David Smith and Hilary Rabbett, the parents of 17-year-old George, came to Parliament to launch their new charity, I’m George’s Mate. It seeks to raise awareness of mental health issues and to provide suicide prevention courses in schools and colleges. George tragically attempted suicide in May this year. He has been supported by his mates, who are regularly visiting him as he regains consciousness. Will my right hon. Friend join me in raising awareness of this incredible new charity, which will be of interest to colleagues right across the House? May we have a debate on what more can be done for our young people on suicide prevention?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving us all the opportunity to welcome I’m George’s Mate—it sounds like a wonderful initiative, and all credit and praise are due to his constituents David and Hilary for the work they are doing on that. He will know that the new five-year suicide prevention strategy for England, which was published in September, sets out our ambition

to reduce suicides within two and a half years, together with over 100 actions to make that happen. However, we will only be able to do so through the likes of David and Hilary and that grassroots action, providing the support that people need, including peer support. We have backed our plan with £10 million in a new grant fund, and it was precisely those sorts of community organisations and social enterprises that we were thinking of when we set it up.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Nineteen years ago today, at the age of nine years old, I woke up to the news that my beautiful mum had died. She had an illness—she was an alcoholic. My story of this loss through addiction is not an isolated case. While I welcome the Government’s harm to hope strategy and the funding for local authorities, more needs to be done to provide wraparound care and support for the families of those who have an addiction. Will my right hon. Friend support a debate in Government time to see what further actions can be taken to support people with addictions, so that we stop others losing loved ones far sooner than they should?

Penny Mordaunt: Can I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and say that we are all thinking of her today in particular? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] She will know better than anyone the impact that alcoholism and its health aspects can have on families, and on children in particular. I thank her for sharing her personal story today, which will help raise awareness and shine a spotlight on the importance of these services.

My hon. Friend rightly acknowledges that the Government have made additional investment in this area. I also salute the healthcare professionals around the country who are doing fantastic work, introducing alcohol screening services at accident and emergency and elsewhere in areas where there is high prevalence of these issues. We need to do more on that front: the Government are tackling a number of issues in our legislative programme, including smoking, but alcohol abuse remains a huge concern for many people in this nation, and we must continue to be vigilant and see what more we can do to help families in that situation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In Rugby, we are doing our part to build the homes that the country needs for the future, and as a consequence, my constituency is the fastest growing in the west midlands. We have seen new schools and roads—all delivered ahead of schedule—but we need our local health provision to expand as well. On recent visits to Rugby, Health Ministers have heard the case for enhanced urgent and emergency care provision at Rugby’s Hospital of St Cross in order to support that growing population. May we have a debate to consider how all aspects of infrastructure may be delivered in a timely fashion?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work he and his constituents have been doing to help the regeneration of his local area. It is vital that local health services and other services can keep pace with such growth. As my hon. Friend knows, his local integrated care board has seen its funding increase substantially—it is over £1.6 billion this year. That ICB is best placed to make decisions about where that money needs to be spent, but I will also make sure that my hon.

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Friend's concerns have been heard by the Secretary of State for Health, so that she may be able to help him and ensure that the provision he wishes to see is there, particularly in accident and emergency.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I am delighted that the Government have listened to me and responded positively to my campaigning for funding for the rural enterprise hub in my constituency, with the Chancellor awarding us £7 million as part of the autumn statement. That is a real shot in the arm for our rural community, providing jobs and an economic boost: it is truly levelling up in action. Levelling up should be for the whole of the United Kingdom—towns, cities and rural areas; north, south, east and west—which is exactly what this Conservative Government are ensuring. Can we please find time for a debate on the impact and benefits of levelling up for both rural and urban areas?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his success in his campaign, and I congratulate everyone who has worked on the rural enterprise hub in his constituency. He articulates absolutely correctly the ambition that was set out in the levelling up White Paper. He will know that the second rural-proofing report, "Delivering for rural England", which was published in September last year, showed a vision for what levelling up would look like in areas such as his, and we are determined to deliver that. He will also know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in particular has done some further work on unleashing rural opportunity, and through that we will continue to build on all the work we did in the original White Paper. I encourage him to speak to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on Monday to further the additional asks I know he has.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I recently met representatives of the Bishopton Villages Action Group, who are concerned about plans for a raft of separate solar farms that would collectively cover almost 2,500 acres of this small community, changing the character of this beautiful rural area and taking away prime agricultural land. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate in Government time on how we can ensure that the community impact of multiple solar farms in close proximity is given proper consideration in the planning process?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter, and I know that other Members in this House have similar views, so it is a prime candidate for a debate, and I would encourage him to apply for one. I know that many Members want to support campaigns and further activity to ensure that we are making best use of agricultural land, growing more and supporting our farmers and food producers. He is running a very important campaign, and if there is anything I can do to support him in that, ask and it shall be so.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in this Chamber on policing? We have seen systemic failures in the Met police, as evidenced to the Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, and West Midlands police has now in fact been put into special measures. Could we

revisit the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners and how they hold police leadership to account? The system is clearly not quite working well in the midlands and London, and probably elsewhere.

Penny Mordaunt: This is a very serious matter. I understand that, under the police and crime commissioner's watch, knife crime in the west midlands has increased by almost a fifth in the last year, and the police are failing in many other areas as well. I know my hon. Friend, like many others, supports Andy Street taking ownership of the West Midlands police. His constituents and others deserve better, and I know that this matter is being looked at by the Home Secretary, who has described it as a total "failure of leadership" from Labour's West Midlands police crime and commissioner.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (REDUCTION IN RATES) BILL: ALLOCATION OF TIME

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill—

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed while the Question is put, in accordance with Standing Order No. 52(1) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills), on any financial resolution relating to the Bill;

(c) on the conclusion of proceedings on any financial resolution relating to the Bill, proceedings on the Bill shall be resumed and the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Ruth Edwards.*)

National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the morning of 28 November 2023, on the Autumn Statement 2023, HC 286; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on the afternoon of 28 November 2023, on the Autumn Statement 2023, HC 286.]

11.53 am

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a landmark moment: the economy has turned a corner. Having rightly supported people through covid with £400 billion of spend and then £100 billion over the winter to support people with energy costs, we on the Government side of the House know that we have to pay back what we have borrowed. The Labour party opposed every single measure to do that, and every difficult decision, but because of those difficult decisions, we are in the position we are in today. Because of those difficult decisions, the Chancellor can put forward an autumn statement that focuses on growing our economy, supporting businesses and, crucially, cutting taxes, and that is what we are here to talk about today.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tell the House, for the record, how many Labour Back Benchers are here for this milestone debate?

Laura Trott: I think by my count none, which is unfortunate and I think speaks to their lack of the commitment to cutting tax that we have on this side of the House. The Bill will cut taxes for 29 million working people. It has three measures: the reduction in national insurance contributions in class 1 primary main rate; the reduction of the NICs class 4 main rate; and the removal of the requirement to pay class 2 NICs. We are prioritising national insurance for two key reasons. First, we want to put more money in the pockets of working families, and NICs are the most targeted way to do that. Secondly, better reward for work makes working more appealing, and the more people work, the more there is a boost in growth.

Let me take the House briefly through the measures in the Bill. The first is the reduction in the employee class 1 NICs main rate, which the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement. By reducing the main rate by two percentage points, from 12% to 10%, on earnings between £12,570 and £50,270, we will cut taxes for more than 27 million employees. That will save the average worker more than £450 a year, and they will see the benefit in their payslips right at the start of the new year, as this legislation will come into effect on 6 January.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister, and the Government, for what they are bringing forward. The cut in national insurance in the autumn statement is a welcome step, and my constituents tell me that. Unfortunately, many are also saying that the average working-class family, including many in my constituency, will still be facing the highest taxation levels. I am not being churlish, not for one second—I want to make that

clear—but can the Minister encourage me and my constituents that there is more to offer from the autumn statement and that those people have more to gain?

Laura Trott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to talk about this, because it is important. Taxes for the average worker will have gone down by £1,000 since 2010. We have not hidden from the fact that we had to make some very difficult decisions to pay back our covid debts, and those have fallen on the highest paid, because that is the value that we espouse as a party. Because of those difficult decisions, which were opposed every step of the way by the Opposition, we are able to cut taxes for everybody—that is what the values of Conservative Members are all about.

We will cut and reform national insurance contributions for the self-employed by cutting the class 4 rate by one percentage point from 9% to 8% from April 2024. Finally, we will remove the requirement for self-employed people with annual profits above the national income tax personal allowance of £12,570 to pay class 2 NICs, also from April 2024. Those who pay voluntarily will still be able to do so, and I assure hon. Members that low-paid self-employed people who make voluntary class 2 contributions will not pay more.

The Bill simplifies the system for self-employed taxpayers, bringing it closer to the system for employees, and not only putting more money in their pockets but reducing the administrative burden. As a result of changes in the Bill, a self-employed person who is currently required to pay class 2 NICs every week will save at least £192 per year. Taken together with the cut to class 4 NICs, an average self-employed person on £28,200 will see a total saving of £350 in 2024-25. That will benefit around 2 million people. Importantly, those with profits under the small profits threshold of £6,725 and who pay class 2 NICs voluntarily to get access to contributory benefits, including the state pension, will continue to be able to do so.

The Government are committed to tax cuts that reward and incentivise work, and that grow the economy in a sustainable way. These measures do just that. The Office for Budget Responsibility states that the autumn statement package will reduce inflation next year, and measures in the Bill will be worth more than £9 billion a year, the largest ever cut to employee and self-employed national insurance.

A vote for these measures is a vote to give 29 million people an average yearly saving of more than £450. These reductions in tax will not only benefit those in work; according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, they will lead to the equivalent of almost 100,000 people entering work, because they will ensure that work pays and will drive more people to seek employment.

There is another point here, and that is about choices. I hope that the Opposition will support these measures today, if only for the reasons I have already set out. The public support them and business supports them. If the Opposition do not support them, it will represent a choice. The shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), has often spoken of her fiscal rules that will have debt falling in the final year of the next Parliament. At the autumn statement last week, the OBR confirmed that public sector net debt is set to fall in that final year, with headroom of £30 billion. Implementing the permanent tax relief for

business investment, plus the legislation before the House today, represents a choice to use around £20 billion of that £30 billion of headroom on these measures.

There is a path here, if the Opposition want it, to deliver the £28 billion a year. They could use up every penny of headroom, reject full expensing and reject today's tax cuts, but what they cannot do—what the OBR, the financial markets and every secondary school maths textbook will not let them do—is vote for our policies today, borrow an extra £28 billion a year and still meet their own fiscal rules. The numbers simply do not add up. That is what I mean by choices.

The Opposition have to choose. Do they stick to their plan to borrow an extra £28 billion a year, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies says risks sending inflation, interest rates and mortgage rates up, or do they choose our plan to bring inflation down, taxes down and debt down? They cannot have it both ways. If the shadow Treasury team has no answer today, it will fall to the Leader of the Opposition to grasp the issue. Rather than anonymous briefings to the BBC over the weekend, he will have to make a choice. That is the difference between being the party of opposition and being the party of government: credibility with the public over credibility with their activists.

This Bill represents the choices made on this side of the House. I have spoken at length about why we have made them. I hope that the shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray), can inform us honestly and straightforwardly on which side of those choices his party will land. If he cannot, we can all conclude, as Lord Mandelson himself said only a few months back, that Labour is not ready to be the party of government. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.2 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Whatever the Chancellor said last week and whatever the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said today, the truth is that the Conservatives cannot hide from the facts when it comes to the level of taxation in Britain today. The inescapable truth facing families across the UK, and the truth that the Government cannot hide from, is that under the Conservatives, the tax burden in Britain is on course to reach its highest level since the second world war. As the Resolution Foundation made clear in its blunt analysis of measures in the autumn statement, personal taxes are going up, not down.

Any cuts to personal taxation announced last week are more than eclipsed by hikes in tax that this Government had announced before; the freezing of national insurance and income tax thresholds for six years is now expected to cost taxpayers £45 billion. They are not just giving with one hand and taking with the other; it is worse than that. As I said last week, it is as if the Conservatives have nicked someone's car but then expect them to be grateful when they pay for the bus fare home.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the context in which the autumn statement was made? Was he not a cheerleader for the furlough scheme and the financial support provided during covid and the energy price shock? Does he recognise that that needed to be recovered but, because of the difficult decisions we have taken, we are now in a position to reduce taxes?

James Murray: The context in which the autumn statement was made was 13 years of Conservative economic failure. There have been 25 tax rises in this Parliament alone and the tax burden is set to rise to its highest since the second world war. That is the context that the British people are facing, and that is the context in which the autumn statement was made.

The impact on people across Britain is brutal. As a result of the Conservatives' decisions on personal taxation, households will be left facing an average tax rise of £1,200 from the Government. Looking across all taxes, we know that, by the end of the decade, taxes in the UK will have risen by the astonishing equivalent of £4,300 for every household in the country. That is the context in which we are debating the Bill's Second Reading.

Let me make it clear for the benefit of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that Labour welcomes the cut in national insurance that the Bill includes. We believe that taxes on working people are too high, and we have long said that we want to see them come down when they can be cut in an economically and fiscally responsible way. We will support the Bill, but we believe that the Government need to be honest with people. The Conservatives need to be honest and admit that they are responsible for the biggest hit to living standards on record, and that this has been the biggest tax-raising Parliament that our country has ever seen.

This is not the first time we have debated national insurance rates in this Parliament. Just over two years ago, I stood here, opposite the Financial Secretary's predecessor—more accurately, his predecessor's predecessor's predecessor—to debate Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Levy Bill. That Bill introduced, in 2022-23, a 1.25 percentage point increase in national insurance contributions for employees and employers—an increase that we rightly described at the time as

“a new tax on working people and their jobs.”—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 845.]

Hon. Members may recall that when the Government published that legislation, their own tax information and impact note on that tax rise confirmed:

“There may be an impact on family formation, stability or breakdown as individuals, who are currently just about managing financially, will see their disposable income reduce.”

We opposed that legislation, and it was clear to a wide coalition, including the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI and the TUC, that it was the worst possible tax rise at the worst possible time.

As time went on, the then Chancellor—now the Prime Minister—realised that he had made a mistake. He tried to make a partial U-turn in last year's spring statement by increasing national insurance thresholds, yet the Institute for Fiscal Studies quickly pointed out that that move would not undo damage already done. Its director, Paul Johnson, confirmed:

“Almost all workers will be paying more tax on their earnings in 2025 than they would have been paying without this parliament's reforms to income tax and national insurance contributions, despite the tax-cutting measures announced today.”

Later last year, the 1.25 percentage point national insurance rise was finally reversed, yet, as we know only too well, any benefits that many families may have hoped to gain from that U-turn were rapidly eclipsed by the Tory mortgage penalty, following the Conservatives' catastrophic

[James Murray]

mishandling of the economy. The impact of that recklessness is still with us today, as mortgage holders across the country face a hit of £220 a month when their current deals end.

The truth is that whatever the Conservatives do, they keep making working people worse off. That has been true over the 13 years that they have been in power, it has been true over the past two years of changes to national insurance, and it will be true after the Bill becomes law.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has been trying desperately to paint today's national insurance cuts as the answer to the cost of living crisis. Last week, she claimed that

"taxes for the average worker have gone down by £1,000".—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 360.]

I believe she repeated that claim today, yet analysis by the House of Commons Library makes it clear that national insurance and income tax on the median earner will rise from £6,112 in 2010-11 to £7,364 in 2024-25. Will she confirm—or will the Financial Secretary confirm on her behalf—whether she stands by her earlier remarks and explain exactly how those figures were calculated? The experience of people across Britain is very different from the picture that she is trying to paint.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Perhaps the answer to the question of the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury is that the income tax starting point has doubled from around £6,000 to more than £12,000. That provides the extra £1,000 take-home pay every year that he is puzzled about.

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman promoted me inadvertently, as I am the shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury, but I thank him for his vote of confidence. Our point is that today's tax cut, which we support, must be seen in the context of 13 years of the Conservatives in power: 13 years of economic failure, with 25 tax rises in this Parliament alone and the tax burden on course to be the highest since the second world war. Whatever the Chief Secretary to the Treasury might say, people across Britain are experiencing life very differently from how she paints it.

However welcome the measures in the Bill may be, they come after 25 tax rises in this Parliament alone. The British people will not be fooled. No matter what statistics the Government contrive or the gloss they try to put on their record, people across Britain need ask themselves just one question: do they and their families feel better off now than they did 13 years ago? The answer is a resounding no. At last week's autumn statement, we learned not only that the tax burden is still on track to be the highest since the war and that inflation has been revised upward across the entire forecast period, but that growth rates have been cut for next year, the year after, and the year after that.

It took some gall for the Chancellor to say that he was delivering an "autumn statement for growth"—comments repeated today by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—since the Office for Budget Responsibility reports that next year's growth rate has been cut by more than half. Low growth has dogged our country for the past 13 years. The autumn statement makes it clear

that the Conservatives still have no plan to get our economy growing as it should. Since 2010, under the Conservatives, GDP growth has been stuck at an average of 1.5% a year, down from 2% in the Labour years before. If the economy had continued to grow for the past 13 years at the rate it grew under Labour, it would be £150 billion larger—the equivalent of £5,000 per household every year.

As we all know, because of that low growth, the Conservatives have had to keep putting up taxes on working people. Low growth and high taxes have made people across Britain worse off. That is the reality of the past 13 years of the Conservatives in power. The Bill's tax cuts cannot even remotely compensate for the damage they have done to our economy and the living standards of people across Britain.

Although we support today's tax cut, we know that our country needs economic growth to make working people better off and to get our public services off the floor. That is the plan from Labour. We are the party of fiscal responsibility and of business, with a plan to make working people better off. Come the next election—it cannot come soon enough—people across Britain will look at the Conservatives' record and the bleak achievements they will claim. In this Parliament, real disposable household incomes will have fallen the furthest, following 20 years of pay stagnation. Real average earnings are not forecast to return to their 2008 peak until 2028. Four million people have been dragged into paying tax, with 3 million more in the higher rate—the biggest hit to income on record. Next year, real-terms income will be 3.5% lower than it was before the pandemic. This the biggest tax-raising Parliament Britain has ever seen.

Whatever the Conservatives say or do, and whichever way they try to twist and turn, reality has caught up with them. We have been here before. We remember the Conservatives promising to cut income tax ahead of the 1997 election. Back then, people decided that it was too little, too late, coming as it did after 22 tax rises in that Parliament. As this Parliament approaches its end, today's Conservative party is showing itself to be even more divided and desperate than in the late '90s. As the next election draws nearer and the Conservatives try to cling on to power, the risk grows that they will get more desperate with their promises and more reckless with taxpayers' money. Britain needs a plan to get the economy growing and make working people better off. That is what Labour is offering and why a general election cannot come soon enough.

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

12.14 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I am not sure that I have ever heard a more grudging shadow Front Bench speech on measures that the Opposition support. They support them so wholeheartedly today that none of their Back Benchers has shown up to speak to them.

I endorse the measures in the legislation. The Chief Secretary is right to point to the turning point that the UK economy has reached this year, thanks to the steps taken a year ago to ensure that fiscal policy did not cut across the central bank's aim to reduce inflation to its target. Thanks to that, inflation, which might have been as high as 13% last year, has fallen to 4.6%. That means

that today, the earnings of the average UK worker are rising faster than the rate of inflation. We are seeing real earnings growth. That is the turning point that I am talking about.

The shadow Minister and the Chief Secretary both talked about the choices that the Chancellor could make on this occasion. In the evidence that the Treasury Committee took this week on the autumn statement, we saw the clear impact of the Chancellor's choices on two long-standing challenges for the UK economy: slow productivity growth and the fact that not everyone has returned to work since the pandemic. When we get to the Finance Bill, I will expatiate further on the supply-side measures on the labour market and permanent full expensing, but today I will focus on the national insurance contributions element, which the Office for Budget Responsibility also considered to be a supply-side measure.

In the evidence that we took, we heard from the member of the Office for Budget Responsibility, Professor David Miles, that the choice to go for the national insurance contribution reduction in the autumn statement created a "definite positive" as an incentive to work. The OBR forecast that it will bring close to 100,000 full-time equivalent extra workers back into the workforce. That is so important. Paul Johnson from the Institute for Fiscal Studies noted in his evidence that, compared with a similar cut in income tax rates, a cut to national insurance is more progressive. It benefits people in work, but only on their earnings up to £50,000. That is important context for the choice that the Chancellor took.

I also welcome the simplification of taxes—a concept our Committee is committed to. Far too many things in our tax system act as disincentives to doing an extra hour of work. There are too many complicated withdrawal rates. The steps taken on class 2 and class 4 contributions represent a simplification of the tax system. Interestingly, we were told in our evidence session that the changes to class 2 and class 4 reduce

"the incentive for people to incorporate to gain a tax advantage." We should have a tax system that is broadly neutral on those two things.

Professor Miles told us that he thinks that the national insurance cuts are "unambiguously" a more positive incentive to work. The Office for Budget Responsibility does not see the measures as inflationary. He also said that

"some people at the margin who thought it perhaps was not worth working might now be persuaded to actively try to get a job",

and that the measures will help retain people in the labour force.

To conclude my short remarks on the narrow measures in the Bill, I wanted to focus on the evidence that we have received on the choice that the Chancellor took on national insurance, and how that is very much focused on the structural challenges that the UK economy faces.

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

12.19 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): We have heard an awful lot about choices at the start of this debate. What is abundantly clear for families in Scotland and across the nations of

the UK is that the Government have chosen to ignore the burning cost of living crisis that they put in place for families.

Let me be unequivocally clear from the outset that the Chancellor's attempt to masquerade the Bill as meaningful support for people is nothing short of a farce. I said to him at the statement that it would not bear scrutiny and it has not borne scrutiny. Families in Scotland already grappling with the harsh realities of the soaring cost of living are acutely aware of the UK Government's role in their deteriorating financial situation. No amount of Tory spin can disguise the stark truth of their policies, or the fact that those families are faced with a future of perma-austerity under Westminster.

The autumn statement was a critical opportunity for meaningful intervention. It was, to say the least, a profound disappointment. It offered scant relief to households across Scotland—households already beleaguered by the catastrophic decisions of this UK Government. The audacity of the Chancellor in trying to package the reduction in national insurance rates as a major tax cut is an insult to the intelligence of the Scottish people. We are witnessing funding for public services pushed to breaking point due to years of real-terms cuts to the Scottish budget. The Scottish Government have sought to protect workers and services, and are having to do that with diminishing resources, yet the UK Government have shamefully neglected to prioritise investment in the NHS and other public services, which will, according to the OBR, see a cut of £19 billion in the coming years.

The Bill, in legislating for the changes to national insurance outlined in the autumn statement, is a glaring example of the Government's disconnect from the realities on the ground. The changes announced by the Chancellor, some to take effect from January onwards, are a mere drop in the ocean of what is urgently needed now by families struggling with rampant food price increases, punishing increases in rents and mortgages, and the dreaded prospect of another winter with soaring energy bills. The Government could have listened to our pleas to provide a £400 energy bill rebate, to reduce the price cap and more. Instead, they will preside over a 5% increase in the energy price cap to land on 1 January—hardly a happy new year for those who cannot afford now to switch on the heating.

Let us dissect the facts. The main rate of NICs for employees is to be cut from 12% to 10%, a change affecting those earning between £12,571 and £50,271. For the self-employed, the rate drops from 9% to 8%, with the flat-rate NIC charge also being scrapped for some. On paper, those changes might appear beneficial, but in reality they are superficial. The Resolution Foundation's Torsten Bell aptly noted that "taxes are up not down".

This is no generous gift to the public; it is a thinly veiled attempt at distraction. The Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted a concerning trend: despite these nominal cuts, we are facing the most significant rise in taxes in recent memory. The tax threshold freezes since 2021 will largely, if not entirely, counteract any benefits of the Chancellor's 2p cut to NICs next year. For someone with average full-time earnings, that means a saving of £449 in NI contributions, but an increase of £413 due to the unchanged tax thresholds. The Chancellor's so-called giveaway then amounts to a paltry £36 for the average earner—a far cry from the over £450 boasted about today.

[Drew Hendry]

From the detrimental effects of austerity to the chaos of Brexit and now the mismanagement of the cost of living crisis, it is abundantly clear that the Westminster Government are a liability for the working people of Scotland. They are left to shoulder the burden of Westminster's disastrous decisions. Our public services, the very foundation of our society, are under threat. The Chancellor's spending plans, particularly his silence on them post March 2025, signal a disturbing turbo-boost of austerity. The OBR's report rings alarm bells. The UK Government's fiscal strategies are shrouded in uncertainty and wishful thinking.

The Scottish Government are handed a real-terms reduction in the block grant, yet are expected, miraculously, to maintain public services with, for example, a health budget increase of less than 0.01% for 2024-25. Inflation sits, even today, at 4.7%, so that NHS money equates to only £10.8 million blown away by inflation before it arrives, leaving only the cold sting of a sharp cut in reality.

The autumn statement and the Bill will serve as stark reminders that Westminster Governments are fundamentally misaligned with the values and needs of the people of Scotland. Our aspirations for a fair, just and prosperous society cannot be realised under such governance. Independence remains the only viable path to ensuring the wellbeing and prosperity of the Scottish people.

In conclusion, it is imperative that the Government acknowledge their failings, even at this late stage, and take decisive steps to truly support households and public services across the nations and in Scotland. Until such time, we in the SNP will remain unwavering in calling for real help for people struggling with rising rents and mortgages, struggling to pay for their shopping, and terrified of the cost of their energy bills this winter. Our values are to champion the interests of the Scottish people to safeguard our communities and the families who live in them. We will continue to call for the real power of independence to deliver on them.

12.26 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak, very briefly, in this debate.

My starting point is the concern I felt, when I listened to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer making his autumn statement and highlighting this aspect of the measures he was taking, to hear cries of "not much" and "big deal" from some on the Opposition Benches. It is important to reflect that even if we were looking solely at the class 2 national insurance contributions element, the amount that adds to a household income equates to more than the cost of a child's school uniform for a year. It is a quarter of what the average household in the UK spends on Christmas. These are significant amounts of money for a good many of our constituents. Indeed, for one of my constituents who is affected by the ultra low emission zone policy, it would even pay their ULEZ charge for a fortnight. Taken in concert with the rest of the measures, it will make a significant difference to many household budgets and ensure that people have more money in their pocket in the new year.

I represent a constituency that, according to the ONS, is very much a constituency of workers. We enjoy a very high level of employment and self-employment, a

very low level of unemployment and, I am very pleased to say, higher household income on average than the rest of the UK. But within that, there are many, many workers—those who are beginning their careers, or who have faced unstable employment—for whom this will make a real and practical difference. For that reason alone, I enormously welcome the measures we will be voting on today.

I would like to offer the Chief Secretary and the Treasury team an issue for consideration, which arises out of something I see in my constituency. It has been the subject of a lot of debate in this House in the last week or so. In 2019, the Conservatives stood on a manifesto that set a target of an additional 600,000 foreign students coming into the UK. That manifesto commitment has been achieved. We know that it earns us, in foreign currency income, around £35 billion a year. It is a bigger earner for the United Kingdom than our oil and gas industry, so it is incredibly important to our economy. Part of the thinking behind it was that many of those workers would become longer-term residents of the UK, especially in areas of great need: our national health service, caring professions and the technology industry. I hear from a good many constituents about the challenges they still face recruiting those workers to ensure that my constituents who need an operation can get it on time and that businesses can grow.

Home Office figures show that a very large proportion of those people leave the United Kingdom at the conclusion of their studies, but that some stay. Concern has been expressed about whether those who transition into work after being foreign students or those who are here for a brief period on a working visa and subsequently move abroad pay a sufficient amount into the UK economy to cover the costs of the benefits they may well receive. Right hon. and hon. Members have highlighted those who come to the UK under care worker visas, but who bring with them dependants who have significant health and educational costs. Would the Treasury team, in due course, give consideration to setting a differential rate of national insurance contributions for those who come to the UK on those types of visa, in line with the measures already taken of charging those applying for those visas a significantly higher fee and the national health surcharge? It would then become absolutely clear to everyone in this country that people who are here for a short period will pay a contribution that reflects the potential benefits available to them, whereas those who are lifelong citizens, for whom those costs will be spread out across their entire working life, will enjoy the benefit of a lower rate?

Every country in the developed world has faced a similar set of challenges around interest rates and costs of living. We all know what the reasons are: the impact of covid and the impact of rising US interest rates, which set basic interest rates and mortgage rates across the whole of the developed world. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said, the turning point has clearly been reached. Most of us can see and feel in our constituencies the signs of a return to growth and a sense of prosperity. The fact that wages are now rising ahead of inflation is hugely significant to the living standards of all people, but especially to those on lower incomes the measures I am here to support today are incredibly important. I commend the Treasury team for bringing them forward.

12.31 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to join this debate, albeit one attended by literally zero Back Benchers of His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

This debate and the changes to national insurance raise narrow issues of the amount of tax being paid by our constituents, wider issues relating to the question posed by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray)—“Are you better off today than you were in 2010?”—and broader still questions about the value and purpose of life and what matters most to our constituents. I shall touch on all three in turn.

On the narrow issue, the national insurance payments mooted in the Bill, there is widespread agreement that they are good news for our constituents, because they mean lower tax. It is recognised that there is social justice in the measures, because they are not applicable to those earning more than £50,000 a year. We already know that no party in this House will oppose them. On the narrow issue, therefore, the Chancellor, the Treasury and those involved in creating the Bill have clearly got it right.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) pointed out, this can easily be seen to be one of the measures by which we judge a turning point in the wider economy. After all, only a few months ago there were widespread expectations that the economy would be in recession, unemployment would be rising, taxes would be increasing, and there was very little wiggle room for the public finances to be seen to improve. All those things have been turned around. None of us can say with certainty that we are in full summer, but the green shoots are evident and things are changing.

On the broader issue of what we measure to answer the question, “Are our constituents better off today than in 2010?” there are different aspects. I suspect the shadow Minister had most clearly in mind a simple calculation of whether salaries net of inflation were higher or lower, and if we take that on its own, it will be a challenge for many Government Members to demonstrate that the answer is yes. For my constituents in Gloucester, average take-home pay has risen from £25,000 to £31,000, but their salaries have not kept up with increases in inflation. That is only part of the equation though; we need to take into account all the different forms of taxation, which include council tax. It is a cliché but true that council tax rises faster and is higher in Labour-run councils, whereas the Conservative-run council in Gloucester has done a good job of keeping it as low as possible over the last 14 years. Then, there is the question of take-home pay. As I pointed out to the shadow Minister, because income tax now applies only at £12,500, rather than at just over £6,000, the take-home pay element has increased by £1,000.

Other than that relatively straightforward financial calculation, there are many measures on which I hope all of us would want to answer “Yes” to the question, “Are you better off today than you were in 2010?” I shall pick out a few of these crucial indicators, because they are relevant to the wider context of the Bill.

The Centre for Cities report is an excellent source of data for those who live in cities, so let me highlight a few elements of what its latest report said about Gloucester. We are one of the 10 lowest cities for economic inactivity.

In effect, we have low unemployment and high employment—in fact, ours is the third highest employment rate, having risen last year from 76% to 84%, a 7.5% increase. The regional average is 79%, so we are way ahead of the south-west's average. That means that many more people have purpose in their lives—they have occupations they can thrive in; they are bread-earners at home and useful role models for their children—and the city as a whole has a strong sense of purpose.

It is often forgotten, but many people remember vividly that their jobs were kept by the £400 billion spent during the pandemic. The furlough scheme ensured that during the pandemic people could shelter at home, confident that their job would still be there, and those who had their own business know that the vast majority of those businesses would undoubtedly have gone bankrupt during the pandemic. The small businessmen and women, the self-employed, the entrepreneurs, all came through that period intact, whereas under a different scheme that would have cost taxpayers' less, they would have struggled. The question, “Are you better off today than in 2010?” needs to encapsulate other questions: “Was your business able to survive? Was your job kept? Were you still able to be self-employed during a period when so many people around the world were struggling horribly?”

We in Gloucester are extraordinary in that our city has one of the very lowest percentages of population with no formal qualifications. In fact, extraordinarily, Gloucester has fewer people with no formal qualifications than Cambridge, and we are only 1% behind Oxford. The skills of my constituents are different from many of those in Oxford or Cambridge. A large number of our people are highly skilled with higher apprenticeships working in industries like aerospace, nuclear and high-level engineering. Those occupations, apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships have increased hugely over the last 13 or 14 years and are seriously threatened by the prospect—any prospect—of a Labour Government.

Let me illustrate that statistically. Since 2010, there have been almost 15,000 new apprenticeship starts in Gloucester—15,000 in a population of about 100,000. The run rate of apprenticeships nationally—5.5 million new apprenticeships since 2010—would have been almost halved under the Labour run rate between 2005 and 2010. Were Labour's current proposals on apprenticeship spending to go through, it has been suggested that 140,000 apprenticeships would no longer exist. Therefore, the skills that my constituents have, which are being valuably used in leading sectors that are being supported by the Treasury and this Government, would be at serious risk under a new Government who did not value apprenticeships so highly.

The question, “Are you better off today than you were in 2010?” could also be rephrased, “What will happen to your skills, your purpose, your job and your future earnings under the changes proposed by the Labour party, which is so sadly absent here today?”

There are different issues that we need to consider in answering the question, “Are you better off today?” Education is vital for all of us, and everyone in the country needs to be more aware that our PISA rankings have risen from 25th to fourth in reading and from 27th to 16th in mathematics. I might be one off on both, but it is a significant leap forward. Those skills are vital to all our young constituents getting the opportunities they deserve.

[Richard Graham]

Within infrastructure, there is the whole question of public transport. Gloucester has additional train services to Bristol, Worcester and down to London. There is a wider range of services, sports, culture and leisure, and cultural regeneration and the role of heritage are incredibly important to any city. Gloucester's more than 40 wins from the National Lottery Heritage Fund have brought alive our old buildings and rebuilt pride in the city. These things are all part of answering, "Are you better off today than you were in 2010? Is where you live a better place today than it was in 2010?"

National insurance contributions are coming down sharply, which will mean an average saving of around £350 to each of my constituents and £450 for those on salaries over £35,000. All of that will be appreciated, but it is about the wider context in which it happens: the gradual recovery and the sense of green shoots coming through after a difficult year. That is important, and then there is the wider context of what has been achieved over the last 13 to 14 years. We must all take that into careful consideration.

12.41 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on his remarks. He provided a lot of sensible context for this debate and I will address some of his helpful points shortly.

It is very unusual to talk about fiscal matters, or fiscal legislation, to an almost empty Chamber. It is unheard of during my time in Parliament. As my hon. Friend will know, back in 2010, after the financial crisis, when we had to consider the long-term economic plan to build back our economy and to restore fiscal competence, there were many long, heated debates, and rightly so, in which proper scrutiny was given not just to Bills and legislation but to an exposition on the state we were in and how we needed to get ourselves back on to an even keel by growing the economy through Conservative policies.

That brings me to today's theme. Conservative policies have, over the last decade, helped to restructure the economy, rebuild our country and create jobs and economic growth. They have made us stand tall in the world once again. I remember, in 2010, 2011 and 2012, looking at our financial ratings with a degree of despair. Thank goodness we are no longer in that state, which I think we all welcome.

I welcome this Bill and thank the Treasury and, in particular, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for bringing it forward. Any measure that brings down the tax burden should be welcomed, because it represents a positive and constructive step in the right direction for our constituents. Our constituents are taxpayers and, ultimately, they want to keep more of the money they earn, and they want to know that the Government are spending their money responsibly.

Reducing the class 1 primary rate from 12% to 10% will put money into people's pockets from 6 January—the sooner, the better. I commend the Government for bringing forward this vital fiscal measure. I am disappointed that there are not more colleagues here to debate it, but that is just how Parliament is right now.

The £450 benefit to a worker on the average salary will make an important difference to households. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and

Pinner (David Simmonds) put it succinctly when he spoke about what it means for households at this time of year and for domestic budgets and spending.

I am particularly pleased to see the elimination of the class 2 rate and the reduction of the class 4 rate, which will help the self-employed from the start of the new financial year. I never tire of coming to this Chamber to say that I represent a constituency and a county of entrepreneurs. We are self-starters. We are self-made people. We are very proud of the contribution that the people of Essex make to our country. They are net contributors to His Majesty's Treasury, which is all the more reason why they should get a tax cut.

As a Government who believe in enterprise, economic growth and letting people stand on their own two feet, we should do everything possible to support the self-employed and sole traders. It is hard work being a sole trader and being self-employed. We know about the regulatory burdens and pressure that HMRC puts on sole traders and the self-employed in particular, but they are the backbone and the engine of our economy; they are the lifeblood that creates jobs.

Some 80% of my constituents are employed by small and medium-sized enterprises—that is 20 percentage points higher than the national average—and we want them to continue to thrive and grow, as is right and proper. They are the embodiment of the entrepreneurial spirit that our country needs to create growth. I sometimes feel that we do not always give them the voice they need. It is easy for the big companies that can lobby central Government Departments to get their voices and representations heard. We are here for our constituents as their MPs. Even at business questions this morning, Members spoke about three family-run businesses. That is who we should be supporting.

We have seen a reduction in the number of self-employed people from around 5 million just before the pandemic to just over 4 million this year. That is why I believe we must back them, support them and encourage their growth. We should hold out that ladder of opportunity. Where they need help and support, we should back them as a Government and as a country.

I always come to this House to give a shameless plug for family-run and self-employed businesses in my constituency. It is also important that we buy British and support local firms in our country and in our constituencies. It is important to remember that the self-employed contribute an estimated £278 billion to the economy, and the fiscal and supply measures will make it easier for them to trade.

The ability to do business, to trade and to set up a business are so important. Lower taxes will mean that more people want to give it a go and set up a business. They are the ones taking a risk, so they are the people we should back and support. If we want to be healthy, competitive and drive growth, these are the very people who innovate and invest in new technology and do things that are edgy and somewhat different, while providing vital services to so many of our constituents and being pioneers in certain sectors. That is why keeping taxes down should be at the core of our mission in government.

As we have already aligned the class 1 and class 4 thresholds, to match the tax-free threshold on income tax, we all welcome that the burden of national insurance

contributions has been reduced for the self-employed. That is why I am disappointed that there are not more Opposition Members present.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. I totally agree with her on the NICs paid by employees and the self-employed. In Esher and Walton, the average employee will receive a tax cut of £589 a year, benefiting 50,000 people. She is right that we are here to give a voice to the ambitions and aspirations of local people in our constituencies. Aside from the Labour Benches being totally empty, there is not a single Liberal Democrat Member here. Is it not churlish that, at this particular time, they are not doing more to support people on low and middle incomes?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right about that; his observation is spot-on. He will recall that, as I said in my opening remarks, when we have been in this Chamber to discuss important fiscal and economic measures, it has more often than not been to a full House. It is appalling that when the Government are backing working people and doing the right thing for them by putting more money in their pockets, the Opposition are all hiding. They are failing to recognise something that their constituents will benefit from. The Opposition should be giving a positive voice and supporting it, because it means more jobs and growth in every constituency across the country. As parliamentarians, we should all welcome that.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)
rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman was quite late in and did not hear the beginning of the right hon. Lady's speech.

Priti Patel: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As has been mentioned, the alignment with the tax-free threshold should also help with the future plans to simplify the tax system. We had a bit of a discussion on this last week, but it is important in today's debate again to raise the prospect of simplifying the tax system—more should be done in that area—by merging income tax and national insurance together. That is why I am disappointed that more Opposition Members are not here to discuss it. Last week, we had a semi-healthy discussion about it. It is out of the scope of this Bill to table an amendment to bring those two taxes together, but I urge those on the Treasury Bench—I would also be happy to work with other colleagues on this—to consider taking that up in advance of the spring Budget. Much more can be done here. Such a move would simplify taxes for the entrepreneurs and self-employed even further. As we know, when we come to the end of the tax year they are constantly having to do all sorts of things to satisfy His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

In 2012, I asked the Treasury a written question on integrating those taxes, and the then Exchequer Secretary replied by stating:

“Since Budget 2011, the Government have engaged extensively with stakeholders to develop options for operational integration of Income Tax and National Insurance Contributions. As many stakeholders have recognised, this is a complex issue with potentially significant implications for employers' payroll operations. The

Government will provide an update on this work later in the autumn. As we have already made clear, this is a long-term reform on which the Government will proceed carefully.”

That was a long time ago—it was 11 years ago. Although this is a complex issue, I maintain that such a move would help to simplify the tax system. I know that the Treasury Committee has looked at this area, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) touched on it today. Such a move would help to make payroll much easier for businesses, and allow them to co-ordinate income and revenue in a much more straightforward way.

Although this next issue may not be directly within the Bill's scope, it does relate to NICs. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to restate for Treasury Ministers the position on fiscal drag. The OBR forecasts show that a freezing of the NICs thresholds and the income tax thresholds will, relative to consumer prices index inflation, and after taking into account the tax cuts here, bring in an estimated £27 billion in the next fiscal year, 2024-25, with this rising to nearly £45 billion more for the Exchequer in 2028-29. The OBR is clear on that. Ministers know my views: as we go into spring next year, and as the economy grows and more revenues come in, I urge them to look at this area all over again.

This Bill is welcome. It is a positive step in the right direction, along with the entire autumn statement. I commend my colleagues for the work they have done on it. The speed at which the Government are acting to bring forward the benefits of the NI changes and get them into pay packets as early as possible is right; it is commendable and should be supported, as I hope it will be by all colleagues in the House. The Government must continue to look at further steps. We want more economic growth. We are pioneers when it comes to innovation and small business. We need to find other ways to lower taxes so that people can keep more of their earnings and, importantly, we ensure that our economy is match-fit for the future so that it continues to grow.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.54 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Before I start, I want to say that we have heard during the debate that former Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling has died at the age of 70. I am sure Members will agree, no matter which side of the House they sit on, that he was a man who cared deeply about people across the country, and that our thoughts are with him and his family today.

The Government may want our constituents to believe that they are easing the burden on their pay packets, but the reality is that households have not given the state this much of their earnings since the 1940s. Despite the warm words that we have heard today on tax cuts, households are now paying £4,000 more a year than they did under the previous Labour Government. This is a crippling tax burden for those struggling to make ends meet through the cost of living crisis. Despite today's commitment to reduce NI, as a result of the Tories' decisions on personal taxation, working people are left facing an average rise of £1,200 since 2010. So although Labour supports the measures put forward today to lighten the load that NICs are placing on our constituents, we should see this announcement for what

[Tulip Siddiq]

it is: a cynical attempt to draw voters' attention away from the fact that, under this Government, their living standards are going down and taxes are going up, while their wages continue to stagnate.

As the British people already knew, the promises made today cannot compensate for the damage that has been done. The measures announced today are equivalent to handing back £1 for every £8 of the Conservatives' tax rises since 2019. The freeze in the personal allowance threshold means that a couple on an average wage will still be a staggering £350 worse off per year, regardless of cuts to personal taxation. The wider freezing of current thresholds has confirmed that an additional 4 million of the poorest in society will now pay income tax by 2029.

The scorecards for last week's autumn statement are now in, and our leading independent economists do not seem that impressed. The OBR has confirmed, following the Chancellor's announcement, that real household disposable incomes will drop by 7% next year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) noted, the head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has also given a damning verdict, stating that the NICs reductions that we have been debating today "pale into insignificance" compared with the threshold freezes announced by the Chancellor. According to the latest International Monetary Fund forecast, the UK will have the slowest growth in the G7 next year. The Bank of England has confirmed that there will likely be zero growth in the economy until 2025. Those are not figures that the Government should be proud of.

If that economic backdrop were not bad enough, our constituents are also left worrying about how to pay for their mortgage and avoid having to sell the family home due to the reckless actions of this Government. Working families will see an average increase of £220 a month in mortgage costs because of the Tory mortgage bombshell, and 1.5 million households are also set to suffer as they desperately try to re-fix their mortgage deals next year. The Chancellor and other Conservative Members may want us to believe that the economy has turned a corner and that the cost of living crisis is over, but millions of people are still struggling to make ends meet. So of course we welcome the tax cut being debated today, but it is a drop in the ocean for working families who are still bearing the brunt of this Government's economic decisions.

Despite the desperate smoke and mirrors we have seen from the Chancellor, it is now clear that this Government do not know how to find the solutions to address the fundamental challenges facing this country right now—all the challenges that our constituents are facing day in, day out. After 13 years of failure, it is time that the Government got out of the way and let Labour deliver its plan for the economy and how to grow it again, get wages rising again and get Britain its future back. For all the warm words that we have heard today, if the Conservatives sincerely believe in their policies, they should ask the general public and call a general election as soon as possible.

12.59 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): On behalf of the Government, I join the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq)

and the whole House in expressing our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Alistair Darling. I know he had many personal friends in the House who knew him very well indeed. I never had the pleasure of interacting with him here, but what an incredibly calm and dignified gentleman he was. Perhaps that is something we can all reflect on.

Although the debate was somewhat one-sided, as most contributions came from the Government Benches, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. This important Bill delivers tax cuts and rewards and incentivises work, while growing the economy in a sustainable way. I will respond to many of the points raised.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly pointed out the importance of looking after the lowest paid and having a fair tax system, which we are delivering on. Over the last 13 years, we have lifted hundreds of thousands of families out of poverty, and we have a progressive tax system where the top 1% of taxpayers pay 28% of all income tax.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) highlighted the context in which the autumn statement was delivered and recognised the fact that we have faced not one but two global crises: the pandemic and the cost of living challenges. Those challenges are not unique to the United Kingdom and, despite the myths peddled by the Opposition, whoever was in Government would have faced those challenges. We do not remember the Opposition arguing against any of the intervention or support measures at the time—it is as if they have completely forgotten about that. Not recognising the context and the global circumstances speaks volumes about their inability to run the economy. We operate not in a vacuum but in a global system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester went on to highlight the remarkable progress made over the last 13 years, particularly in areas such as tax thresholds. Under Labour, the income tax threshold was £6,475, whereas it is now £12,570, and the NICs threshold was £5,715, whereas it is now £12,570. That is incredible progress. Together with the increases in the national living wage, that means people on the national living wage working full time are 30% better off in real terms than they would have been under Labour. That is a remarkable achievement and shows, despite the myths the Opposition peddle, that we look after the lowest paid in society. That will always be a priority of this Government.

My hon. Friend showed, yet again, his incredible insight, knowledge and commitment to his constituency by setting out a range of areas in which his constituents have benefited over the last 13 years, including by highlighting the importance of skills and apprenticeships. I could not agree with him more.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister is talking about apprenticeships, opportunities and skills, and in Gillingham and Rainham, we have seen over 8,000 apprenticeships. Does he agree that the concept of the Bill and the autumn statement is that if people work hard and do the right thing, they keep more of the money they earn? If they work hard and then retire, they get dignity through the pension triple lock—I know my residents from Darland, who are in the Gallery, very much appreciate

that. If it were left to the Labour party, there would be more borrowing, spending and debt. We saw what happened before and we do not want to go back to that.

Nigel Huddleston: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. He has given me the opportunity to leap swaths of my speech, because he has put those important points incredibly well.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who is my constituency neighbour and the Chair of the Treasury Committee, highlighted the importance of the autumn statement as a turning point, as articulated by the Chancellor, and the all-important supply-side measures in it that will help spur on business, create employment and generate incremental economic activity. As a result of the spring Budget and the autumn statement, the OBR has said that the economy is likely to be 0.5% larger. When we are talking about an economy of over £2 trillion, that is a huge incremental value to the UK economy.

Unfortunately, the spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), failed to recognise that we have addressed the cost of living to the tune of £100 billion in support. He also forgot that in the autumn statement we had an increase not only in the living wage but in benefits, aligned with inflation; in pensions; and in the local housing allowance rate, to the 30th percentile. That means 1.6 million families will be better off, gaining an average of £800 in support. It is not true to say that there were no cost of living support measures in the autumn statement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) recognised the considerable impact of those measures and the fact that they make a meaningful difference to his constituents. He raised issues about visas and students, which I am happy to discuss with him further.

As always, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) articulated core Conservative values incredibly well. The autumn statement recognised the importance of spending every penny of taxpayers' money incredibly carefully and responsibly, as well as ensuring that we are there to support people through the tax system wherever we can. She is right to be passionate about small businesses and entrepreneurs. Small Business Saturday takes place this weekend and I am sure many of us will be out supporting small businesses, not only on Saturday but in the run-up to Christmas and beyond.

The Opposition spokespeople peddled so many myths and untruths, I do not know where to start. *[Interruption.]* We addressed many of them in previous debates, so I will not hear from them. The way they react speaks volumes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Minister did not mean to say “untruths”, did he?

Nigel Huddleston: I take back that comment, Madam Deputy Speaker. There were some presumed facts that require challenge, as we saw earlier in the week. At one point, the shadow Chancellor claimed that the forecasts

were going to be £40 billion smaller. The shadow spokespeople know full well, because it is stated by the OBR, that economic growth by the end of the forecast period is higher than it was in the spring forecast. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry if I have to explain that to Opposition Members—if a number is bigger than the previous one, then that means growth and not decline. We could possibly forgive that mistake if it were not made by the people trying to become the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is extraordinary incompetence—a £55 billion difference is not something we can easily ignore.

As my hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury pointed out earlier, we are pleased that the Opposition are supporting the national insurance cuts, but to combine that with their commitments on spending, to the tune of £28 billion, and then claim that there will not be an increase in debt is farcical. It is not true; we know that will happen, and we are seeing the same old Labour. As Margaret Thatcher said:

“The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people’s money.”

That was true then, and it is true now.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. The Bill delivers a tax cut for 29 million working people, and I am pleased that it will be getting support from across the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I join the two Front Benchers in saying how deeply sad it is to hear the news that Alistair Darling has died. He was an incredibly well-respected, thoughtful and kind man who was devoted to public service. I know all Members will want us to send their condolences to his family.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Further proceedings on the Bill stood postponed (Order, this day).

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (REDUCTION IN RATES) 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 National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided that is attributable to:

- (a) reducing the main primary percentage for Class 1 primary national insurance contributions to 10% (and reducing the percentage specified in regulation 131 of the Social Security Contributions Regulations 2001 to 3.85%),
- (b) reducing the main Class 4 percentage for Class 4 national insurance contributions to 8% from tax year 2024-25, and
- (c) removing the requirement to pay Class 2 national insurance contributions from that tax year.—(Mark Jenkinson.)

Question agreed to.

National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill

*Proceedings resumed (Order, this day).
Considered in Committee*

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members that, in Committee, Members should not address the Chair as Deputy Speaker. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. Madam Chair, Chair, Madam Chairman or Mr Chairman are also acceptable.

Clause 1

REDUCTION OF CLASS 1 MAIN PRIMARY PERCENTAGE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Clauses 2 to 5 stand part.

The schedule.

1.10 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Thank you, Dame Rosie, for that timely reminder. I shall briefly outline the clauses in the Bill. Clause 1 amends the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, which applies to Great Britain, and the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to reduce the main primary percentage of class 1 national insurance contributions paid by employees from 12% to 10%. That is a tax cut worth an average of around £450 per annum for employees. Clause 2 amends the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, which applies to Great Britain, and the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to reduce the main class 4 NICs percentage paid by the self-employed from 9% to 8%. That is a tax cut worth an average of around £350 per annum for the self-employed.

Clause 3 amends the 1992 Acts that apply to Great Britain and to Northern Ireland to remove the obligation on persons to pay class 2 obligations when their earnings exceed the lower profit threshold of £12,570 per annum. The small profits threshold is retained, with the result that self-employed persons with profits from a trade, profession or vocation above that level will be treated as having paid class 2 NICs and will continue to gain entitlement to contributory benefits.

Clause 4 introduces the schedule, containing transitional and consequential provisions. The schedule to the Bill includes changes that are consequential on clauses 1 to 3 of the Bill. The principal changes are the introduction of a blended rate of primary class 1 national insurance contributions for directors for the 2022-23 tax year and consequential repeals arising from clause 3 that removes the requirement to pay class 2 NICs. Finally, clause 5 gives the short title as the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Act 2023.

The First Deputy Chairman: I call the shadow Minister.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): As we made it clear on Second Reading, we will be supporting the measures that it includes, I thank the Minister for

setting out the details of its clauses. As we heard, clauses 2 to 5 and the schedule to the Bill implement a reduction in the class 4 rate, a removal of the requirement to pay class 2 contributions and various transitional and consequential provisions.

I wish to ask the Minister some questions about how the measures in clause 1 will operate and what their overall impact will be. May I put it on record that, as ever, I am grateful to the Chartered Institute of Taxation for sharing its views with us on the clauses in this Bill?

Clause 1 makes it clear that the Bill's measures will apply from 6 January 2024. Of course, we want people to benefit from these changes as quickly as possible given the pressures that families across Britain are facing right now. We recognise though that with the Government having left this policy change until late November to announce, there is not much time left for payroll software to get ready for 6 January. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether HMRC accepts that some employers' payroll software will not be ready in time for 6 January. If so, how many employers does he anticipate being affected? In such cases, employers would have to pass on the benefit of any changes to employees in subsequent months. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm how many employees he expects will be affected by this delay, and how long he expects them to have to wait to receive the delayed benefits.

Furthermore, we understand that many operators in the retail sector have a moratorium on releasing new software updates in the November to January period, given what a busy time that is for them. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether he is aware of that. If so, what meetings has he already had with retailers to discuss this point and, if so, what has the outcome of those meetings been?

The First Deputy Chairman: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Before I come to my point, may I add my own condolences and those of my party to the family and friends of the former Chancellor, Alistair Darling? Clearly, we were on very different sides of the fence, particularly on independence, which was heavily contested nine years ago, but he was a towering intellect and a very important figure in Scottish public life. As I say, we pass on our condolences to his family and friends.

My question is also on the operation of clause 1. HMRC has stated to the Treasury Committee that it is unable to cope with inquiries either in writing or by phone at the moment, and that it is under severe pressure. I, too, would like to know how the clause will be given effect by 6 January, and what measures the Government are taking to ensure that that happens.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank hon. Members for their questions. I can assure them that HMRC is engaging with industry and providing relevant guidance to support it to deliver the changes on time. We expect the majority of companies to be able to do so, particularly in this era, when many of the changes can be made on various systems. The Government are confident that the majority of software developers will be able to make changes to their payroll software in time for the 6 January deadline.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

REVIEW OF EFFECTS OF ACT

“(1) The Treasury must lay before the House of Commons on the day on which this Act is passed a report which sets out forecasts of—

- (a) the changes to the amount of national insurance contributions deducted from the annual income of a full-time worker earning the national living wage as a result of the measures in this Act over the period 2023/24 to 2027/28, and
- (b) a comparison with the changes to the amount of national insurance contributions deducted from the annual income of a full-time worker earning the national living wage as a result of the thresholds for payment of national insurance remaining frozen over the period 2023/24 to 2027/28, rather than rising in line with CPI.

(2) The report in subsection (1) should also set out the costs to (i) businesses, and (ii) government, of implementing the changes in this Act, and compare them to the costs of—

- (a) implementing a 1.25% point increase in national insurance contributions in April 2022, and
- (b) implementing the reversal of the increase in paragraph(a) in November 2022.”—(*James Murray.*)

This new clause would require a review of the effects of the Bill if enacted over the period 2023/24 to 2027/28, on someone earning the national living wage, compared with the effect of national insurance thresholds being frozen, and a comparison of the expected implementation costs of this Bill with those of implementing and repealing the Health and Social Care Levy Act 2021.

Brought up, and read the First time.

James Murray: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Thank you, Dame Rosie, for the chance to address our new clause 1. Before I do so, may I ask whether the Minister would commit to writing to me with detailed responses to the questions that I raised in our debate on the previous group? We did not get them in his response just now, so perhaps he will commit to writing to me with them as soon as possible.

Our new clause would require the Government to be honest about the impact of the changes made by the Bill when considered not just in isolation but in the wider context. Subsection (1) would require the Treasury to explain how the taxpayer or someone earning the national living wage would be impacted by the combined effects of the changes in the Bill and the freezing of national insurance thresholds at their 2022-23 level over the period 2023-24 to 2027-28.

We asked for confirmation of that, because our analysis shows that a full-time worker on the national living wage will pay an estimated £70 more in national insurance next year, even with the cut in the Bill, as a result of the thresholds being frozen. What is more, the full impact of the Government’s freezing of national insurance thresholds will be that by 2027-28—again, even with the cut in the Bill—a full-time worker on the national living wage will pay £160 more a year in tax. Can the Minister confirm whether he accepts our calculation? If he does not, I assume that he will accept our new clause and publish the data; otherwise, people will rightly be left wondering what it is the Government have to hide.

Should the Government choose to accept our new clause, subsection (2) would require them to come clean on some of the implementation costs to businesses and

the Government of what the Chartered Institute of Taxation described last week as the “national insurance roller-coaster” in recent years.

If the Government are not prepared to accept our new clause, perhaps the Minister will again commit to writing to me with details of the implementation costs of the changes made by the Bill, of the 1.25 percentage point increase in national insurance contributions in April 2022, and of the reversal of that increase in November 2022. If he will not, I would be grateful if he could explain why not, again to prevent people from wondering what it is the Government have to hide.

Nigel Huddleston: I hope that I can give the hon. Member some assurances. A worker on the national living wage will save £165 next year from the national insurance cut, and thanks to above-inflation increases in the NIC starting threshold since 2010, a full-time worker on the national living wage will pay £400 less in national insurance contributions next year than they otherwise would have. That includes the historical increase to the national insurance contributions starting thresholds in July 2022 by this Government—the largest ever increase to a personal tax starting threshold. The national minimum and living wage rates are set on advice from the independent Low Pay Commission. Rates for 2025-26 and beyond will be set in future years.

The cost to HMRC of implementing and reversing the health and social care levy was £5 million. The cost to implement this rate reduction is not yet known as the project to deliver the change is in delivery, though HMRC does not expect it to be significant. In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s previous question, I will be delighted to write to him.

James Murray: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

1.21 pm

Nigel Huddleston: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a short and relatively straightforward Bill, but it is an important one, as it will make a meaningful difference to many households by putting money in the pockets of millions of people in every constituency in this country. I thank the Treasury officials, Clerks and everyone involved in getting the Bill to this point so speedily. I sense the enthusiasm in the House to pass it, and for us to get back to our constituencies and spread the good news. I will therefore end my comments there and commend the Bill to the House.

1.23 pm

James Murray: As the Opposition have made clear throughout today’s proceedings and on many other occasions, we believe that taxes on working people are too high. We have long said that we want taxes on working people to come down when they can be cut in an economically and fiscally responsible way.

[James Murray]

While we confirm our support for the Bill, we repeat our call for the Government to be honest with the British people. The Conservatives should be honest about the inescapable truth facing families across the UK: the tax burden in Britain is still on course to reach its highest level since the second world war. As a result of the Conservatives' decisions on personal taxation in this Parliament, households will be left facing an average tax rise of £1,200. Looking across all taxes, we now know that, by the end of the decade, they will have risen by the equivalent of an astonishing £4,300 for every household in the country.

As we have set out today, a clear pattern runs through the Conservatives' time in office: whatever they do, they keep making working people worse off. While we support the Bill, it is clear that the Conservatives are incapable of delivering what Britain truly needs: a plan to get the economy growing and make working people better off. That is what Labour is offering. In last week's debate on the autumn statement, when discussing the general election, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury said that we should "bring it on". On that point, we wholeheartedly agree.

1.24 pm

Drew Hendry: As we have pointed out, the Bill does not go nearly far enough to help people facing a bitter cost of living crisis. We urge the Government, after introducing this tiny measure, to go back and consider those people who are suffering from high food costs, seeing their mortgages and rents increase, and—most tellingly, as temperatures plummet—facing a winter with higher energy bills than last year. This is a hard time for families across the nations of the UK, and in Scotland they deserve better. They should get that through the powers of independence being returned to Scotland.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

HM Prison Bedford

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

1.25 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate on conditions at His Majesty's Prison Bedford. I thank the Commons Library, the Howard League, the Prison Officers Association, the residents living by the prison, the Prison Reform Trust, the independent monitoring board, Victim Support and Charlie Taylor for their helpful information and data, which will inform the debate.

HMP Bedford, which is also a young offenders institution, was inspected on 9 November, and the findings by His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons are shocking—shocking, but not surprising. In 2018, I was granted an urgent question when Bedford Prison was last issued with an urgent notification. The same problems—inexperienced staff, extreme violence, overcrowding, drug use, mouldy and filthy conditions, self-harm, and rat and cockroach infestations—are cited in the last report and the recent report. It is as heartbreaking as it is deeply frustrating to see the degrading and totally unacceptable conditions in which prison officers, staff and residents are expected to live and work.

HMP Bedford continues to have the highest level of violent assaults against staff in adult male prisons in England and Wales. Self-harm and drug use is excessive. I am sorry to say that the amount of force used by staff was also found to be high. Inspectors saw examples of inappropriate and excessive force alongside unprofessional behaviour. Many prisoners are locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, and even the minority who are in education or training find that it is often cancelled because there are no staff to cover those services.

I have been told that prisoners sleep with covers over their mouth to stop cockroaches crawling in while they sleep. The inhumane segregation unit, once described as a rat-infested dungeon, was supposed to be shut down years ago, but endless delays to the new unit mean that it is still in use. Will the Minister explain what he believes prisons are for? Locking people away in those conditions does not keep society safe. Where is the rehabilitation in the system?

Who can leave those conditions a better person, or less likely to reoffend? Overcrowded, squalid and unsafe prisons will never help or allow people to turn their lives around and move on from a life of crime and hurting others. According to the report, staff and leaders are doing their best, and the POA has told me that staff at Bedford feel safer now than they did when the last urgent notification was issued. However, while many problems, such as problems with staff retention, inadequate prison capacity, too few and inexperienced staff and too much staff churn at leadership level, are symptomatic of a wider crisis, questions must be asked about why HMP Bedford has not learned the lessons of the past or been able to implement sustainable changes.

As His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons said in his report, many of the issues found at Bedford "reflect wider problems across the estate."

HMP Bedford is the fifth prison in a year to receive an urgent notification and the third reception prison. That is a damning indictment of not just the prison system,

but the whole British justice system. Prisoners on remand are waiting far too long for trials because of the court backlog, which means that victims are waiting too long and are not getting justice.

In an ideal world, Bedford Prison would have been shut down years ago. It is a Victorian jail in the middle of an urban area and totally unfit for purpose. Residents living by the prison have had to tolerate unacceptable disturbances for years, with intruders breaking and entering gardens to traffic drugs over the walls and regular drone flights delivering contraband. The noise and disturbance from prisoners in solitary confinement cells mean that nearby residential windows are kept closed and some constituents have reported hearing sexual assaults and violence left unchecked. However, because the prison estate is full to the brim, it looks as though a more modern appropriate prison to detain offenders is not an option, even though it should be.

Despite all that, the Government have not improved the conditions, because they cannot or will not tackle the root causes of the persistent issues at HMP Bedford. Currently, 377 male prisoners are on roll, although the “in use certified normal accommodation” number is 229. More than 45%, or 170 men, are awaiting trial. Some reports say that that figure is higher, so I would be grateful if the Minister clarified the number of men currently waiting to be put before a judge or magistrate and how long the average wait is for a trial date.

It is totally unacceptable that prisoners languish on remand for months and even years in an overcrowded prison, all because this Government have decimated the criminal justice system. The Crown court backlog has hit a new record high of more than 65,000 cases and the magistrates court backlog is also rising. Does the Minister agree that his Government’s target of reducing the backlog to 53,000 by March 2025 is very unlikely to be met?

Serious questions are being asked about whether Bedford can remain as a remand prison. Will the Minister consider a complete re-role of the prison? Our prisons are so overcrowded that judges are being asked to delay sentencing convicted criminals. In HMP Bedford, 46 men have been convicted but are awaiting sentencing. How is that delivering justice for victims or perpetrators?

We will no doubt hear about more plans, promises and initiatives to turn the place around, but I have heard them all before. We have had the 10 prisons project and the prison performance support programme, just two years ago, where Bedford Prison was supposedly going to

“benefit from a new intensive support programme to help challenging jails to improve safety and rehabilitation.”

All have failed.

Will the Minister explain why, after years and years of action plans and interventions, the problems at the prison persist? What will his Government do differently this time to resolve the distinctive and systemic failures at HMP Bedford and across the wider prison estate? What will he do to support the governor to manage an overcrowded prison, to implement basic levels of cleanliness and to tackle a toxic culture, where prisoners are locked up for too long in squalor and do not seem to bother trying to keep their surroundings clean?

In 2017, when HMP Liverpool was described as having the “worst living conditions” ever seen by inspectors, the prison was successfully turned around through a

significant population reduction. Huge investment and resources were channelled towards the prison. Bedford needs that level of sustainable investment now. In the context of the current capacity crisis, however, will the Minister confirm whether such a decanting measure is even possible? There is absolutely no excuse for any prison not to meet basic standards of decency.

The quality of leadership is vital. Governor Ali Barker has not yet been there a year, and I hope she gets all the resources she requires to achieve the higher standards needed at HMP Bedford. Meanwhile, nearly half of the prison officers working at the prison have less than two years’ experience. Being a prison officer is one of the most challenging of the uniformed professions. What plans do the Government have to support prison officers and tackle the huge lack of experience in the profession? Leadership and experience are key to improving the outcome at HMP Bedford, but leadership in Government also matters. Since the last urgent notification five years ago, there have been 10 changes in Prisons Minister. Amid such chaos and churn, there cannot be a serious plan for reforming the penal system and delivering justice for victims.

The decision to privatise the estates maintenance contracts has had a particularly detrimental impact on older establishments such as Bedford, where the maintenance needs are substantial. Those contracts were poorly funded and understaffed, and basic routine repair and maintenance work has suffered. What plans has the Minister to improve that and, at the very least, demand a better service from those contracts?

Full use of the recently announced measures, including the emergency release scheme and provision to delay the sentencing of individuals on bail, should be made in the Government’s response to the urgent notification. A presumption to suspend short sentences would also relieve pressures on reception prisons once the relevant legislation has been passed and enacted. Those measures are not about being tough on crime, but about implementing a justice system that works for victims—because today, the justice system is failing victims.

As Bedford Prison serves a number of courts, including in Bedford, Luton and London, there is a lot of intake churn. Because Bedford hosts a prison, my constituents are too often the victims of reoffending criminals in the area, and many are understandably losing faith in the justice system’s ability to deliver justice to victims of crime, including violent crime.

The thorny question of what sentencing is for was tackled by the Criminal Justice Act 2003, which codified for the first time the principles and purposes of sentencing: the punishment of offenders; the reduction of crime, including reduction by deterrence; the reform and rehabilitation of offenders; and the protection of the public. Apart from punishing prisoners—remember that many Bedford inmates have not yet been convicted of a crime—no other remedies in that list are being met.

A report by Victim Support cites a study conducted for the probation service that reveals that 94% of victims of crime said that the most important thing to them was that the offender did not commit the crime again. The same study found that 81% would prefer an offender to receive an effective sentence rather than a harsh one. The first recommendation of the report is:

“Effective rehabilitation has to be at the heart of the prison system.”

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

The second recommendation says:

“Though victims accept that any reforms have to be cost-effective, if individual sentencing decisions are seen to be motivated by concern for cost more than justice, they will not inspire the support of victims or the general public.”

Victim Support backs the reduction in short-term prison sentences, but wants evidence-based alternatives to stop reoffending put in place before they are abolished. It wants robustly enforced community sentencing to be applied as a meaningful and effective alternative to custodial sentences. It says that if alternatives such as drug or alcohol treatment programmes, or treatment for mental health problems, are ordered, they need to be adequately funded and proven to prevent reoffending.

The conditions at HMP Bedford, and indeed across the prison estate, are not conducive to the rehabilitation of prisoners—far from it. In fact, the recent urgent notification found that the preparation for release was “Not sufficiently good”. What will the Minister propose in his response to His Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons that will finally turn Bedford Prison around, so that I am not standing here again next year asking the same questions? Will he find a solution that finally puts victims at the heart of the criminal justice system, a big part of which is to ensure that prisons rehabilitate offenders, rather than create reoffenders and more victims of crime?

1.43 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar):

If I may briefly crave your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to put on the record my tribute to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, on the news of his sad passing. He was a man of intellect, integrity and ability, and had a deep commitment to public service. He will be missed by all in this House. We send our condolences and sympathies to his family.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this important debate. As he knows, I am deeply concerned by the recent findings of HM inspectorate of prisons at HMP Bedford, particularly in regard to safety and living conditions, and I have been clear that the situation needs to improve quickly. This is, as he set out clearly, the second time that an urgent notification has been invoked at HMP Bedford. I agree that the circumstances leading to it are not acceptable. Before I turn to the specifics that he raised about the situation at Bedford, I hope that he will allow me a moment to remind the House of the context—his speech rightly ranged more widely than Bedford alone—and of the steps that we are taking to improve prisons and justice across the country, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor set out in his statement of 16 October.

On prison capacity, the House will be aware that we are building six new prisons as we create an additional 20,000 places to deliver the biggest prison expansion in over a century. We have already delivered just shy of 6,000 of these additional places, and the brand-new category C resettlement prison, HMP Fosse Way, opened its doors in May this year and will house up to 1,715 prisoners. At the same time, we are creating thousands of places through the expansion of prisons with additional house blocks and major refurbishments at existing prisons,

and by rolling out rapid deployment cells across the estate—the first 380 or so have already been delivered at six sites.

The hon. Gentleman raised a specific point about Bedford. There are no plans to re-roll Bedford Prison at this point. I appreciate that he may be disappointed by that, but it is important that I am open with him, as I will seek to be throughout my speech. I would gently say, in respect of prison capacity, that we are getting on with delivering that increase in modern, effective rehabilitative prison places through those six new prisons. By regrettable contrast, the plans under Jack Straw in the last Labour Government were to build 7,500 places in three Titan prisons, and, to the best of my recollection, they never got built at all.

In respect of staffing, I join the hon. Gentleman in rightly paying tribute to all those who work in our prisons—prison officers and all the staff in a range of capacities—for their work. Since March 2017, we have also increased the number of prison officers in public sector prisons by 4,655, and we made a commitment in 2021 to hire up to 5,000 prison officers across public and private prisons by the mid-2020s. As he alluded to, the increase in numbers means that, as we grow the workforce, which is a positive thing, we are also bringing new joiners and staff to the prison service, who will, by logic, have fewer years of service under their belt. It is important that we continue doing what we are doing to retain experienced officers alongside them as part of their mentoring and the development of their skills.

We have improved starting salaries for officers, which have risen from £22,000 to £31,000 since 2019. The staffing picture is improving in prisons across the country: in the 12 months from last September—the latest figures I have—the number of officers has increased by 1,441 full-time equivalents. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight that we are also improving the retention of staff: the resignation rate among frontline prison officers is down by almost three percentage points compared with last year. There is more to do, but that is progress, and it is important that we continue on that trajectory.

The hon. Gentleman also rightly highlighted prison safety, which I will address in a broader context before I turn to his local prison. We continue to take the necessary action to make our prisons safe both for frontline staff and for prisoners. The overall rate of assaults is 26% lower than prior to the pandemic. Of course, every assault is one too many, and we continue to work to improve the security of our prisons and reduce violence and the number of assaults within them, but I highlight that degree of positive progress to him.

The measures that we are putting in place to reduce violence in our prisons estate include our £100 million security investment to clamp down on the weapons, drugs and mobile phones that fuel violence and crime behind bars, and the continued rollout of PAVA—a synthetic pepper spray—in the adult male estate to protect staff and prisoners from incidents of serious violence, alongside de-escalation training for officers, which is also playing an important part.

Before I turn specifically to Bedford, let me address some of the broad-brush points that the hon. Gentleman made. He was right to highlight the five key purposes of sentencing. I highlight to him—although I am doing so from memory, so I will write to him to correct myself if I am incorrect—that reoffending is down by 9%, so

again, that is working, but there is always more to do. He is right about the importance of substance misuse treatment programmes in getting people off substances that may drive their criminal behaviour. Their importance extends beyond prison, to when people are on release. My recollection is that there is a 54% reduction in reoffending if those programmes are continued in the community, the treatment is sustained, and the NHS, local authorities and prison authorities work together to make sure that it is in place. We are seeing positive outcomes there.

The hon. Gentleman quite rightly talked about the approach to sentencing at headline level, and the challenges of short sentences. They are often so short that we cannot get to grips with the underlying challenges that an individual faces, but long enough to break fragile ties and affect relationships, jobs and accommodation. I am very pleased that, on this issue, he appears to be following the approach set out by the Lord Chancellor, who suggests tougher sentences for those who commit the most heinous crimes, and tough community sentences as an alternative to short custodial sentences, though obviously discretion will rest with the sentencer. Also, while there should be a clear focus in the custodial estate on people paying their debt to society, they should also be able to make positive life choices about what they intend to do when they come out of prison, so that they can make a positive contribution and live life on the straight and narrow.

I turn to the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised about his local prison, HMP Bedford. As he set out, His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons has highlighted significant concerns about the condition of cells and overcrowding at Bedford. I reassure him that I am treating that with the utmost seriousness. He asked a number of questions about measures that we will put in place in response to the urgent notification. In accordance with our usual protocol on responding to the inspectorate, the Lord Chancellor will publish his response to the urgent notification, and the action plan, no later than 15 December; there is 28 days in which to do that. That will be the detailed response. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the time he spared me earlier this week for a conversation, in which he set out and amplified his key concerns. I hope that I can engage with him as we finalise the action plan. I also highlight my gratitude to the governor for giving me her time when we spoke last week.

The findings are, as the hon. Gentleman said, deeply concerning. Notwithstanding the fact that there will be a formal response within 28 days, I can update him—and indeed you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the House—on a number of immediate actions that we have taken to drive improvement. These include providing additional resourcing support to the prison, equivalent to 15 additional prison officers, to improve the prison's safety and security, and to improve the regime; I think the hon. Gentleman asked for additional support for the governor. We are undertaking a cell cleaning and painting programme to improve the physical environment, and completing a joint audit with our maintenance contractor to identify works and key priority areas, so that we can ensure that the work is done. We are introducing a cell conditions agreement to ensure that all cells are in good condition before they can be occupied. Decency checks to address concerns about cleanliness will be overseen by the governor; that will help directly with improving living conditions.

A working group has been set up, led by the governor, to understand issues regarding fair treatment. The hon. Gentleman raised that point when we spoke. The group will particularly focus on allegations of racism and other inappropriate behaviours. He has highlighted his concerns on that issue to me. We have made a number of new senior appointments at the prison; they include a new head of violence reduction, a new head of reducing reoffending, and a new head of education, skills and work.

His Majesty's chief inspector noted in his letter to the Lord Chancellor that Bedford has

“consistently failed to provide good outcomes for prisoners”

since the inspection in 2016. The series of concerning inspections at Bedford is, of course, deeply troubling, and it may be useful if I briefly set out the improvements that we have made in response to previous inspection reports. Of course, they clearly have not resolved all the underlying issues, hence the hon. Gentleman's securing this debate, but it is important that we highlight what has been done.

In response to His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons' first urgent notification about HMP Bedford in 2018, a comprehensive safety strategy was implemented to support violence reduction, and a dedicated young adult unit was introduced to provide targeted support for prisoners and upskilling for staff. That resulted in lower levels of violence for that demographic group. We also provided additional staffing, including a safety hub manager, and a dedicated use of force co-ordinator in the safety team. In addition, we upgraded the head of safety post from a band 7 to a more senior band 8. Refurbishments also took place to improve decency and living conditions; they included improvements to showers and flooring.

HMP Bedford has also received support from the prison performance support programme, which offers tailored support for a maximum period of 18 months to prisons that face numerous complex challenges. The support for Bedford included over £1 million of additional funding focused on improving security and living conditions. Following the taking of those steps, the inspectorate undertook an independent review of progress in 2019 and found that although there had been some progress since 2018, progress on many of the inspectorate's recommendations was insufficient. Inspectors found that despite the pandemic, improvements in living conditions had been made, including extensive, good-quality refurbishment of the communal shower rooms. However, previous concerns about violence and safety persisted.

In early 2022, the inspectorate visited Bedford to undertake a full inspection. It noted improvements at the prison, including strong leadership and an improved prison culture. Further improvements had also been made, such as investment in new windows and flooring and the installation of enhanced gate security. Alongside this, the capacity of the prison had been reduced by 76 spaces to allow residential accommodation to be refurbished. The inspection recognised that challenges remained, but it acknowledged that the prison was heading in a positive direction, and the oversight that followed the urgent notification of 2018 was removed from Bedford in October last year.

Even after the removal of urgent notification oversight, Bedford continued to receive support, for example through an ongoing compliance project, in which management

[Edward Argar]

checking systems were built to ensure that rules and regulations were fully followed by both staff and prisoners. It is therefore deeply disappointing that the latest inspection concluded that standards had slipped back at the prison, as the hon. Gentleman said, and a second UN was issued. It is also worrying that the contents of that urgent notification, which I considered very carefully, were, to my mind, similar to those of the 2018 notification. As I say, I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for discussing these matters with me earlier this week, and I hope that he will feel free to come to me with any specifics that he would like considered in the next few weeks, as we put together our response—and, indeed, if he would like more regular engagement as we work through what needs to be done to improve the prison in his constituency.

When we met, the hon. Gentleman raised a couple of points that I would like to address. He raised his concern about the impact on constituents who live near the prison; he mentioned people entering the gardens of properties that neighbour the prison in an attempt to throw things over the prison wall, and broader impacts. Speaking as a constituency MP, I entirely understand his concern when constituents bring him those issues. It is right that he makes those points to me as the Minister, and to the House more broadly. The prison has worked to enhance partnerships with both the local council and the police, so that it can tackle such behaviour; as part of that, the prison checks directly, on a weekly basis, on any complaints from residents, and follows up on them, if they have not been raised with Bedfordshire police. If it is helpful to him, he may wish to raise specific issues with me outwith this Chamber, in confidence.

The hon. Gentleman touched on his concerns about the inexperience of some staff at Bedford. Notwithstanding the benefits of increasing the number of staff in prison officer roles, we recognise the need to continue training rigorously. There is now a learning and capability manager in place to directly support all new staff at HMP Bedford. We have also provided for a full-time welfare post for HMP Bedford staff, so that they have that support, independent of local care team arrangements, should

they need it. Having previously deployed standards coaching teams at the prison, I intend to redeploy them in the new year, to again help drive progress.

The HMIP findings are of course deeply concerning, and we are committed to improving the conditions at Bedford and at the other prisons where UNs have been triggered over the past year. My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor will be monitoring the situation at Bedford very closely in the coming weeks and months to ensure there is sustained improvement. Although I have had this specific brief for only about two and a half to three weeks, the hon. Member for Bedford will have had experience of dealing with me in other ministerial roles, and I hope he will recognise that just as I did in those roles, I will seek to work collaboratively with him where I can. We share the desired outcome of making improvements.

I also confirm on the record that the Lord Chancellor's response to the urgent notification will be published by 15 December, as required. The hon. Gentleman will be able to obtain it, but I will make sure that a copy is sent to him for his records. A wider-ranging full action plan will also be developed in the longer term to address all HMIP recommendations and hopefully tackle some of the long-term underlying challenges that he has highlighted. I anticipate that that will be published in March 2024, but I will inform him when we have a more precise timing for that. I am grateful to him for bringing this important issue to this Chamber for debate, and look forward to working with him and the prison in the coming months to address the issues that have been highlighted.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Following the Minister's opening remarks, I place on record my own sadness on learning of the death of Alistair Darling. He was a distinguished Member of this House, and one who I regarded from the Opposition Benches as a friend. The political landscape of the United Kingdom will be the bleaker because of his loss.

Question put and agreed to.

2.1 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 November 2023

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme

1.30 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I am here today because the reputation of Parliament matters, and how we conduct ourselves here matters. Like many workplaces, we are grappling with issues around bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, and we are looking for ways to not only give people routes to redress but change the culture of our organisation to ensure that such issues do not find any solace in our midst.

I stand here today representing a number of colleagues who, through the establishment of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, have become Ministers but still have very strong opinions on this issue and want to see it dealt with in the right way. I refer in particular to the pivotal role played by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who introduced the ICGS in July 2018. She has recently taken up a ministerial position and is unable to take part in the debate, but I note that she is here in body as well as in spirit.

I also note that I was a member of the recent Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff, and the excellent report which came from that underlines the importance of the changes recommended for the ICGS, some of which have not yet been carried through in full but were part of the recommendations of the Speaker's Conference.

This is a timely debate, because there is an independent review under way into how the ICGS has developed over the last five years. The review issued a call for evidence on 22 November, and I know that a number of colleagues will want to provide feedback through that. Because we are midway through a review, the Minister responding to the debate will inevitably be somewhat curtailed in what she is able to say. I hope that this debate gives some individuals the opportunity to recognise that they can contribute through the review and to hear from the Minister the Government's support for this important programme of work within Parliament.

The vision of the ICGS, introduced in the wake of the #MeToo scandal, was to ensure that everybody who works in or visits Parliament is treated with dignity and respect and to underline that there is absolutely no place for bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct in any workplace, including Parliament. The scheme is there for all current and former members of the parliamentary community, not just MPs, and it is the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

The initial working group, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, was made up of Members of all parties in this place, noble peers from the other place, members of staff of both Houses and trade union representation for House staff. It was a thorough piece of work, embracing a huge range of views, and it demonstrated the importance of not only enshrining those views in the process that was developed but getting their support for the recommendations.

The research into the problem and the possible solutions was incredibly detailed, taking advice from legal experts and employment advisers. A number of hearings were held, to hear the sometimes shocking stories of colleagues who work here. The result was widely consulted on with Members right across the House and was agreed on the nod; there was no dissent to what was put forward. It is important to note that the House chose to vote on the specific processes to be followed because of the possible serious sanctions involved and the nature of the allegations. When we come to review this, it is important that we also look at the fact that the process needs to closely echo what this House agreed to and ensure that there has not been any mission creep along the way.

The ICGS proposals took a holistic view, looking at change processes, and, importantly, changing the culture of the organisation—as I say, as many other organisations are doing across the country. The key features of the scheme as it was originally envisaged were: the development of a behaviour code that would apply to everyone; the development of new training to support continuous professional development; the maintenance of respectful behaviour, proper induction courses and exit interviews to identify bad practice wherever it occurs; and, of course, the independent scheme itself. Again, that is very much what other organisations are doing to try to address these sorts of problems.

The scheme was designed to enable any complainant to call a strictly confidential helpline with their grievance and have it assessed in a timely fashion by an independent case examiner, who would also invite the complainant and respondent to give their sides of the case, with witnesses if necessary, and provide for the appropriate mental health support for all parties. The issues are difficult.

Should the independent case examiner find that there was no case to answer, the matter would be dropped with no publicity or consequences. Should, however, the case be upheld, the findings would be escalated to the employer or manager of the person accused and the ICGS would identify appropriate sanctions, which would include written or oral apologies, training, a requirement to prohibit contact, and, in serious cases, dismissal of the respondent.

In instances where an MP was the respondent, an escalation through the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to the Committee on Standards, which could recommend perhaps a suspension, including potentially allowing for a recall vote if that was triggered. The House had to agree the scheme and the process to be followed because of the implications of the sanctions. More recently, for sanctions against MPs the Independent Expert Panel was introduced as an extra layer in the process. That was not originally considered necessary by the working group, but has been put in place subsequently.

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

Were the complainant to report an issue that could break the law, the ICGS case examiner offers support and guidance to the complainant to go to the appropriate police force. Should the complainant not wish to do that, the ICGS has a protocol with the Met police to enable anonymised reporting to take place to ensure safeguarding of the wider public.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. Lady has put forward a very detailed and constructive case that needs to be looked at. Over the years, lots of constituents have come to tell me about issues to do with workforce bullying in the constituency. They tell me that their biggest concern is the time it takes for things to happen. Frustratingly, it means that sometimes they almost give up. Can the right hon. Lady confirm for all of us here, but for me especially, that the timescale will be sufficiently fast to ensure that the complaint, if upheld, can be dealt with within a 28-day timescale? Is that possible?

Dame Maria Miller: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his timely intervention. I will come to the specifics of that point later in my remarks. One reason for calling the debate today is that there is not that surety. The cases go on for months, not weeks, because of the number of cases that are being referred to the ICGS. There needs to be a review of how the organisation operates to address the very remarks that the hon. Gentleman has made. He is absolutely right to say that if there are allegations of serious bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct, they need to be dealt with in a timely manner. Delay helps no one—not the accused or the victim.

One working group recommendation was that Members' staff should have access to proper human resources support and advice, which is not routinely available in Parliament at the moment. That recommendation has not been implemented, despite it being one of the important recommendations from the working group. That means that Members' staff with a complaint have nowhere to go other than the ICGS, which is unsuitable if their complaint does not relate to harassment, bullying or sexual misconduct.

The report from the recent Speaker's Conference has also highlighted that issue. Its recommendations recognise that if staff have concerns about their employment or if their relationship with their Member of Parliament starts to break down, there are few routes through which they can seek support. The ICGS may be the only route they are aware of, even though it may not be appropriate for their complaint. Unfortunately, that means that a significantly higher number of general complaints on issues such as working conditions or contractual disputes are being reported to the ICGS helpline, because staff have nowhere else to go.

The fifth annual report of the ICGS was published last month. It stated that only 31 of the 479 contacts to the helpline—under 10%—were about bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct. Any complaints are distressing and unacceptable in a modern workplace, but the ICGS helpline is getting clogged up by the many complaints that are outside the remit of the ICGS.

With that in mind, the Speaker's Conference recommended that the budget of the Members' Services Team be expanded to hire more HR professionals to deliver an HR service to Members' staff. The ICGS was set up to deal with bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. The lack of a clear pathway for issues that would normally be dealt with by an HR department has inundated the ICGS throughout its life so far. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, that means that the grievances of many complainants are not tackled swiftly enough, which results in further distress.

The 31 serious cases in the ICGS report show that the average time taken for a serious case to conclude is not a matter of weeks, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned in his intervention, but 184 working days. That is far too long for someone who has been subject to bullying or sexual harassment in the workplace. For the benefit of both sides, these things need to be dealt with swiftly.

The new director of the ICGS, Thea Walton, is committed to reducing that time, but the system has been working in that way for the past few years. We should fully implement the initial proposals that Parliament agreed when it established the ICGS. The Speaker's Conference supported many of those recommendations, particularly the creation of an HR department for Members' staff. That will provide a swift and timely service, and lead to the sort of culture change we all want to see—whereby people who work in this place feel valued, heard and supported if need be.

First, the review must prioritise the improvement of the timeliness of investigations through ensuring that cases are dealt with in the appropriate way and that the ICGS is not inundated; secondly, we must set up the HR department; and, thirdly, we must implement the other elements of the ICGS programme that was agreed in this place, including the establishment of induction courses for new joiners. To reiterate, I am not talking only about Members of Parliament, but the whole parliamentary community. There should also be exit interviews for those who leave abruptly, and we should promote the take-up of training courses to upskill team managers and staff more generally.

The review must consider the role of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in the ICGS. The commissioner was specifically identified as the individual to whom MPs could appeal should they be subject to allegations and the case find against them. That was to ensure the possibility of an independent review of the case, and therefore to take into account the level of public of scrutiny when an accusation of bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct by an MP is made public. That appeal process meant that there was an additional check, which was capable of ensuring that decisions had been taken fairly and correctly, and had been based on evidence not bias. Should the PCS uphold a case against an MP, the process is now that the case is sent to the Independent Expert Panel, which investigates the findings and makes a recommendation. That then goes to the Committee on Standards, which will bring a recommendation to the House. That process is different from other investigations by the PCS—such as those in relation to the misuse of stationery or other more day-to-day matters—and reflects the sensitivity of these complaints about bullying and sexual harassment.

The nature of the sanctions also needs to be considered, particularly given the possibility of further appeals and the complexity of what we are talking about. The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme deals with some of the most difficult complaints. It does matter not only to those complainants who are reporting abuse, but also to the reputation of Parliament, that we have an effective system by which to deal with those sorts of allegations. In having an effective system, we do not only have sanctions in place; we create an environment that will enable the culture of our organisation to evolve. Too often, the ICGS is seen as being there just to punish MPs, but it is actually there for the whole parliamentary community, and there are around 14,000 non-MPs working in and around Parliament and across the country who rightly want an effective process by which to tackle bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct when it occurs.

I urge hon. Members and right hon. Members to have a look at and take part in the review, because it matters not only to our staff and ourselves that we get it right; it matters for the way that our Parliament is perceived across the country and the world.

1.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. The SNP welcomes the progress made on the work of the ICGS. We support all efforts to improve the system and to stamp out all bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, in this place and beyond. Everyone has a right to a safe workplace and to live their lives without fear or intimidation. All employers have a duty of care to protect the health, safety and welfare of their workers, and that means having robust processes for reporting and dealing with harassment, bullying and sexual misconduct. At a time when trust in politicians is, unfortunately, at an all-time low, it is more important than ever that we treat those who work in this place with dignity, courtesy and respect, and that we ensure that those who do not treat people in that way are held to account.

The SNP very much appreciates the work of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme team in providing confidential guidance, advice and support to anyone who has experienced bullying, harassment and/or sexual misconduct. We welcome the ICGS's fifth annual report and pay tribute to all those who have helped to drive improvements across the work of the ICGS.

I very much appreciate the comments made by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), who I know is standing in, extremely capably, for another Member, and I know that that Member—the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom)—has a particular and very close interest in the debate. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire will also be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is very sorry that he could not make it today, but I am sure that he will be watching closely.

The report found that the ICGS team has responded to criticisms and made improvements that have—it must be acknowledged—reduced the time taken to carry out investigations. That improvement was due in part to the welcome addition of extra investigators to the team.

It has been a big source of concern for many in this place that some of these investigations have taken so long, and I certainly look forward to further improvement in the time taken.

The team has also provided extra guidance resources for service users to support them through the process, and it has implemented 32 out of 33 of Alison Stanley's 18-month review's recommendations. We welcome the fact that the remaining recommendation, on governance, will be considered in the upcoming review and that an interim governance arrangement has been established.

However, there are still shortcomings in the system that need to be addressed. It is vital that complaints are dealt with confidentially, but through a transparent process. The scheme was set up to shed a light on matters that had been shrouded in darkness previously and that reflected badly on the House and its Members. It is important that we are clear about the processes the different complaints go through, while of course making every effort to make those processes confidential for the individuals involved. It is also important that we do things in a timely manner, as I mentioned, and that we improve the process so that complainants feel listened to and receive the support they need.

The report highlights key trends, including a

“power imbalance between the complainant and the respondent... In a number of cases, the blurring of personal and professional boundaries”

and

“the presence of alcohol and the culture of drinking in Westminster.”

We agree with the ICGS director, Thea Walton, that the organisation should escalate action against individuals if they are the subject of three allegations of bullying and harassment—the current trigger is five—even if those fall short of a formal complaint. Although the ICGS is well placed to investigate allegations of sexual misconduct, harassment and bullying, it is incumbent on all of us in this place to improve the working culture and to ensure that everyone who works here feels safe and is treated with dignity and respect.

We are very much in favour of the proposed expansion of the Members' Services Team, which has come to provide a really invaluable and professional service over such a short time, as I am sure other Members will appreciate. The recommendation that the team should evolve into a Members' and Members' staff service is commendable. As small employers, MPs should have access to better human resources support, but staff should also have access to guidance and advice independent of their employing MP.

The Speaker's Conference report, published a couple of weeks ago, describes Members' staff as “uniquely vulnerable” and found the current Members' support service to be “under-resourced”. It recommended creating a new “restorative practice” for workplace dispute resolution. That welcome recommendation would help to create uniform procedures for MPs' staff across the House. Inadequate provision of employee support, employer guidance and qualified HR experts directly impacts on the experience of staff. We are highly supportive of recommendations to improve those and the great work of the current Members' Services Team.

In closing, I acknowledge the cross-party group of MPs—the initial working group—who worked so diligently in the initial stages to arrive at various recommendations,

[Deidre Brock]

which were acted on. In particular, I acknowledge my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire, who was the SNP shadow Leader of the House at the time, and the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire. They made what some might say was an unlikely couple, but they were able to put aside political differences to take that important work forward—with the assistance, of course, of other members of that working group, and I pay tribute to them.

1.53 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the debate, Sir Robert. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for providing leadership on this key issue, and I acknowledge the work of the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) in helping develop the ICGS in the first instance.

This topic is important, and I touched on it recently in the Speaker's Conference debate. Although it is by no means an issue for every MP—or indeed everyone who works in Parliament—there have been too many instances where MPs, or sometimes staff members, have abused their power. The issue goes to the heart of our culture and working conditions in Parliament. The past few years have been damaging to the reputation of the Houses of Parliament, with serious allegations against, and sometimes convictions of, Members. It is essential that we get our own house in order and ensure that we have an inclusive and respectful working environment.

We welcome the role of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme in dealing with instances of poor behaviour by Members. The ICGS is a hard-won system, its origins rooted in too many reviews of Parliament's failures. We fully support this new way of working. Investigations of misconduct are independent and impartial, with victims' anonymity respected—that is important.

The ICGS has proved an effective method for MPs' staff to raise incidents of poor conduct. After concerns that the process can be lengthy, timescales for completing cases are coming down. The most recent report published by the ICGS, in October, said that the time taken to resolve complaints had fallen by 26 working days. It used to take up to a year to resolve cases, but they are now completed, on average, within six months. That is an important step in the right direction, but the time taken is still too long.

It is welcome that the ICGS has held roadshow events across the country. Constituency office staff and those working remotely should be aware of the advice and support open to them. I also welcome the new HR system proposed by the Members' Services Team. Earlier intervention can prevent the escalation of problems in the long term. The MST, acting as a mediator where appropriate, could help to prevent incidents from escalating and to ensure that we have proper inductions, training and ongoing welfare checks, as others have said. Early intervention by the human resources team will reduce complaints to the ICGS. As covered in the Speaker's Conference debate, it is essential that such important HR issues are introduced as soon as possible.

At the coming general election, there might be a high turnover of Members, and it would be good to see the measures ready to go at that point. Importantly, the implementation of a risk-based exclusion process is urgently needed. There are safeguarding issues if an MP who is arrested for a serious violent or sexual offence is allowed to continue attending their workplace and going on parliamentary visits. Labour has been working with Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House on the issue, and we want the exclusion process to be brought forward as quickly as possible.

I therefore have some questions for the Minister. Can the ICGS investigation process please be speeded up still further? Will the proposed action on exclusions be introduced before Christmas of this year? How will the ICGS work with the new Members' Services Team? It is vital that we continue to make progress on this important issue. Parliament should be a safe and respectful workplace.

1.58 pm

The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Dame Amanda Milling): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) on securing the debate and on her excellent speech, which set out the details around the ICGS and how it was set up.

The Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme was a fundamental step towards safeguarding everyone on the parliamentary estate, in the wake of disturbing allegations of bullying and harassment in Westminster back in 2017. As Members have mentioned, it was set up at pace and on a cross-party basis, and I too pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) for all her work when she was Leader of the House, as well as for her work over the past few years in ensuring that the House authorities continue to look at this important issue.

The ICGS now provides a dedicated independent mechanism for handling complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct in both Houses, and it forms an important part of the parliamentary standards system and of efforts to effect culture change in Westminster. To pick up on some of the words mentioned in each of the speeches this afternoon, reputation matters, trust in politics matters and culture matters. That is why it is so important to have this system in place, and I will come on to talk about the review and its importance. The safety of the parliamentary community is paramount, and the Government have made it clear that there is no place for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in Parliament. By working cross-party, we can ensure that everyone who works in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke outlined in her excellent opening speech, an independent review of the ICGS was launched on 23 October to assess the performance of the ICGS and identify areas for further improvement. This is something that has been evolving over time, and there was a previous review, which I will touch on in a moment. The current review is an important piece of work, and I remember having a conversation with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire last year. It is

five years since the ICGS was first developed and launched, so it is an ideal time to review how it is working. The review will look at the operation of the ICGS, as well as at understanding the investigatory process and the complexities involved.

Dame Maria Miller: The Minister said a phrase a few moments ago that I think is important: the ICGS is a system. It is not a thing, but a system; it is a number of different elements. The concern that I expressed, and that has come from elsewhere, is that although we may be having this review at the moment, not all of the system has actually been implemented—many elements of it were never implemented. Will she join me in urging the review to particularly focus on that point?

Dame Amanda Milling: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her intervention. The terms of reference have been set for this review, but there are a number of different mechanisms relating to standards in the House. The Standards Committee is actually undertaking an inquiry itself, and I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend has put evidence to that inquiry, but I would urge her to look at that as well.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned in her opening remarks, the independent reviewer will soon launch a call for written evidence, and I encourage members of the parliamentary community to submit evidence. The review is expected to conclude and to be published in early 2024. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will continue to champion improvements to the ICGS as a member of the House of Commons Commission—indeed, many Members present are members of the Commission, including the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). One of the Commission's recommendations from earlier in the year was the need for a new resolution service to support Members and staff to resolve issues and repair relationships.

I will turn now to the terms of reference of the current review. There have been a number of mentions of timeliness today, and quality and timeliness is one of seven points in the review's terms of reference. The review will be an opportunity to address concerns about timeliness and the quality of investigations. Fundamentally, we need to ensure that people have confidence in the ICGS. I know that the Leader of the House and Commission members look forward to working with the director, the chair of the Independent Expert Panel and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to ensure that the system operates as effectively as possible. All colleagues mentioned timeliness in their speeches, and Alison Stanley's 18-month review of the ICGS, which was published in February 2021, stated:

"Its operation and processes have become over complex and there is a perception amongst the Parliamentary community that it is a stressful, isolated and lengthy process."

I very much welcome the fact that timeliness is part of the current review, because it is one of the things that cause concern.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned risk-based exclusion, and the Commission continues to consider the matter—as hon. Members will appreciate, there is a need to treat it with due care and attention. On 12 June, there was a debate about the proposals for risk-based exclusion that the Commission published in late May. It was a general debate because the commissioners were conscious that the publication of the report was the first opportunity for hon. Members to consider the Commission's final proposals. It was an important opportunity for Members to express their views—ultimately, this is House business. The Commission has reiterated its strong commitment to proceed with this matter while taking on board the useful practical suggestions that emerged from that debate. It is of course paramount that everyone working on the estate feels safe. We all have a responsibility to improve the culture and working environment across Parliament.

The ICGS has been an integral part of efforts to change the culture in Parliament. We must remember that we probably would not be having this debate if it were not for the bravery of those men and women who chose to speak about their personal experiences. We thank them for taking that step on behalf of everyone. It is vital that we continue to take steps in the right direction and to listen to feedback. The review is under way, and I am sure the independent reviewer will listen to this debate. I will ensure that a copy of *Hansard* is provided with the points that have been made this afternoon.

It is important that the system has the confidence of all those involved. Our Parliament must lead by example in how it tackles these issues. The Government and the Leader of the House look forward to seeing the review's recommendations. I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke for securing the debate, as well as all those who have worked so hard in this area.

2.8 pm

Dame Maria Miller: I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate, and I hope our comments will be listened to carefully. The ICGS is a system of well thought-through procedures and processes that provide an avenue for redress and for changing culture and behaviour in this place. Not all the original proposals have been implemented or adhered to, so I urge the review to consider how many of the current issues could have been avoided if they had been put in place as designed. There is a list of things, including training and HR, that have not yet come to fruition. Let us get the full package in place and give the ICGS the opportunity to work as originally envisaged.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the work of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme.

2.9 pm

Sitting suspended.

School Pupils with Allergies

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

3 pm

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

That this House has considered pupils with allergies in schools.

I sincerely thank hon. Members for making time for this afternoon's debate. I am ever mindful that the reason why people are here is that they want to be here. The House has risen—even the Adjournment debate is over—and those of us here today are here with a purpose, which is to put forward our request.

We are very pleased to see family members of allergy sufferers in the Public Gallery, and we are here to fight for them. I thank them for the books they have made available to us. I read Helen's story about her wee boy in today's paper. I know that she sent the story of her child to all MPs and explained why this debate is so important.

May I say what a pleasure it is to see the Minister in his place? I do not believe I have had the opportunity to address him in his current capacity, even though I am a regular in Westminster Hall. I am really pleased, as always, to see my good friends the shadow Ministers from Labour and the SNP in their places, and other colleagues who have made an effort to be here.

What are we doing today? We are raising the important issue of allergies in our local schools. I am the Member for Strangford in Northern Ireland, where education and health are devolved, but I will make a case for Helen, her family and her wee boy Benedict. The debate is important not just for those of us present, but for people across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Food allergy affects around 7% to 8% of children worldwide, or about two children in an average-sized classroom of 25, which gives a perspective on what the impact can be. It highlights the sheer volume of young people and parents on whom allergies impact. It is so important that we address this issue in the right way. I understand that the Minister has a copy of my contribution and the four requests at the end of it—the four requests that Helen and others in the Public Gallery have also made.

I am the DUP's health spokesperson, and I am grateful to be able to make the case on behalf of all representatives and those who could not attend but wish to be here. Our schools are safe places for our children—somewhere to grow and learn—which is the way we want it and the way it should be. If we want that to be the case in our schools, we need to make sure that it is safe for that to happen. Children spend at least 20% of their waking hours in school, and further data shows that 18% of food allergy reactions, and approximately 25% of first-time anaphylactic reactions, occur at school. Collectively, we are asking for action on behalf of parents who have lost loved ones and those who are concerned for the future, because the figures highlight the need for better strategies to tackle allergies in schools. Anaphylaxis due to food allergy occurs more in schools than in any other setting. The very nature of schools is that they are places where kids socialise, chat and eat food. Schools are our focus for this debate, and it is important that we get things right.

Around 30% of allergic reactions in schools occur in children previously not known to have a food allergy. With that being the case, we really need this debate to highlight the issue. There is no doubt that we all have some experience of allergies and intolerances—there is probably not a family that does not—and maybe some Members in this Chamber have an intolerance. One of my sons had some allergies when he was smaller. The lady I was speaking to before the start of this debate was talking about airborne allergies and how this triggers asthma. My second son had asthma; he was born with it. We were told that although he had psoriasis when he was first born, when the psoriasis left him the asthma would come—there was a combination. I am not medically qualified to say that; it is what the nurses and doctors told me. We were always very cautious about the things he ate, and ensured that anti-allergen tablets were taken.

One of my staff members has a son who has a severe allergy to egg whites. That is another example. He has spent numerous nights in hospital over the last 20 years of his life, and his mother has had to be especially vigilant when he has been offered certain vaccines because the vaccines themselves can complicate the issue. We are able, over the years, to build an understanding of how to cope with these allergies, but for younger children, who are being exposed to new foods and new surroundings, it is not always that easy, especially in schools.

Every debate I do, I learn something; I have clearly learned today that there are probably airborne allergens in this room at this moment and, if we have an allergy, we could react to one of those. However, what is responsible for my being here today and for making this debate happen is the story of Benedict Blythe and engaging with his mother, Helen. I understand that she sent an email to every MP. I got it, and the issue caught my attention, as it did for other hon. Members here today and those who unfortunately cannot be here but wish that they could be. Helen is utterly fantastic and a devoted voice for this cause. It was her energy, commitment and dedication that ensured that we all found out about this issue.

Benedict, Helen's son, was allergic to milk, eggs, nuts, sesame, soya, chickpeas and kiwi. He also had asthma. In 2021, he collapsed at school and died in hospital. I am ever mindful that Helen has fought this campaign through the Benedict Blythe Foundation. She wants every school to have an allergies policy and tailored healthcare plans for all pupils with allergies, so if I could ask for just one thing at the end of this debate, on behalf of Helen and others, that would be the request. The Minister already knows what my requests are, and I am very confident that he will be interested and dedicated and committed to making those changes.

The relevant petition garnered some 13,000 signatures, so it is not a small petition by any means. It galvanised the opinion of many across this great United Kingdom, and that is also part of the story. If people have not heard the story, or read the story in the paper today, I encourage them to do so, please.

I know that Helen has raised the case of her son, Benedict, with many Members across this House, and not just that—there are thousands of people across the United Kingdom, including me and my constituents in Strangford in Northern Ireland, who support her wholeheartedly in doing this. I will just give some background to Benedict's story, if I may.

This debate is taking place on the eve of the second anniversary of Benedict Blythe's death. Benedict was only five years old at the time. He was a lovely young boy with so much to live for. The Benedict Blythe Learning Foundation was established in 2021 in memory of five-year-old Benedict following his collapse at school and subsequent death from anaphylaxis. He was an enthusiastic learner—as children are at that age. Children are almost like a sponge because they want to learn it all and they want to learn it right now. And that was what Benedict did. He loved to “play numbers” and learn about the natural world. Inspired by his passion for knowledge, exploration and play, the Benedict Blythe Foundation seeks to support other children to have the same positive relationship with learning and education, regardless of their ability, and to remove barriers to education. If young Benedict had survived, he could well have gone on to become an MP in this House, such was his interest in making things change and making things happen.

Benedict was allergic to dairy, eggs, peanuts, sesame and chickpeas. Helen and her husband, Pete, are still waiting for the inquest to shed light on how and why their son died, but they say the horrifying speed with which he became ill—I understand that there is an inquest to be heard—demonstrates the need for pupils with allergies to be better protected at school. That is one of the requests of this debate.

Helen and her husband, all of us here and all those in the Gallery today are calling for new legislation to make that happen, including mandatory allergy and anaphylaxis training, statutory allergy policies, individual healthcare plans for all children with allergies and spare adrenalin pens in every school. We have many requests, but that is our core request. That would allow children with allergies to have a fantastic experience of school and enjoy all the fun of learning and social interaction with their friends, despite their allergies. It is about having a normal life and yet, at the same time, having an agreement to deal with the problems of allergies.

There is a need for schools to be better prepared to manage the increasing number of children with allergies entering a classroom. In September 2017, the UK Department for Education published guidance on the use of adrenalin auto-injectors in schools. It states that from 1 October 2017 schools may purchase AAI devices without a prescription for emergency use in children who are at risk of anaphylaxis. Schools may administer their spare AAIs to children in emergencies but only to a pupil at risk of anaphylaxis, where both medical authorisation and written parental consent for use of the spare AAI has been approved.

To parallel the UK's guidance, Northern Ireland's version issued by the local Department of Education back home, updated in October 2018, essentially reflects the DFE document. In Northern Ireland, while schools are expected to develop policies to support pupils with medical needs, including allergies, and review them regularly, there is no statutory requirement for them to do so. It is a guideline that schools will follow. Today, we are trying to underline the need for legislation that can make that compulsory. While everyone says, “Yes, we will do that,” we need to make sure there is enforcement to do that. That is not about being critical of anybody and it is not about pointing the finger; we are just saying, “Let's get it right.”

I can speak for the schools in my constituency that go above and beyond to cater for pupils with medical needs. The extent of the allergies that children have can vary, but ensuring that teachers are aware of the correct protocol, no matter how severe the allergy, is the core of the solution. Support for children with allergies can vary significantly across the country. Examples of best practice exist and include some in my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland where schools find ways to be inclusive and keep children safe.

Whenever a mum or dad leaves a child in school, they are fairly confident that their child is safe. We need to make sure that the child is safe. That often depends on teachers going above and beyond that guidance. For every instance of good practice, there are many cases of severe allergic reactions and, unfortunately, sometimes death. The lack of universal standardisation of school allergy policies is a concern given that around a quarter of allergic reactions to food in children occur at school, some of which result in fatalities from anaphylaxis.

I am conscious of time so I will briefly make some comparisons. There are international jurisdictions that have schemes in place that could provide us as a collective with inspiration. I mention some, such as Canada and Sabrina's law, the first of its kind ever, which requires Canadian public schools to create and execute anaphylaxis plans to reduce allergen exposure and communicate with parents, students and staff about allergies. It is about getting the communication thing right. That has to be done so that everyone understands, and people know what to look out for and what to stop the children from taking. It also requires allergy and AAI training for educators and for individual plans to be created for high-risk students. US states such as Colorado, Michigan and Ohio have laws to ensure students have access to AAIs and that schools keep adequate stocks. Again, that is precautionary but it is important that it is done. Schools must also have individual health plans in place to keep students safe.

The Benedict Blythe Foundation has already achieved some important milestones. Just last week, on 23 November 2023, the foundation launched a schools allergy code, co-created by parents, educators, clinicians, the Benedict Blythe Foundation, the Independent Schools' Bursars Association and The Allergy Team. The foundation is to the fore in leading on that, and we congratulate it. The code is a guide to best practice in achieving a whole-school approach to allergy safety and inclusion. If you wanted a guide or legislative framework, hang it on this, because it will make the difference. It has been made available as a free resource to all schools to ensure good allergy management in their settings, and it is based around four key principles.

First, take a whole-school approach. Every member of the school community should understand allergy and their responsibility for reducing risk, from pupils and parents to staff members. Allergy management is not just the responsibility of the catering and medical teams; it is everybody's responsibility. I know the Minister understands that and will respond to that point when he speaks. Secondly, information about the school's approach to allergy must be communicated and given to people clearly and frequently. Thirdly, there must be clear governance and risk management—create an awareness of allergy risk across all activities and processes. Fourthly, be ready to respond. Have systems, processes and medication in place for emergencies.

[Jim Shannon]

Earlier this year, the foundation launched a petition, which as I said has garnered some 13,000 signatures. It called for the current voluntary guidance to be replaced by a funded, mandatory requirement for all schools. The petition has four asks—the Minister has access to them, and I am hoping that others have as well. They are that we need to have an allergy policy in place; to co-create an individual healthcare plan for all pupils with allergy and anaphylaxis; to hold spare adrenaline auto-injector pens in schools; and to train school staff and teachers in allergy awareness and allergy first aid.

The wonderful thing about the request I am making today is that it will not cost the earth. The Minister knows the figure, because I have mentioned it already. To be fair, he already knew it; he did not need me to tell him. As a gentle reminder, the steps would cost less than £5 million per year to implement in England. That is a modest sum to save a life. It would ensure that current best practice is implemented nationally, making a significant difference to keeping children safe while providing peace of mind for parents, who send their children off to school and have every intention and hope of seeing them at the end of the day. What we have here is value for money in these trying financial times.

As Members may be aware, I have worked very closely with the Oliver King Foundation to campaign for public access to defibrillators, especially in schools. I always put it on the record if somebody does something right, so I am grateful that the Government took forward my recommendations. I am no better than anybody else—far from it—but the Bill that I presented on this issue was taken up by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris). Along with Ministers with responsibility for health and education at that time, she encouraged me to take this on board. The Minister here today and the Minister who preceded him made sure that defibrillators were available in schools and took steps to fund that.

Once again I make a plea to the Government, and it is about a cause similar to the one they endorsed before, which undoubtedly saved lives. We can stop severe illness and death from allergies among young people in schools if we have the correct provisions in place. I do not care who does it, as long as somebody does it. I am not worried about whether it is a ten-minute rule Bill that I introduce or somebody else introduces. Just do the job—that is the most important thing—and take the credit.

As I always state, there is an understanding that education is devolved and that it is not the sole responsibility of the Education Secretary to introduce law in Northern Ireland, but I believe we can—indeed, we must—initiate a joint approach to ensuring that the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has a strategy in place to protect young people with allergies.

Dr Adam Fox, professor of paediatric allergy at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital—not too far from here—has stated:

“There is a clear need for a change in culture around how food allergies are managed in schools. The UK”—
unfortunately—

“lags behind other countries and children are suffering and even dying as a result. By really educating the whole school community about food allergy we can turn things around.”

That is my request to the Minister in this debate. It is a request that all of us, including those in the Gallery, will make collectively, and we look forward to a positive response from the Minister.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind Members who wish to catch my eye that they should bob.

3.20 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and it is lovely to swap roles, given the other jobs we hold. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. He is truly such a good man, as I think everyone in this place would say. It speaks so much to the kind of man he is that, having received an email from someone far away from his isles—although only 10 minutes from my home—he put this subject forward for debate. I thank him on behalf of the entire House for doing so, because it goes to the heart of the kind of man that he is.

I also, once again, welcome Helen and her husband, who are here from Stamford. I thank them for all their work with the Benedict Blythe Foundation; it works not only to raise awareness of the risks facing children with allergies, but to support children with unique brains and approaches to learning. I will touch on that briefly, because it matters so much that we remember the children for whom we are here fighting.

Helen's son, Benedict, had an incredible talent for maths, which I wish I had. In fact, I often say: who do I look up to most in the world? People who can do maths. At the age of one, he could complete a 24-piece puzzle independently; by 18 months, he was doing pie charts; and by the age of four, he was reading books with diagrams of the central nervous system with a maths ability equivalent to that of a 10-year-old.

Benedict was clearly blessed with incredible intelligence, but he also had asthma and allergies. His first allergic reactions were identified when he was just four months old, and I cannot imagine how scary that must have been at the time for his parents. However, with careful planning and prevention, they were able to keep him safe. When our children grow up and go to nursery and school, it means that trust has to be put in those around them. That was not easy and, as the hon. Member said, when he was aged just two, Benedict's nursery worker gave him cow's milk, which caused him to immediately throw up. They only admitted that they had given him something that he was allergic to after his lips and tongue had swollen so severely that he needed urgent medical treatment.

Two years ago today, on 1 December 2021, Benedict woke up and went to school. There he ate a snack that caused him to collapse shortly afterwards, and he died later that day in hospital, aged just five. That changed the lives of his family and friends forever. I want to place on record the condolences of this entire House. As parents, we all struggle with this, and my child is just five, so I struggle in particular to do this. But I am so pleased that, after a year of fighting, his family finally get their debate—a year later—and also that it comes on the eve, suggesting to me that this is fate and it was meant to be as a tribute to Benedict.

Benedict's story, however, is not unique. Although we as parents do everything we can to keep our children safe, more support is needed, particularly in the education system, where children spend so much of their time. Worryingly, 18% of food allergy reactions and 25% of first-time anaphylactic reactions occur in school, and that will only rise. Between 1998 and 2018, 66 schoolchildren died from allergic reactions.

A really important point was made about behaviour change and understanding change. I do not remember discussions about allergies when I was growing up. I think they are on the rise—I am not an expert, so I will not pretend to give a medical diagnosis—but I think it is very difficult for those in a position of authority, when they did not grow up having to worry about allergies, to suddenly run an institution where this issue has to be of fundamental importance. As we heard, at least two children in every school classroom have an allergy.

What this means is that, every day, thousands of children walk into schools uncertain whether they will get the support they need that could mean the difference between life and death. I have seen the impact and what it means for a young child to be nervous when they sit down with their peers at lunch, not knowing what will happen if some milk were to be poured on to their skin. For some children, including one in my family, that is how severe their allergies are. The vigilance needed and the pressures that it puts on the shoulders of these children is significant. That is partly why what we are talking about today is so important. If we can lessen the stress and the vigilance that these children are living with, we would be doing them a good turn—not to mention the lives we would save.

We know that every education professional goes into the profession because they love it and want to support children. Nobody would want to see a child exposed to life-threatening allergens in their school. The problem, however, is that the current system allows risk, which I believe could be tackled. As we have heard, the current Department for Education guidance is voluntary, which results in vastly different standards in schools, and even between different teachers and classrooms.

I think we are all very united in our list of asks today, but I will go through them. We should replace the voluntary advice with mandatory regulations—that is at the basis of ending disparity. We should require every school to implement and maintain an allergy policy. Let us make talking about what allergies are a standard part of the school conversations that children have, from the youngest age. Let us talk to our children about what it is to be a responsible classmate. Let us make it as egregious to mock a child who has an allergy as it is to be racist. When we read the allergy stories in this booklet and hear children talk about having their allergy weaponised against them in the playground, we see we can deal with that by making that abhorrent from the moment children start school—they have those conversations in their classrooms.

In addition, we should require every school to work with pupils' parents or guardians to create individual risk assessments for pupils with allergies. A child's allergy and the support they receive has to be reviewed by a GP every single year. It should be a requirement for the school to sit down every year and go through that GP assessment with the family. That would create additional work, but this is about saving lives. The reality is that

the type of things that a child will do changes every year—they might start going on foreign trips, for example. I remember that being a real cause for concern for the parent of the child in my family, who said, "Well, I don't know what will happen when he goes on a school trip. That is not the same as a school canteen, where we know it is dealt with and there is a plan." We have to make sure that the yearly review happens, because the circumstances and the way in which children are taught changes.

We also need to keep spare adrenaline auto-injector pens available to treat emergency cases. The good news is that the lifetime of those pens is getting longer. We need to make sure that staff are EpiPen-trained—not necessarily every member of staff, but a significant number—just as they are trained in CPR. We need to end the distinction drawn by some within education between minor and severe allergies: according to clinicians, there is no such thing. The factors in place on a day where a child has an allergic reaction determine whether or not that is minor or severe, so we need to overcome that.

Finally, we should ask for all school staff and teachers to be fully trained in allergy awareness and first aid response, because, as we heard, many children do not know that they have allergies. As part of that, in every single staff room—this can be done; I know schools that do it—there should be posters of children's faces with the allergies that they have, and the three-point plan for what has to be done if they have an allergic reaction, so that teachers get used to knowing that. On an average day, the teacher who identifies a child having an allergic reaction in the playground or the canteen might not be their standard teacher.

As we heard, taken together, those measures would cost less than £5 million a year to implement, and they would mean that more children go to school in safety. For my part, I will write to every school in my constituency and ask them to adopt the schools allergy code. I will ask them to come back to me and we will offer whatever support they need to go through that.

Once again, I want to thank Helen and Pete; I am so proud that it is someone from our communities in and around Stamford who is going to change lives. I am confident that Benedict's legacy will change and save lives. Some 13,000 people around this country felt strongly enough to sign the petition: 282 were in Stamford and Grantham, and 81 were in Rutland and Melton. Each one of them will be a member of a family who has been touched by this.

Allergic reactions and deaths are avoidable. I urge the Government to take these few simple steps. I know that there are many demands on the Education Minister's time. Some people want to raise other conditions—asthma, for example, which Benedict also had—but allergies are the most likely to result in death and are therefore far more of a priority. There is an urgent need to support teachers, so that they can feel confident, take the pressure off children and make sure that parents know their children are safe. I urge the Government to take these steps to honour Benedict Blythe's legacy and take what the House believes is a meaningful step that would save lives and ensure that we do not continue to see the heartbreaking reports of children dying in our schools for what could, with the right measures put in place, be as preventable as possible.

3.30 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns); that was an excellent contribution and I associate myself with everything she said.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, as is customary in these proceedings. In this instance, my congratulations are about more than simply adhering to the parliamentary protocols, because this stuff really matters. Hopefully, actions that might follow from this debate could save the lives of scores of young people in this country, so the stakes are high. I therefore thank him both for securing this debate and for his detailed contribution. During my comments, I will echo many of the things that have been said. As the chair of the all-party group on allergy, I can say with some confidence that the allergy community, countless young people suffering from allergic diseases and their extended families will be grateful for his intervention.

This is our third or fourth debate on allergy over the past year or so, and that is great, because it marks real progress. For years, it has been difficult to get the scale of the allergic epidemic registered in Parliament and by Government policymakers. It is so frustrating that over the past couple of decades, a series of detailed, authoritative reports has consistently demonstrated the prevalence of allergic disease, patient needs and the lack of UK service provision, yet their policy recommendations have generally been ignored. Hopefully that is now changing, as is reflected in not just the number of debates we are having, but the changing dialogue secured over the past two years with Government.

A previous care and mental health Minister, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan)—now the Secretary of State for Education—demonstrated real commitment in this area and began to grip questions of allergy, primarily from a public health perspective. Consequently, since 2021, we have established a work programme and an ongoing dialogue between civil servants and representatives from the National Allergy Strategy Group to support the development of a national plan. From a public health perspective, we are beginning to see real and, quite possibly, sustained progress. Hopefully, following today's debate, we might complement those positive recent developments with progress for those suffering from allergic disease in our schools.

It is worth remembering what we are talking about. Allergy is a hypersensitivity reaction to substances or allergens that are normally tolerated. Examples include peanuts, milk, shellfish, cats, medicines and grass pollens. They can trigger harmful antibodies and the release of inflammatory chemicals, causing symptoms such as sneezing, itching, rashes and falls in blood pressure. However, they may also cause airway narrowing, shortness of breath, wheezing and swelling that, if in the mouth, throat or airway, cause severe difficulty in breathing and can be life-threatening.

About one in three people—more than 20 million people—in the UK have an allergic-related disorder, 5 million of whom have conditions severe enough to require specialist care. Fatal and near-fatal reactions occur regularly due to foods, drugs and insect stings, and they have been increasing over recent years. For example, hospital admissions due to allergy rose by 52%

in the six years to 2017-18. Admissions from anaphylaxis, which is a rapid onset of life-threatening reactions, rose by 29%.

Prevalence rates for allergy in the UK are among the highest in the world, especially among young people. Each year's new births add some 43,000 cases of child allergy to the population in need. This is not just happening here in the UK: the prevalence, severity and complexity of allergies have increased on a global scale over the last 60 years. Allergy UK has described allergy as "the most common chronic disease in Europe."

More and more children struggle with allergic conditions. Some 50% of British children may have an allergy, and those numbers are rising. However, this goes beyond the statistics: for the growing number of people living with allergic disease in the UK, their condition can have a significant and negative impact on their lives and those of their families.

As I mentioned, the lack of interest in allergy at national level has been frustrating. Over the past two decades, there has been a series of specialist reports recommending action. They have highlighted the poor management of allergy in the NHS and specialist services, as well as in primary care, and they have identified the negative impact of an allergic condition on a person's life and the lives of their family members. It is frightening and restrictive to live with a condition that can cause a severe or life-threatening reaction at any time.

However, there has been no wide-scale change in how we protect people with allergic conditions and respond to anaphylactic reactions, and a change is therefore needed. I think we can all appreciate how parents of children with allergic conditions suffer. A child unexpectedly vomiting, struggling for breath or breaking out in a rash is terrifying. That is why this debate about allergy in schools is so important.

At least a fifth of a child's life is spent away from parents at school. More anaphylactic reactions occur in school than anywhere else, yet in a third of anaphylactic cases, teachers and staff did not know that the child had an allergic condition in the first place. That is a horrifying statistic: in a third of cases, they did not know that the child had an anaphylactic condition. It is against that backdrop that parents rightly worry that schools and teachers have inconsistent and vague guidelines on planning for anaphylactic reactions.

Although there are awkward gaps in the guidance, there is mandatory guidance on supporting children with medical conditions, but that does not provide details on specific conditions such as allergy. There is specific guidance on using adrenaline auto-injectors, but that is not mandatory. Teachers are often unaware of which pupils in their class have an allergic condition so strong that it might induce an anaphylactic reaction and may need an EpiPen response. Quite correctly, parents are therefore nervous about how schools manage their children's allergic conditions. Moreover, pupils might forget what they are allergic to and need teachers to remember, but teachers may not know or may be unprepared to respond to a severe allergic reaction.

Things can go wrong because of no one's fault. Let us take the case of Karanbir Cheema. When this 13-year-old boy was eating lunch at school in west London, a classmate flicked cheese at his face—the sort of behaviour that is common on most school dinner tables across the

country—but Karanbir was allergic to milk. He had a severe anaphylactic reaction and was taken to hospital. Tragically, two weeks later, he died. Schools might well respond to tragic occasions such as that by introducing no-nut bans or creating special zones in dining halls for milk allergies. Those are well intentioned, but they tend to isolate children from their friends, so they might inadvertently increase the vulnerability of children to social exclusion and the type of teasing that we heard about.

The best response to improve the immediate reactions of staff is to improve their knowledge and capacity to act. The key point is that changing schools' management of allergies is not complicated or expensive. Many countries and governments around the world have simple legislation. New York state, for example, requires daycare employees to recognise anaphylaxis and administer EpiPens properly. Virginia requires schools to stock auto-injectors, which teachers are trained on. That also protects the schools from liability. As we heard, almost 20 years ago, Canada required its state schools to create anaphylaxis plans reducing exposure to allergens and to communicate with parents and students about allergies, and it required individual plans to be made for all high-risk students. That approach seems sensible and pragmatic. It would not be expensive or complicated to develop a similar set of requirements for British schools.

I will repeat the request that has been made this afternoon. The Benedict Blythe Foundation suggests four mandatory requirements for all schools, which seem entirely sensible to me. First, it suggests that every school must have an allergy policy in place, and secondly, that parents and schools must co-create an individual healthcare plan for every pupil with allergy and anaphylaxis—similar special educational needs plans are currently created for students with disabilities. Thirdly, it suggests that schools must hold spare adrenaline auto-injector pens, and fourthly, that school staff and teachers must be trained in allergy awareness and allergy first aid. It is straightforward to learn how to use an EpiPen. As we have heard, those combined recommendations would cost less than £5 million a year to implement in England. They would end patchwork guidance and provide peace of mind for both parents and teachers.

One final point I would make is that it is important that we use such debates to put on record our appreciation for all the practitioners and healthcare professionals dealing with allergy—including Allergy UK, members of the National Allergy Strategy Group, Anaphylaxis UK, the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation and all the researchers seeking new remedies—and for the insights of all the families and campaigners fighting on behalf of those with allergic conditions. These people do a fantastic job, but they need help, because lives depend on it.

It should be the right of every allergy sufferer to receive a quality standard of care. Every sufferer should be able to feel confident about the food they consume, and every young person should remain safe at school. Allergy conditions are becoming more prevalent and commonplace, which makes it extremely important that we make schools safe and protect children with allergic conditions.

I urge the Government to respond favourably to the debate and the recommendations that have been outlined this afternoon by Members from parties on both sides of this House, because the lives of many of our young people may well depend on it.

3.40 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I also commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this very important debate and agree with the tributes from the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who also gave a very powerful and moving speech. I also welcome Benedict's parents and others who are with us today; as hard as it was for the hon. Lady to talk about Benedict—and she did so really well—I can imagine how hard it is for them to be here and to listen to the debate. I just want to place on record our thanks to you for everything you have done and for being here today.

We are all here today to discuss the incredibly urgent need for school-wide, mandatory, standardised allergy policies—not just guidelines—that would standardise provision and protection in all schools across the country and end the postcode lottery of provision that so tragically results in up to six children—I think that is the figure the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton gave—dying in their schools each year, with many more children experiencing horrific anaphylactic reactions. In the case of coeliacs, I think the term is “being glutened”, which leads to long-term damage to the gut, as well as to short-term, painful symptoms. At the very least, we need to discuss the need for schools to have strict and standardised anaphylaxis plans and in-date and accessible EpiPens.

In 2022, it was found that around 30% of allergy reactions in schools occur in children previously not known to have had a food allergy, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) in his excellent speech, or in children with an allergy that had not been communicated to school staff. That is why it is so unfair to rely on parents of children with allergies to have to be the only experts in the room, left to self-advocate and protect their children from afar. That is also why we cannot limit EpiPen administration to children with recorded allergies.

I want to take the opportunity of today's debate to focus on a specific issue relating to allergies in schools. Food allergies in schools come to a crucial flashpoint of risk at lunchtime. Over the last few months, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food, I have spoken to and been lobbied by more and more key charities and stakeholders on the allergy safety campaign, including organisations like the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, Coeliac UK and the Benedict Blythe Foundation. They have shared with me what are, frankly, horror stories of children being served allergen-contaminated food at school; contamination from other children's packed lunches; children being made to eat alone in classrooms away from their peers; and children missing out on lunchtime activities, Christmas lunches and teddy bears' picnics—all because allergy-safe provision was never prioritised. Their children's needs meant that they were excluded and forgotten—to keep them safe, I suppose.

At the launch of the Food Foundation's fantastic report on better school food just yesterday, knowing that this debate was coming up today, I spoke to several young people who received free school meals about their experiences of food in their schools. I asked them about how allergies complicate their lunchtimes and the lunchtimes of their friends. I heard from them that their friends with allergies end up limited, from all the choices

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

on offer, often to just a jacket potato or the same food every single mealtime. I heard of young people who have had to move schools to access school food that would be safe for them. The lack of access to allergy-friendly food is compounded exponentially when a child is in receipt of free school meals and often limited to just £2.50 per meal. The level of provision is just not there. Caterers need additional support, funding and training to make varied and nutritious allergy-friendly meals.

My son-in-law is coeliac. One day, God willing, I may have grandchildren, but I am well aware that those grandchildren may have coeliac disease, so this fear is very real for me. I am also aware, therefore, how much more expensive gluten-free food is and how important it is not to have any cross-contamination in food preparation or serving areas. You only have to cook with my daughter, when she knows we are cooking for the wider family, including her husband, to realise how careful you have to be. She screams at me, “Don’t use that spoon!”—because it is a wooden spoon that I have stirred a pan of pasta with. It really, really does matter, but it takes extra space and money, none of which schools receive for this issue. I am also aware how hard school chefs and catering teams work to try to meet all the needs of their pupils with allergies, but the Government need to help them with proper, standardised policies, and the appropriate funding and training to enable them to do this properly.

Rightly, if we had a young person with, say, a religious food requirement, like kosher or halal food, we would facilitate their provision on the grounds of equality and inclusion. Similarly, access to suitable food for a young person with, say, a special educational need or disability, who had a feeding and food need, would be recognised as part of the reasonable adjustments that they require under the law. If we can recognise how important it is for schools to adhere to equality and inclusion laws for food for a variety of pupils, surely for allergies, many of which may be damaging to health or life-threatening, as we have heard, it is as—if not more—important to do the same.

I have long fought for school food for all children, and I have long fought for high-quality, nutritious school food. As the prevalence of food allergies continues to rise at the rapid rate of about 5% each year—we could have a whole debate on why that is the case, because it is interesting in and of itself—the gulf of inequality of access will continue to grow, unless we do something about it.

Children should not lose their ability to be well fed at school because of something that could be recognised as an additional need. I am not suggesting that allergies need to come under education, health and care plans or be labelled as a disability. But the point stands that the health and wellbeing—and sometimes survival—needs of these children are causing them to be excluded. That is discrimination, and that is at best; at worst, it can cause their death. That is why I implore the Minister to urgently implement the schools allergy code that we have heard about in detail today, and I look forward to his response.

3.49 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Strangford

(Jim Shannon), who has given us an insight into allergies in schools and how they should be treated. His remarks were personal and well thought-out. Other Members who contributed to the debate teased out the issues a bit further. My contribution will be from a Scottish perspective—I do not think anyone here would expect me to do anything else.

I thank those from the Benedict Blythe Foundation who have come here this afternoon. These debates are important because, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, we all learn new things. It must have taken great courage to come here. Speaking as a granny, I know that it is not easy for you, so I appreciate you coming.

Education, as Members know, is devolved in Scotland, and it is therefore up to the Scottish Government how they do things. Across the UK, as we might already have heard, 41 million people and between 5% and 8% of children live with a food allergy. The UK has some of the highest prevalences of allergic conditions in the world, with 20% of the population affected by one or more allergic disorder. Allergies are very common in children, and although some go away, many do not—we have heard about the awful consequences of that today.

New legislation for food businesses in Scotland and the rest of the UK came into force on 1 October 2021. Known as Natasha’s law, it requires businesses to label all food that is pre-packed for direct sale with a full list of ingredients, with the 14 major allergens emphasised. Such information can help parents and students to know what they are buying and whether it is safe for them to eat and to take into school. Food Standards Scotland chief executive Geoff Ogle said:

“This is a huge step in helping improve the quality of life for around two million people living with food allergies in the UK—with 200,000 of those living...in Scotland. If these changes drive down the number of hospital admissions caused by food allergies, which has increased threefold over the past 20 years, and prevent further tragic deaths such as Natasha’s, that can only be a positive thing.”

I mention that because we are looking for more than just guidance from all Governments in relation to allergies in school.

The Scottish Government have published guidance for NHS boards, education authorities and schools on supporting children and young people with healthcare needs, including allergies, in school. Education authorities are required to work collaboratively with NHS boards and to ensure that there is adequate and effective provision in place in the schools in their areas to support the healthcare needs of young people.

As noted in the guidance, the rights, wellbeing, needs and circumstances of the individual child or young person should at all times be at the centre of the decision-making process. Under article 24 of the UN convention on the rights of the child, all children have a right to the highest attainable standard of health and to healthcare services that help them attain that.

Any child or young person at school in Scotland may require healthcare support or the administration of medication. Healthcare support or medication for the management of long or short-term conditions is therefore really important and must be available. Schools must arrange specialist anaphylaxis training for staff where a pupil in the school has been diagnosed as being at risk of anaphylaxis. The specialist training should include practical instruction in how to use the different adrenalin auto-injector devices available.

As part of the medical conditions policy, the school should have agreed arrangements in place for all members of staff to summon the assistance of a designated member of staff to help administer an AAI, as well as for collecting the spare AAI in the emergency kit. Wherever possible, children and young people should be empowered and supported to manage their own healthcare needs and work in collaboration with the school health team, school staff, and their parents and carers to reach an understanding about how their health affects them and how their healthcare needs will be met. That option is not always possible but, when practicable, it should be exercised.

Children with allergies are often excluded from social or fundraising activities in school. That has an impact on them, and it should not happen in any school in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon *indicated assent.*

Marion Fellows: I think I got it right that time—as the hon. Member for Strangford indicated. We play that game occasionally here.

Social or fundraising activities, including charity bakes, can be really dangerous for children with severe food allergies. When teachers are buying food—as they often do—for things such as Christmas parties, they should be aware of these things, so that they can eliminate the risk of children coming into contact with food they are allergic to.

If this debate encourages the Minister to bring in not just guidelines but regulations, everyone in this Chamber will be extremely happy, and I know that the Benedict Blythe Foundation will be too. I therefore encourage the Minister to look at the four asks and to see what he can do to help everyone involved.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I call Catherine McKinnell to speak on behalf of the Labour party.

3.56 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under you as Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on pupils with allergies in schools. I absolutely agree with the comments the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) made about the hon. Member for Strangford—he is the reason we are here debating this incredibly important topic—and I congratulate her on her incredibly powerful and heartfelt speech. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who have campaigned on this issue for many years in this place.

School should be a place where every child can learn and enjoy themselves—a place where parents can have confidence that their children will be safe and comfortable. Unfortunately, as we have heard at length today, when a child has a serious allergy, school can be a cause of great stress and anxiety for them and their parents. Many charities and campaigners, such as Allergy UK, the Benedict Blythe Foundation and the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, work incredibly hard to raise awareness of allergies and to support important research on them. Much of that work is driven by very difficult circumstances, and I pay tribute to Helen Blythe and her husband, who are here today and who have campaigned tirelessly in the face of their incredibly painful loss.

I regularly make the point that the challenges faced by children and young people do not just disappear at the school gate. Increasingly, schools are places where a whole range of issues that children and young people faces impact their learning and development. However, this debate is specifically about allergies and their impact in schools. Allergy UK research highlights that more than 20% of the UK population is affected by one or more allergic disorder and that 2 million people have been diagnosed with a food allergy. Young children are most commonly affected, with 6% to 8% of children suffering from food allergies.

According to the *British Medical Journal*, hospital admissions for food-induced anaphylaxis have tripled over the past 20 years, with the largest increase among children under the age of 15. Twenty per cent of allergic reactions among young people happen in a school setting, and 30% of allergic reactions in schools occur in children not previously known to have had a food allergy, where schools are unaware of the allergy. As we have heard, stress and anxiety around allergies can lead to some children skipping meals or missing out on social events because of concerns about the capacity to accommodate them and manage the danger they may be in.

There is some fantastic practice happening in schools, including significant planning and consideration to support children with allergies, but it is vital that best practice is applied across the board and that guidance is kept up to date with the latest developments. Why would we settle for anything less?

In response to a petition earlier this year, the Government pointed to the statutory guidance for schools, “Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions”, which makes it clear that schools should be aware of any pupils with allergies and have processes to ensure they are well managed. They also pointed to guidance to school caterers on displaying allergen information on products. I understand that the Department of Health and Social Care also issues guidance to schools on the use of adrenaline auto-injectors and emergency asthma inhalers.

The Department for Education clearly has a role to play alongside the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Health and Social Care, so I have a few questions for the Minister. I understand that the Department for Education recently declined the invitation to sit on the expert advisory group on allergy. I would be grateful if he can confirm whether that is the case and explain the Department’s reasoning, given the statistics that have been outlined today. Will he also set out how the Department for Education monitors the effectiveness of the guidance on allergen management and ensures that it is up to date and in line with best practice? What action is he aware of across Government to support forward-looking research into potentially life-saving treatments and approaches to allergies?

We know about the scale of the challenges in our schools—the workforce crisis means that far too many teachers and support staff are overworked and undervalued—but the safety of children is paramount. The utmost priority for school leaders, teachers and staff is their responsibility to keep the children in their care safe.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I hope he will reflect on the points that have been raised and respond to the asks from charities, schools and experts in this area.

4.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. It is typical of him to bring to Parliament incredibly important issues that do not get the attention they should. He does so consistently in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber, and we all admire and appreciate that.

I start by offering my deepest condolences to the family of Benedict Blythe, who died two years ago tomorrow. No parent should experience what Helen has gone through. I was deeply saddened to learn of the story before I came here and to hear more detail today; the colourful picture that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) painted of what Benedict was like moved us all. My heart goes out to any family experiencing that sort of loss. I just wanted to say that at the outset to Helen and her husband. As she knows, the coroner's inquest into Benedict's death is ongoing, so I am unable to comment on the details of his case, but officials from the Department met her in May to hear about the excellent work she has been doing through the Benedict Blythe Foundation to raise awareness of how best to protect children.

I can, of course, address the more general points that hon. Members made about allergies and our policies. I understand how worrying allergies can be for parents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton said in her moving speech, when parents send their children to school, it is only right and natural that they expect them to be kept safe. If their child has an allergy, that adds a particular level of concern about what is happening in the school day.

Allergies are complex conditions that can range enormously in severity. Not all allergens are foods either, as hon. Members know, which makes it more complicated to manage them. I welcome the schools allergy code that the foundation launched this week, which will provide helpful guidance to schools on how to implement allergies policies; we would be keen to encourage schools to look at that code.

Alicia Kearns: I know that the Minister cannot commit to anything at this moment, but I would very much appreciate it if I could pick up that point about the code with him, maybe in a few weeks' time; we could see whether that resource could be put on the Department for Education's website or look at the best way to ensure that all schools around the country are aware of it, not just through the foundation but through the Department. That would be a meaningful way to spread that code across the country. I know that he cannot commit to that now, but would he be happy to pick that up with me in a few weeks?

David Johnston: I am very happy to have that conversation with my hon. Friend.

Turning to the statutory duties on schools, hon. Members have called for voluntary guidance to be replaced with a funded mandatory requirement. We have heard from each Member who has spoken in this debate about the four things that they would like to see: an allergy policy in place; the co-creation of an individual healthcare plan with all pupils with allergies and anaphylaxis; spare adrenaline auto-injector pens in schools; and the training of school staff and teachers in allergy awareness and allergy first aid.

Let me start with the first of those points. Section 100 of the Children and Families Act 2014 places a legal duty on schools to make arrangements to support pupils at their school with medical conditions. The accompanying statutory guidance from 2015—"Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions"—is not voluntary; governing bodies must have regard to that guidance when carrying out their section 100 duty. The guidance makes it clear that schools should ensure that they are aware of any pupils with medical conditions and have policies and processes in place to ensure that those conditions, including allergies, can be well managed. The guidance is clear that policy should also include how the processes will be implemented, what should happen in an emergency situation and the role of individual healthcare plans in supporting pupils. It says that

"The school, healthcare professional and parent should agree, based on evidence, when a healthcare plan would be inappropriate or disproportionate"

and that the policy should also set out

"how staff will be supported in carrying out their role to support pupils"

including

"how training needs are assessed, and how...training will be commissioned and provided."

It states that

"any member of school staff providing support to a pupil with medical needs should have received suitable training."

Members also raised the important issue of adrenaline auto-injectors. The regulations already allow schools to obtain and hold injectors and, in an emergency, they can be administered to pupils the school knows have a risk of anaphylaxis but whose own devices are not available or not working, perhaps because they are broken or out of date. To support schools to meet the needs of pupils with allergies, the Department of Health and Social Care has produced guidance on the use of adrenaline auto-injectors and emergency inhalers in schools, including the purchase of spare adrenaline auto-injectors.

Alicia Kearns: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point before he moves on?

David Johnston: Yes, but I am going to have to get through my speech.

Alicia Kearns: We have a little more time. On that point, would the Minister accept that there is a real problem that, while the auto-injectors are stored in schools, not many staff go through any form of training on how to use them? We have to be honest, in this day and age when we see Americanism being imported to our country, teachers are scared that they will end up in law courts. The Department has a responsibility to support staff so that they are confident enough to provide that life-saving aid. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that there should be funding or a process in place? Does he agree that training should be provided in some way, even if it is just a YouTube video that every single teacher must watch, so that teachers have the confidence to administer auto-injectors? That is a concern that we hear repeatedly, and there is currently no provision.

David Johnston: Staff should have training in it—that is absolutely right. That is part of what we are requiring. We continually review the policies in this area, and if we

feel that there are deficiencies, or indeed inconsistencies, which I suspect is the biggest problem, we will do whatever we can to ensure that they no longer occur.

Jim Shannon: I wonder if I am following you correctly—you will confirm whether that is true or not. We have asked for this provision to be not just voluntary, but mandatory. In other words, we are seeking for it to be put down in legislation—given the cost factor is so small—to make it happen and change lives. I suppose the core question that we are asking, Minister, with great respect, is whether you can confirm that that is something you are prepared to look at. It is really important.

David Johnston: We have a difference of opinion about the requirement on schools. The Department's view is that what is set out in the statutory guidance should require schools to do most of what is being described, and the question then is whether that is happening in every place or not. If what we expect to be happening under the Children and Families Act and so on is not happening, then we definitely want to ensure that it does happen.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for that response; I think that gives us some clarity. From what we have all said in our contributions so far, there are cases where that is not happening—wee Benedict is an example of a case where, with respect, it did not seem to happen. And if it did not happen, then we wish to see it happen.

David Johnston: Yes. The question with these things is always whether the laws are already there. Do you need new laws, or are the laws already there but not being enforced? I have heard from Members today that we are clearly not seeing in every case the practice that we want to see. I will discuss with officials what more we can do on that, including in promoting the code.

Alicia Kearns: Can I ask the Minister one very last question? It will be the last one, I promise—that is not something I have ever said before in this room. [*Laughter.*]

David Johnston: Well, I have a bunch of witnesses to that. I will give way.

Alicia Kearns: If the point is around the Department believing that this is being done rightly, does the Minister know whether Ofsted, when it reviews schools, takes into account whether or not the allergy guidance and section 100 is being upheld adequately? I am aware that this falls between two briefs; it is not just the Minister's brief. If that is not the case, could he write to me? That may actually be the solution: we say that when Ofsted inspects schools, because the loss of life is so high—66 children—this should be part of its reviews. That way, it can say it is meeting its requirements and commitments to children—to keep them safe and ensure it is doing everything to look after them in every single way it can, as we would all wish it to be doing. That may be the solution that fixes this gap that, between us, we seem to be coming to.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. This has been a good and important debate, but I must remind hon. Members that interventions should be short. I did not want to intervene previously, but I also remind Members that I am not involved in the debate—you should not refer to other Members as “you”.

David Johnston: I will write to my hon. Friend to clarify that particular point. Ofsted has a role in inspecting safeguarding, which incorporates a wide range of vulnerabilities that children may have. I do not know the answer to her specific question about section 100, so I will write to her on that afterwards.

I have no idea where I was in my speech at this point, so I will turn back to the code. On the points in the code on taking a whole-school approach and having clear governance and risk management, the statutory guidance makes it clear that all state-funded schools should have a policy for supporting children with medical conditions. This should be reviewed regularly and be accessible to parents and school staff.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) talked about school catering policies. Schools are expected to make reasonable efforts to cater for pupils with particular requirements—for example, as she touched on, to reflect medical, dietary and cultural needs.

In deciding what is reasonable, schools and their caterers are expected to take into account factors such as the type of diet required by the child with allergies, the number of children in a similar position and the cost of making suitable food available. In exceptional circumstances it may be considered reasonable for the school not to make special provision for particular children—for example, where this would be very difficult and costly to achieve.

Turning specifically to younger children, the early years foundation stage framework sets the standards that all registered early years providers must meet for the learning, development and care of children from birth to age five. It states:

“Before a child is admitted to the setting the provider must also obtain information about any special dietary requirements, preferences and food allergies that the child has, and any special health requirements.”

Providers must have

“a policy, and procedures, for administering medicines”

and

“systems for obtaining information about a child's needs for medicines, and for keeping this information up-to-date. Training must be provided for staff where the administration of medicine requires medical or technical knowledge.”

Within all early years settings there is a requirement for at least one person who has a current paediatric first aid certificate to be on the premises and available at all times when children are present, and who must accompany all children on outings. The PFA criteria is clear that the training should include being able to

“help a baby or child who is suffering from anaphylactic shock.”

In September, we changed the adequate supervision requirement within EYFS to be explicit that adequate supervision while children are eating means that children must always be within “sight and hearing” of an adult; not within sight or hearing, as was the case previously. This will help practitioners to be able to notice the signs of an allergic reaction as soon as they present themselves, and allow them to act quickly. The new early years educator level 3 qualification will come into force next September. That will ensure that early years practitioners have an understanding of allergies and anaphylaxis.

[David Johnston]

I will have to write to the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), about the expert advisory group on allergy—this is the first time I have heard of that. Likewise, I will write to her about monitoring the effectiveness of the allergens policy. I think her question on research into life-saving treatments is probably better directed to the Department of Health and Social Care, but I will obtain for her the information about what that Department is doing in that regard.

Having outlined the various legislation and guidance that covers allergies in schools, the Government's overall position, given the complexity and individual nature of allergies—which was set out very clearly by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), who chairs the APPG—is that the legislation we have in place is proportionate, and allows schools to respond to individual circumstances and the specific needs of their pupils, but, as I said earlier, we keep these policies under review. We welcome feedback on how we can better support schools' implementation and awareness of these policies, particularly to try to remedy any inconsistencies between what we require from them and what is happening.

I will write to hon. Members about those points, and will meet my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford again for securing this important debate.

4.18 pm

Jim Shannon: First, I am so very pleased that we have had what I would refer to as a united front across the political parties. I think we all recognise the importance of this debate. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) set the scene well from a personal point of view. We all owe the family and all the supporters here a great debt. Today—probably in our own hesitant but very sincere ways—we put the case forward for a family who have grieved, and for those we all wish to make a change for.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton said that the voluntary must become mandatory—how true that is—and be made part of the school conversation. Allergy assessment by GPs should be alongside and in conjunction with the school. There should be adrenalin pens training at every school as well. I apologise to the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), because I was not aware of the extent of his knowledge until today; he has brought his vast experience to this debate, and we thank him so much for that. There was that positive response from the school, but the allergy numbers are up and the stats are quite shocking, as he illustrated so well. That allergies happen so often at schools underlines the depth of this debate and why it is so important.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) always brings personal input to a debate. By her very nature, she sums up the compassion we all have—that is what I have always thought about her and I think others see that too. She spoke of the incredibly urgent need for equal access to EpiPens, of other allergies and of safety in schools. These can be life-changing matters for children, as can nutritional food and people's diets. All such things need to be more than normal; we need to make them mandatory. We thank her for that contribution.

We are regularly in debates with the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), and I was pleased to have her Scottish input. Is something safe to eat? Is it safe to bring to school? Allergies are up threefold, and children should be at the centre for allergies and food safety, clearly.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), brought her knowledge and interest to this subject matter, and we thank her for that. School staff need to be skilled in keeping children safe and with their requests. She also reminded us that the reason why we are here today is that we are inspired by the painful loss of others. How true that is.

I thank the Minister very much for his response. Being the positive person I am, I suggest that I am correct in assuming that the Minister will take what we have said in this debate to the relevant Minister and that, where his remit falls within our debate matter, he will look much more towards the mandatory than the voluntary. I think that is our request; that is what we are seeking and asking for. If that happens, I believe that today this debate will have been won. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton suggested that Ofsted might have a role to play, and I think that is true. The Minister needs to act on that. He mentioned what happens voluntarily in schools, but we want to take that to a different stage.

Today, this House has done the family and all those in the Public Gallery proud. We have put forward viewpoints on their behalf. I think that the Minister has grasped that we are seeking the change from voluntary to mandatory—from voluntarily to legislatively making the changes. We owe a great debt to the family for all that they have done in educating us on what is necessary, and to all those in the Public Gallery. Let us make a change for wee Benedict.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pupils with allergies in schools.

4.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 30 November 2023

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Advertising Taskforce: Action Plan

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale): I am pleased to inform the House that today we are publishing the Online Advertising Taskforce's action plan.

The Online Advertising Taskforce brings together representatives from Government and the online advertising sector to work in collaboration to address illegal harms and the protection of children in relation to online advertising. Its creation was announced in the Government's response to the online advertising programme consultation, published in July, and the taskforce held its first meeting later that month. It committed to agreeing upon and delivering a programme of work to help address illegal advertising and minimise children being served advertising for products and services illegal to sell to them ("in-scope harms"), in anticipation of regulation being introduced in due course.

The action plan we are publishing today brings together commitments from Government and industry that seek to drive progress against two objectives: improving the evidence about the in-scope harms, and expanding voluntary industry initiatives that seek or have the capacity to address them. This has been a collaborative and ambitious piece of work and we are grateful for the invaluable contribution of taskforce members since the summer.

The Government have also been working with technology companies as part of their online fraud charter, which will further drive action against fraud, including that which is perpetuated through online advertising, and which is also being published today. Through both programmes of work, the Government and online advertising companies will implement significant protections from fraud for everyone engaging in business and recreation online.

The action plan will be published on the Online Advertising Taskforce gov.uk page:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/online-advertising-taskforce>.

[HCWS81]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

UK Priorities for COP28

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): The UK is committed to tackling climate change and restoring nature. We have reduced our emissions by more than any other major economy since 1990 and, going forward, have one of the most ambitious targets for 2030. Our emissions are down 48% compared to 1990 and we have grown the economy by 70% over the same period.

We brought the world together at the COP26 Glasgow summit to speed up the global net zero transition, as well as brokering a historic deal to end deforestation and kickstart new green finance markets. However, limiting global temperature increases to 1.5° will only be possible if countries around the world commit to join the UK on a net zero pathway. The science is clear that global emissions need to peak by 2025 and must be reduced by 43% in 2030 compared to 2019 in order to achieve this.

The upcoming 28th conference of the parties under the UNFCCC (COP28), to be hosted by the UAE in Dubai from 30 November to 12 December, will mark an important moment to get to net zero. Amid record global temperatures, the first global stocktake of progress against the Paris agreement will show that the world is currently off track and urgent action is needed to keep the 1.5° goal within reach. The world needs to take a hard look at what is working and where we are failing to deliver, focusing our resources on practical, deliverable solutions. This COP must deliver the framework and targets already agreed, including in Glasgow, and set out the long-term decisions that are needed to bring everyone with us, from rural communities to the countries most impacted by climate change.

The context is challenging, given the current geopolitical tension, conflict and macroeconomic environment where countries are battling inflation and debt. At the same time, the widespread impacts from increasing global temperatures have never been felt more, underscoring the need to deliver on our climate commitments and reduce emissions.

His Majesty the King will attend the opening ceremony of the world climate action summit at COP28 at the invitation of the UAE and at the request of HMG, and will deliver an opening address. The Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Environment Secretary and other Ministers will attend the summit. I will lead the negotiations for the UK.

The Prime Minister's focus will be on forests, finance and net zero transitions. These are areas where the UK can lead global progress, building on our track record, and working with the UAE presidency, other countries, business and civil society.

Overall at COP28 the UK wants to see progress in five priority areas:

New commitments and action to keep 1.5 alive. Coming out of the global stocktake, we need renewed leader-level political consensus and increased ambition to keep 1.5 in reach. We need commitment to peak global emissions by 2025 and clear guidance for the next round of NDCs. And we need a clear, forward-looking road map with global targets in key sectors and commitment to action including through the breakthrough agenda, on forests, and through the phasing out of hydrofluorocarbons. Since 2010 the UK has seen nearly £200 billion of public and private finance investment in low carbon energy sectors. We will use this domestic experience to spearhead efforts to accelerate decarbonisation of key sectors of the global economy.

A clean energy package with clear commitments to transition away from fossil fuels. This includes commitments to triple global renewables and double energy efficiency by 2030, to phase out unabated fossil fuels—in line with the G7 commitment the UK helped to deliver earlier this year—and to end new unabated coal power and phase out coal power globally.

An outcome on finance that helps deliver the trillions needed to accelerate the transition. This includes reform of international financial institutions, delivery this year of the collective goal of \$100 billion climate finance per year for developing

economies, and progress on the post-2025 climate finance goal with contributions from a broader range of donors. Based on preliminary data, the OECD has stated that it is likely that the \$100 billion goal was met in 2022. The UK will play its part. We are fully committed to delivering on our £11.6 billion of international climate finance and we are a world leader in green finance. We will work with partners to realign financial flows with the Paris agreement and global biodiversity framework.

Progress on building resilience to climate impacts—demonstrating progress on the Glasgow commitment to double adaptation finance by 2025 and establishing an effective loss and damage fund to support countries that are particularly vulnerable. We are pleased that the loss and damage transitional committee, mandated by COP27, has put forward a recommendation on the fund. The UK was instrumental in securing that recommendation and we hope it will be agreed at COP28. We will continue to advocate for the priorities of the most vulnerable. I co-chaired a third climate and development ministerial alongside the UAE, Malawi and Vanuatu at pre-COP last month. This focused on enhancing access and delivery of adaptation finance, the equitable delivery of high-quality grant-based finance and concessional finance.

Real progress towards protecting, restoring and sustainably managing nature, on land and in the ocean, which is crucial to delivering on net zero and building resilience. We need COP28 to maintain momentum on the implementation of the global biodiversity framework agreed at CBD COP15 last year, to make concrete progress on the historic agreement to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. We want to see forests prioritised in the global stocktake and to use the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership as the vehicle to drive accelerated delivery of the Glasgow leaders declaration on forests and land use. To date UK International Climate Finance has avoided over 410,000 hectares of ecosystem loss.

We will continue to deliver ambitious reductions, embracing innovation and green finance opportunities. The UK will go into COP28 with a strong record at home and internationally. We recently committed \$2 billion to the green climate fund second replenishment, the biggest single international funding commitment the UK has made to help tackle climate change, making us the top contributor cumulatively to the world's most prominent international climate fund.

In his recent net zero speech, the Prime Minister set out the long-term decisions to enable a just transition to net zero while maintaining public support. We are absolutely clear that net zero is the right thing to do for our long-term national security, economic prosperity and the future of our children.

All countries around the world need to do more to keep 1.5 alive. The UK is delivering significant progress, and following the clear framework and targets agreed at Glasgow COP, we saw 90% of global GDP committed to net zero. We must now drive progress and support other nations constituting 99% of emissions to grasp the benefits of green growth.

We will update the House in the usual way once negotiations have concluded.

[HCWS80]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Sudan Update

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I would like to update the House on the situation in Sudan since the

outbreak of conflict on 15 April this year between the Sudanese armed forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the UK's efforts in support of the Sudanese people.

Violence continues across the country. The lack of humanitarian access and a disregard for civilian life is resulting in terrible suffering. The conflict has caused destruction on a massive scale as a result of the indiscriminate use of force by both sides, including shelling and airstrikes in urban areas. Since 15 April, more than 6.3 million people have been displaced, including over 1.3 million people who have fled to neighbouring countries, seeking safety, protection and assistance. Twenty-five million people are in urgent need but constraints on humanitarian access mean insufficient aid is reaching them.

There is mounting evidence of abhorrent atrocities against civilians, in particular in Darfur. Women and girls are subject to rape and sexual violence. Houses are being burnt to the ground. People's livelihoods are being destroyed. These attacks have all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing and may amount to crimes against humanity.

Following the conclusion of the first round of Jeddah talks that resumed on 26 October, the UK is continuing to support the mediation efforts of the US, Saudi Arabia, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union. I urge both warring parties to engage constructively with these talks to secure short-term ceasefires and improvements in humanitarian access.

But in the meantime, the suffering of the Sudanese people continues. There have been increasing reports from El Geneina and Ardamata in West Darfur of potentially ethnically-targeted violence against men and boys and alleged executions, including the murder of Masalit community leader, Al-Farsha Muhamed Arbab. These atrocities must end immediately, and those responsible must be held to account.

We are supporting the Centre for Information Resilience (CIR). CIR works to monitor atrocities in Sudan using satellite imagery to investigate attacks against civilians and infrastructure, and also to monitor hate speech and incitement of violence. This financial year, the UK has provided £600,000 to CIR for this project. Our partnership on this innovative work is vital in documenting the ongoing atrocities, and preserving and sharing evidence, so that those committing these heinous crimes can be brought to justice.

In July, I announced a package of sanctions, freezing the assets of three commercial entities linked to both SAF and RSF. We stand ready to take additional measures.

In the UN Security Council (UNSC), UN General Assembly and at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), we have consistently condemned the violence across Sudan. On 11 October, the HRC adopted the UK-led "Sudan Core Group" (US, Germany, Norway, UK) resolution, which creates an independent and international fact-finding mission to investigate atrocities in Sudan and support future accountability efforts.

As part of our commitment to humanitarian assistance, I announced £21.7 million in humanitarian funding in May for those in need in Sudan, in addition to £5 million to help meet the urgent needs of refugees and returnees in South Sudan and Chad. UK Aid is providing nutrition, safe drinking water, medical care and shelter, as well as supporting protection services including for those affected

by gender-based violence. In November, the UK confirmed a further £14.3 million in humanitarian aid, bringing the total to £36 million for 2023-24.

The UK, alongside Norway, jointly funded the Sudan humanitarian conference that took place in Cairo on 18 to 20 November; an event that brought together Sudanese grassroots organisations, NGOs and the international humanitarian system to develop co-ordination mechanisms to give a greater voice to Sudanese organisations in the humanitarian response.

We have also established a new British Office Sudan in Addis Ababa, until a British embassy can be re-established in Sudan. This makes us the first western nation to set up an operational office for Sudan in the region. The staff of the British Office Sudan in Ethiopia will continue to work to support our diplomatic and humanitarian aims to bring peace and stability to the people of Sudan, as well as continuing to assist in providing limited remote consular support to British nationals in Sudan. I would like to put on record my thanks to the Government of Ethiopia for enabling the setting up of this office.

The UK remains committed to supporting Sudanese civilians to chart their own future for their country. Neither of the warring parties should have any future role in power in a future democratic Sudan. I therefore warmly welcome the gathering of Sudanese civilian actors and stakeholders in Addis Ababa on 23 October as an important step towards the formation of an inclusive and representative pro-democracy civilian front.

The UK will continue to advocate for a ceasefire, safe and unfettered humanitarian access, an end to atrocities and a return to a civilian-led Government that can deliver the peace and stability the Sudanese people deserve.

[HCWS84]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Online Fraud Charter

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Today, I am pleased to inform the House that we are publishing the online fraud charter.

A key deliverable in the Government's fraud strategy—<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fraud-strategy>—the online fraud charter contains a series of ambitious commitments from several of the largest tech companies in the world. These commitments reflect a landmark moment in our fight against fraud and will target some of the most harmful and pervasive frauds that occur online. This includes stronger action to make sure people are who they say they are on marketplaces and on dating apps. It will ensure that signatory companies make fraud easier to report online. When content or users are found to be fraudulent, immediate and decisive enforcement action will be taken.

Further detail will be published online but the charter will contain actions focusing on:

- Blocking frauds from occurring in the first place
- Improved reporting structures and faster takedowns of harmful content and users
- Making sure advertisers are who they say they are
- Greater collaboration with law enforcement and other partners to drive further intelligence sharing, transparency, public communications and horizon scanning.

Tech companies have made strong progress in the last several years in combating fraud and, with the Online Safety Act 2023 in the process of coming fully into operation, change will be a statutory responsibility. However, those that have signed this charter have shown their willingness to work faster and in a more targeted fashion than regulation will require. I commend their constructive engagement and their ambition in agreeing to these commitments. I am pleased to see them taking responsibility to protect their users from fraud.

We are taking the fight to the fraudsters, targeting the criminals that try to exploit us when we are online. Today, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries has also announced the publication of the Online Advertising Taskforce action plan, which brings together initiatives from industry and Government to tackle illegal online advertising and increase protections for children. Through both of today's announcements, the Government and industry will implement significant steps to make sure that the British public are protected online. The online fraud charter will be published on the Joint Fraud Taskforce [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/joint-fraud-taskforce) page—
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/joint-fraud-taskforce>.

[HCWS82]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Elections Act 2022 and Boundary Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): I wish to make a statement.

Evaluation of the Elections Act 2022

The Government are committed to ensuring UK elections remain secure, fair, modern and transparent. As part of this commitment, the Elections Act 2022 introduced new measures designed to increase the security and integrity of UK elections. Two of these measures, voter identification in Great Britain and enhanced support for disabled voters in polling stations, were delivered for the first time in polling stations at the May 2023 local council elections.

The Government are pleased with the introduction of voter identification in Great Britain, with data gathered in polling stations showing that 99.75% of voters were able to cast their vote successfully under the new measures. This smooth roll-out is a testament to the skill and careful planning of local authorities and electoral administrators, without whom the realisation of these measures would not be possible. We thank them.

However, the Government are committed to understanding fully the impact of the Elections Act and to improving its implementation where necessary. They are committed in legislation to undertake an evaluation of the voter identification policy after its first implementation. To this end, the Government appointed external research agency IFF Research to evaluate the implementation of the Act, examining the impact of the voter identification and accessibility measures at the May 2023 local elections. The Government are also committed in legislation to conducting further evaluations at the next two UK parliamentary general elections.

Today, I am pleased to share IFF Research's first evaluation report. This independent evaluation has used data gathered at polling stations, supplemented by public opinion survey results, the Electoral Commission's data and report on the May elections, surveys with the electoral sector and qualitative research to provide a full picture of the impact and implementation of the voter identification and accessibility measures. While providing further evidence of successful delivery, the report also makes a number of recommendations for both the Government and others including the Electoral Commission for ongoing improvements.

In addition to the Government evaluation, I have today published the Government response to the Electoral Commission's report on the May 2023 polls. The Government welcome the views of the commission and have considered its recommendations carefully.

Implementing the Elections Act requires close partnership working between the Government, the commission, the electoral sector, and their representative bodies. We look forward to continuing close engagement with all our partners as we implement the remaining measures from the Act and take forward any necessary adjustments in response to this evaluation.

Responding to the evaluation

The IFF evaluation makes an assessment of where adjustments may be made to delivery of the voter identification and accessibility measures that would improve the experience of both voters and electoral administrators. The Government are keen to support the diligent work of the Electoral Commission and other partners and we look forward to discussing these recommendations further.

These recommendations include: action that may be taken on training and guidance for polling station staff and electoral administrators on the reasoning behind which photographic identification documents are accepted in the polling station; how to apply the Electoral Commission's guidance for returning officers on supporting disabled voters to enable or make it easier for them to vote in polling stations; activity and communications to address any gaps in awareness or understanding across the whole electorate of the voter identification requirements; the availability of the voter authority certificate; and the additional support and equipment available to disabled voters and more specifically to address this among groups where awareness is low; supporting electors who may struggle with the online application process to apply for a voter authority certificate; and increasing the time available for processing voter authority certificates ahead of a UK parliamentary general election.

Many of these recommendations are, of course, in areas where the Government recognise they should and do not have a direct role, but in these and other aspects of delivery we remain keen to support the brilliant work of returning officers, electoral registration officers, their electoral services teams, the Electoral Commission, and all our other partners.

Other recommendations in the report are specific to supporting and strengthening future evaluations, for example by gathering more evidence from specific groups of interest, and these will be taken forward in future plans.

Ongoing evaluation

The Government are committed to maintaining the integrity of the ballot and ensuring that UK elections remain accessible to all. While the evaluation published today demonstrates the significant steps we are taking in achieving these aims, the Government will continue to learn from this and future evaluations and other sources of data. We look forward to further assessments that will be published in the future and the ongoing successful implementation of the Elections Act, ensuring the integrity and accessibility of our democracy now and into the future.

Copies of the "Electoral Integrity Programme Evaluation Report: Year 1" and the Government's response to the Electoral Commission's report on the May 2023 polls will be placed in the House Libraries.

Implementation of the Boundary Review

The Government's 2019 manifesto committed to ensuring updated and more equal parliamentary boundaries. These help to make sure that votes carry more equal weight in Parliament, across the whole United Kingdom. To this end, Parliament passed the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, which provided for the number of constituencies in the UK to remain at 650 and for a boundary review to take place on the basis of this number of constituencies and to report before 1 July 2023.

The 2020 Act also provides for regular boundary reviews, which will ensure that the boundaries remain up to date and involve less change at each cycle by not having such a long period between reviews. The boundary commissions will likely commence their next review in 2029 and complete it by October 2031.

The four independent boundary commissions commenced their review shortly after the Act came into force. Having completed the review, the boundary commissions submitted their final reports to the Speaker of the House of Commons on 27 June 2023. The Speaker laid the reports before Parliament on 28 June 2023. We thank the Boundary Commission for its work.

At the Privy Council meeting on 15 November 2023, His Majesty the King made the Order in Council to enact the changes recommended by the boundary commissions. The order came into force on 29 November 2023 and the new parliamentary constituencies and boundaries will take effect at the next UK parliamentary general election. Until that time, any UK parliamentary by-elections will continue to use the pre-existing constituencies and boundaries.

[HCWS83]

Petition

Thursday 30 November 2023

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Wilby Way roundabout

The Humble Petition of the residents of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth, that the Wilby Way roundabout, between the A509, A5400 and the A5128 is extremely dangerous to cross for pedestrians and cyclists; further that the increased volume of traffic due to the housing developments in and around Wellingborough has caused crossing this roundabout to become increasingly difficult and dangerous.

The petitioners pray that your Honourable House urge the Government to work with North Northamptonshire Council to consider the concerns of the petitioners and ensure that measures are implemented which will make crossing the Wilby Way roundabout safe for pedestrians and cyclists.

And your petitioners, as duty bound, will ever pray, etc.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 5 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 396.]

[P002849]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman):

Decisions on the infrastructure needed to support active travel rests with the relevant local authority, in this case North Northamptonshire Council. The Minister has asked Active Travel England's regional manager for the East Midlands to write to the authority for further information on the roundabout, as well as any support the agency can offer the authority regarding potential design issues.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Thursday 30 November 2023

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**not later than
Thursday 7 December 2023**

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Considered in Committee
Read the Third time and passed

HM Prison Bedford [Col. 1108]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme [Col. 373WH]
School Pupils with Allergies [Col. 383WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 49WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
Observations
